Charlie Lewis (00:32)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey's spin free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm Charlie Lewis, Crikey's reporter at large. And today we are inaugurating Uppercut, our new debate format where we draft in a couple of heavyweights to battle it out over the questions of the day. Today's topic, is it time for Labour and the country to ditch Anthony Albanese? Let's meet our competitors

in the red corner arguing against

Crikey's Politics Editor, Big Mean, Bernard Keane.

Rachel Withers (00:59)

Ha ha

Charlie Lewis (01:01)

And in the blue, arguing for our politics writer, mess with her and you'll no longer be with us, Rachel Withers. Guys, welcome.

Rachel Withers (01:11)

Thank you so much, Shelley.

bk (01:12)

the paying yeah.

Charlie Lewis (01:14)

Apologies for that boxing nickname, Rachel. Your surname was much harder to work with than Bernard's um

Rachel Withers (01:19)

Yeah.

Charlie Lewis (01:21)

I was bordering on doing a Shakespeare reference, but that just seemed like it would have definitely made it onto the cutting room floor.

Rachel Withers (01:24)

Well I

briefly had a sub stack called The Withering, so you know, that's always there as a

Charlie Lewis (01:29)

nice.

Oh, God, that's much better. That's much better than her withers are unrung. Anyway, before I let you guys have at it at this question, I should also probably say that those colors are in no way partisan. That's just the colors that boxing corners are, But before I you guys have at it, it's probably worth going into a bit about why we're posing this question, because

it may seem on the face of it bit of an absurd proposition. Anthony Albanese is the longest serving

PM since John Howard. He returned a labor to power in 2022 and followed it up with an even bigger victory in 2025. These two results have gutted the liberal opposition such that it's hard to imagine the ALP could lose power in the next election. Another mitigating factor is possibly the fact that Australia seems to have given up on actually liking its prime minister sometime in 2009. But what has Albanese done with that mandate?

His policy record veers between flubbing and then abandoning major reforms concerning reconciliation and gambling, and at best incremental policy progress on issues like climate change, artificial intelligence, and Gaza, none of which has satisfied progressive voters and none of which prevented conservatives from portraying him as an economic vandal and an enabler of extremism. His reward in the last year has been the greatest surge in support for the far right in Australia we have seen in a generation.

After yet another embarrassing week in which our PM attended a summit dedicated to combating climate change and didn't use the phrase fossil fuels, got caught in a microphone discussing the possibility that mobile phone usage might make his junk go bad

and shield for some local fast food. Is this the moment where his leadership goes from dreary to unsalvageable? Right, round one.

Rachel, let's start with you. Back in 2024, you wrote as part of a debate piece about whether Albanese was simply the new Scott Morrison, his predecessor.

You said that he wasn't because he may still actually believe in something. Now that piece wasn't the most ringing enthusiastic endorsement of his program in general, but it did hold out some hope for him and his leadership. You're now arguing that it is time to ditch him. What extinguished that hope that you once had in him?

Rachel Withers (03:39)

Charlie, I'd like to start by thanking you for making my case for me in your introduction there, and for the excellent question. Uh, and I'd also like to thank Bernard for being willing to draw the short stick in this debate, given we're both on record as having complained about Anthony Albanese being about as useless as a One Nation candidate in Brunswick. I did argue in September 2024 that there was still hope for Albanese, uh, that he might actually do something to respond to people's economic pain.

that is risking driving Australia into the arms of the far right. But we could not be much further from September 2024 at this stage.

back then, Labour's primary was sitting around 30%, slightly down from when they won the 2022 election. but it was still comfortable. Uh, and a surging One Nation was just a glint in Gina Reinhardt's eye.

Albanese's main opponent was Peter Dutton, who knew how to kill a referendum, but not how to speak like a human being. And there was still time for Albanese to start fighting to avert a Trumpian crisis. I thought some kind of political survival instincts would kick in for Albanese at that point. Now we're in a different situation, and it is a truly urgent one. One nation has spent the past 12 months eating into coalitions' vote, they've also been eating into labors.

Which has done nothing but slide since the 2025 election. And people have had it with the system, with the establishment. You know, we've heard it all before, but Pauline Hansen is actually speaking to that. She may not have any actual solutions, but she is hoovering up those votes. And Anthony Albanese looks like a deer in headlights, a grumpy, snarky deer who makes terrible jokes. And we will not go into the dick joke. he can't seem to recognize this moment.

this very pivotal moment for what it is, which is a rupture where people are crying out for for real change. it's not an easy thing to turn around decades of neoliberalism. he didn't even try. He hasn't even tried to offer any big radical left-wing solutions to counter the radical right-wing solutions that are actually winning people over. He was basically too busy trying to make, make sure that the coalition was out of office, that he owned the center

too busy playing politics and wedging the greens. and here's the kicker. Even if Albanese did start picking up what the electorate is putting down right now, and he started acting, I think it's too late for him. I think people don't like him, they don't want to hear from him, they don't trust

him, they think he's a career politician because you know what, he is. it is for that reason that the Labour Party absolutely needs to axe Albo as soon as possible.

it won't be easy under Albanese. Um, you know, he has an iron grip on the party. but they all need to recognize this moment for what it is, we are staring down the barrel of one nation near the levers of power. Albanese is known to talk about kicking with the wind in the fourth quarter, and obviously he hopes something like that is gonna happen to him ahead of the 2028 election. but it's

Pretty unlikely that the wind is going to change at this point, so Labour needs to change the leader.

Charlie Lewis (06:40)

Bernard, on the other hand, you've obviously been a very forthright critic of Albanese, as Rachel referenced there, to the extent where a large chunk of our readership think that you're a Liberal Party operative working as a political journalist. You've recently written, quite recently, that Albanese and Labour's broader problem is that it's not a droid and thoughtful government, but a managerial one geared towards business as usual, i.e. one that's

not particularly well suited to the very tumultuous times in which it's found itself elected. But today you're coming here to argue that you ought to hold on to him or that we ought to hold on to him. And why is that?

bk (07:13)

Yeah, he's I I gotta say I agree with ninety five percent or perhaps a still higher percentage of what um of what Rachel's just said in regard to the man's shortcomings. I don't think he's been a in any way, shape or form a a good PM. disappointing on on all fronts. That's a that's a pretty impressive achievement to disappoint on all fronts, but he's disappointed the left.

He's disappointed centrists, he's disappointed the right, and you know, he is very much damaged goods But uh there's a few reasons why I if I were somehow anthropomorphized into the Labour Party as a parliamentary institution, I'd I'd be loath to dump him just yet. and they're all kind of

Slightly boring business as usual kind of reasons, but Anthony Albanese is very much a kind of a, you know, boring business as usual kind of leader. first one is we've got a long way to go until the next election. while it's true, I think I think there's much in what Rachel says about the fact that people have stopped listening, that doesn't necessarily guarantee that, it's curtains.

Just to go back to the the the the line about kicking with the wind in the fourth quarter, which has almost become a cliche when talking about Albanese and his capacity to electioneer. I think there will be some truth in that this time around in in the approach to the twenty twenty eight election. I think interest rates will be falling by the end of next year and certainly in in the start of twenty twenty eight. Inflation

should have peaked, you know, between you know the the early and the middle part of next year and and the Reserve Bank will be moving to a rate cutting cycle. and there's still 18 months of the dynamic around OneNation.

Still to play out. And that includes not just the Victorian election coming up very rapidly, but the New South Wales election next year as well. I've got a suspicion that One Nation's strength is not going to hold up. at the moment, its strength is in Victoria, seems to have declined. Pauline Hansen's avoiding the state like the plague. I think because they've worked out that they're not going to perform particularly well.

And then I'll make two state elections in a row where one nation is, you you know, hit a you know really solid primary vote, but not actually del delivered in terms of seats. know, I think that might continue to be a bit of a uh a problem for one nation. So long story short, on that particular issue, there is a long way to go until the next election. And s I think circumstances, political circumstances and economic circumstances

are going to change. Coupled with that is the fact that Albanese does actually know has worked out how to win elections, and that is you bribed the electorate. I mean that's that's what he did in 2025. That's what really began his surge from basically New Year's Day. I mean he he kicked off his election campaign, right after the New Year uh and caught Peter Dutton hopping. I think they they have worked out what

can get them votes and the sort of votes that they need to win. know, he'll be going into his third election campaign. He'll be up against Angus Taylor or Andrew Hasty. would prefer Andrew Hasty because I'd, you know, I've got a lot more regard for him than Angus Taylor, but nonetheless he'll be up against an opposition leader who's doing in um their first election campaign and of course Pauline Hansen who's been in umpteen election campaigns because she is a professional

consumer of taxpayer funding. So she's been standing in elections know since 1996 and you know knows her way around an election campaign. But nonetheless this will be the first

campaign I think where you know at least at this point should be being taken seriously uh as a potential Prime Minister.

And given slightly different treatment, one would expect than she's used to. The other point that I just make is this is the weakest Labour government that I've ever seen in terms of its front bench talent. I think at the moment they just don't even have enough ministers to make a

decent cabinet. they're certainly not overburdened with leadership talent. know, if you go through the the the senior members that are actually in the House of Reps, you know, there's no one who really stands out. There's we talk about, you know, Mark Butler. Um Jim Chalmers is said to have blotted his copy book. Tony Burke is, you know, perennially mentioned in dispatches, but you know, none of them I think are,

you know, the sort of person who could step into Anthony Albanese's shoes at this point in the electoral cycle and I think, you know, make a significant difference. Tony Burke would probably like to tell you that look, he'll be able to find a way to nullify one nation. he served in the Home Affairs portfolio and know knows all about migration. But given the poor quality of the the Labour Ministry at the moment.

Yeah, I just don't think there's anyone there who is uh you know gonna be able to offer the kind of leadership, albeit managerial and business as usual, that Anthony Albanese is gonna be able offer between now and the next election. And I think that kind of that kind of mundane stuff about knowing how to hold a party together, knowing how to run an election campaign, knowing how to put a budget together.

with an eye on the election. All that stuff's really important.

And, you know, there's not too many other people in Labour who can, actually do that. So uh I think Labor needs to wait quite a long time before deciding whether it's worth getting rid of uh a bloke who's given them two election wins on the trot, including a pretty big one in twenty twenty five.

Rachel Withers (12:33)

I think it's Wayne Swann who referred to the last election as win as as a mile wide and an inch deep.

There's not much to their current mega majority. Their primary is down over time the major parties have been winning less and less of the vote and still uh for now taking out majorities. And perhaps this Labour government could win another majority. the issue is there that will just reward more of this centrism that isn't actually addressing the systemic issues that are driving.

people away from the major parties. Like it they they may, even on their what are they down to, 26%, they may somehow pull it off. but it's not going to actually solve the problem. and then looking at at the idea of kicking with the wind, I agree in terms of interest rates and inflation, they may once again get lucky as they did with 2025. But again, there has been a broader

growing sense of disillusionment and disenfranchisement in the electorate across the world, like across the the Western world, we've seen Trumpism and Brexit. we're a bit late to the party, but it's not guided by a particular interest rate cycle or a particular, spike in inflation. I think that even if they get a little bit of luck in terms of those those numbers, just like them winning another shallow majority,

The issues will just continue to get worse, even if there's a slight band-aid at the time of the next election. Looking at the One Nation dynamic over the next 18 months, I am quietly confident too that One Nation is going to look more and more chaotic the further along we get. I don't think they're going to grow in competence.

Yeah, as as we discussed on a recent episode, Bernard, you know, they're not actually likely to get much of a look in in Victoria. Uh they might do better in New South Wales. there was already an idea with the South Australian election that voters were angry that they had such a high primary and they didn't win seats. It just adds to this feeling that the system is somehow rigged against them, rigged against, you know, the little guy who

Pauline Hansen supposedly represents. I also wonder if, you know, not winning state governments is actually going to put them in better stead the next federal election. It's like the Albanese government that's become the really, really unpopular one that's become kind of the symbol of everyone's problems. Victoria is its own special case. But I

think that actually, in a funny way, not getting into government at state level keeps.

One Nation's hands clean for that next federal election. And of course that federal election will include Queensland and and WA and and areas that Victoria doesn't have.

bk (15:02)

I think the problem with Labour at the moment is much bigger than Anthony Albanese here. I like to deride him as managerialist and business as usual. but I think the problem is much broader. Labor has there's something has gone wrong with Labor. It's not just that the major parties are on the nose. I think there are specific issues around

Politics and the professionalization of politics that applies to both sides. But I think something has gone wrong with labor

Rachel Withers (15:26)

Agreed.

bk (15:26)

in recent years and it has lost its capacity for policy ambition. Now, whether that was the experience of 2019 decision that they were never going to have any policy ambition ever again, lest it interfere with their electability, or whether it's something deeper within the culture.

I probably argue that it probably began in the wake of the Keating defeat when they began retreating from the idea of of economic reform as a cause to which they could you identify. But regardless of that, I think the problem with is one that is right across the party. And it comes back to, you know, as I said, the dearth of talent.

in the party. There's a dearth of talent in terms of competent ministers, I think, but there's a dearth of talent in terms of policy ambition.

When you've got someone like Ed Husic, who is stands out like a sore thumb in both his willingness to talk about issues, but also his and I disagree with him strongly on you know issues around manufacturing, but nonetheless the man has some sort of, ambition and vision about,

aspects of of the economy that that he regards as important. The fact that that is so atypical now, I think is quite alarming for Labour. And getting rid of our Anthony Albanese is not going to fix that. maybe at some point in, you know, the twenty thirties we'll be towing federal labor out to sea and, you know, sinking it as an artificial reef because it's not good for anything else.

getting rid of Albow is is not gonna fix fix, sorry, the dearth of um of ambition.

Rachel Withers (16:50)

I was four when Keating was voted out of office, but in my lifetime, I think I've watched Labour become less and less ambitious. when it comes to the fact that knifing Albanese might not necessarily solve that problem. I mean, I would agree, but I think in some ways his absolute control of the party is a handbrake.

On any of the debate that would actually bring up some new ideas and encourage change and renewal within the party. And the fact that you have Albanese, who it seems doesn't countenance debate in cabinet, doesn't countenance debate at national conference, is just too powerful of an entity within a party for that party to be organic and actually discuss things, I think is a strong argument to get rid of him.

I agree that there isn't much talent.

Around. Um, I had Ed Husek down on my list as a potential voice who actually manages to speak like a real person and and speak for people, you know. again, only since he was relegated to the backbench, really. He he did speak out a little before, mostly due to the situation in Gaza and being Muslim and his sympathy with his Western Sydney electorate. But I I do think since going to the backbench, he started to look more like the

Outsider, the non-career politician that the party actually needs. But what I think would be the best answer for getting rid of Albanese is something like what UK Labour did. bringing in an outsider

like Andy Burnham. I mean, Andy Burnham was an ex MP. so I don't know if we're looking at the staple of ex-Labour MPs here for an Andy Burnham figure to, jump into a seat and jump into the leadership. that's how Bob Hawke did it, right?

yeah, I I feel like one of the best arguments for getting rid of Albanese is how well UK Labour has done since getting rid of Keir Starmer. That Andy Burnham thing has really worked and has really helped negate reform.

A few other things happened with Nigel Farage's party as well to make them lose some standing. But I do think Labour actually would benefit greatly. Our Labour, that is, from an outsider. oh

bk (18:48)

Men om det ska få PM här.

Charlie Lewis (18:52)

I think that is,

think an illegal swing there from Bernard. It's a swing after the bell.

Rachel Withers (18:57)

How how about this? How about this?

Daniel Andrews.

bk (19:02)

Well, they'll keep me a very they'll keep me

Charlie Lewis (19:03)

deep.

bk (19:04)

in columns until uh until we're five days. Well.

Rachel Withers (19:08)

I mean

a no a man

Charlie Lewis (19:08)

sleep.

Rachel Withers (19:09)

who knows how to communicate, who who was good at b speaking to, you know, a certain segment of the electorate, probably has a little too much baggage at this stage, but he is that kind of figure who was able to do press conference, who was able to answer endless questions, who was able to actually appeal to voters and do big radical things, even if some of them may have ended up tainted by corruption a little bit.

but that is more the figure we're looking for at this stage than in Anthony Albanese.

Charlie Lewis (19:36)

A fabulous battle so far. Let's do round two.

Rachel, I wanna actually pick you up on a point you made about the idea that leaving Albanese in place is only going to sort of heighten the sense of disillusionment and disengagement that voters feel and the kind of disconnection they feel from mainstream politics.

On the flip side of that, obviously, the knifing of Kevin Rudd kicked off nearly a decade of instability where the leadership changed and changed and changed and changed over both parties. it could be argued at least that that has as much to do with people feeling disenchanted and disengaged with mainstream politics as anything else gave the impression of self-involved.

a cliquey kind of games playing politicians rather than people focused on the issues that make people's lives better or worse. Is Albanese so bad that it would be worth the risk of returning to that kind of panicky knee jerk, knife your leader at the first sign of trouble kind of politics?

Rachel Withers (20:34)

Yes, um it is worth it. I but I I wanna quickly before I go into that talk about a little bit about you know the Rudd Gillard Rudd years. Um having just concluded a rewatch of the killing season, I feel well equipped to talk about this. And I think there's a few things that set that time apart. so much of that real sense of instability was

Kevin Rudd and his inability to kind of just accept that he'd lost the leadership and continue to undermine the government. at the same time, he had a bigger like Tony Abbott, like stirring the pot through a lot of that. and, you know, also a different media ecosystem. a time when I think the media saw it as a labor liberal contest. it was easy for Tony Abbott to kind of capitalize on all of that. if Albert Easy was to be

Axed, it would actually have to probably be done differently to how Rudd was first removed. And I think it would have to be somehow with his agreement, you know, a consensus decision. Um, I think he would need to go and he would need to go quietly, much more like Keir Starmer has done, and left politics. I think that is the more apt comparison for an unpopular Labour government and what happens when you change leader.

if done correctly. And I think we can all agree, nobody came out of the Brad Gillard, Rod Years, covered in glory. To go back to like, is it worth the risk of more instability and more distrust and more of this like camberbubble vibe? yes, unfortunately. I think where we are is that bad. and it's getting worse.

And so the risk is either we have more of the same. We have more of an Albanese government that's not really fixing anything, that is just a technocratic manager, even as it slides in the polls, or we get, know, a liberal One Nation government, or God forbid a one nation government. I don't which one is more the God forbid But I do think it would be a risk

to axe Albanese. I I'm not saying it isn't. but I think the status quo as voters are telling pollsters is actually the problem here.

bk (22:41)

So the electorate is very volatile at the moment. I suspect that if he was replaced, regardless of how was to be kind of um

eased out um that whoever replaced him from being scarred by you know being an quote unelected PM would not be able to sustain any sort of honeymoon with the electorate particularly long because the electorate is just so volatile.

I read a phrase and I don't know if don't know if he wrote it himself or he took it from someone else, but Nicholas Gruen recently one of his Substack articles referred to the electorate as kind of like the angry customer who storms back into the shop and demands that the shonky proprietor kind of replace the dud products that they sold them and told them, absolutely fit for purpose.

and it doesn't matter where the customer goes, there'll always be this chonky proprietor selling them, pile of crap, and they'll always be angry about it. That seems to be a you know not a bad description of what the electorate is like at the moment. if we look at, you know, talk about, and I've certainly talked about that the the the role that cost of living is playing in the kind of alienation that's going on at the moment.

funny thing is, yes, cost of living is is bad and there is this a lot of resentment about the political system and it's growing and a lot of it is justified. But in fact, economic circumstances are actually pretty good. for those of us with long memories who grew up, you know, in the nineteen, early nineteen eighties recession or the early nineteen nineties recession, uh, and you know, have seen inflation over ten percent and seen unemployment over ten percent, today's economic environment looks pretty benign. But

There ain't no benignity being perceived by, you know, a a very large portion of the electorate. And my suspicion is that that alienation, and resentment, know, is might be being driven by something deeper, by an un you know, a discomfort with the modern world, I don't know what it is. a discomfort with the fact that we are now in the most, you tumultuous

period of history since World War II. I don't know. But I can't see that the electorate is gonna warm to anyone who replaces Anthony Albanese. within, a year, I suspect, you know, just say it's Tony Burke, Prime Minister Burke will be just as disliked as Anthony Albanese was. And you know, it won't be because

necessarily, you know, he's a dud politician or, you know, he's got bad policies. You know, it'll be because the electorate's angry. Um and that anger, you know, as we've seen with the midterms in the US, that anger lashes out against whoever's in power. So it'd be a case of know, next cab off the rank, yelling at them every bit as much as you yelled at the last person. So

that's the issue around the volatility and anger that's there in the electorate at the moment. You know, I think it is very flighty and it's not particularly ideological, even though at the moment it's kind of shifting to the far right. I think as we've seen from the midterms, you know, it can shift very rapidly back. know, it's more directed at incumbents than it is about ideology or

whatever sort of effective politicking that one side or the other's able to do.

Rachel Withers (25:55)

I also think there's something particularly dislikable about Albanese, which I can go into in a minute. But that's why it's so important that whoever does replace him in this hypothetical scenario where uh Labour all agree to hold hands and sinkar and replace their leader.

Gently, is that it it needs to be an outsider, it needs to be someone who immediately gets to work addressing this sense of grievance. as you get into there, it's not all economic grievance. There are middle class voters who are very comfortable who are looking to vote for one nation as well. But this sense that the social contract is broken, I think.

Somebody who is willing to, think a few people are gonna roll their eyes at this, but Azora Mandani, someone who can actually speak about like the fact things are actually really broken. and especially for younger generations, who are not voting for One Nation, to be fair, but young people who just simply can't fathom getting into the housing market without help at this point. somebody who is willing to kind of

Actually stick it to, big business and to corporations and to people who've been fleecing regular people for all they're worth. if there was a figure who was able to come in and do that, I think it wouldn't it wouldn't happen overnight, but they would start to ameliorate that concern and this feeling from the electorate that they aren't being listened to. and I think if somebody was responding to that, it might calm things down somewhat.

Back Albanese being particularly dislikable. I I think he was once a very, very liked politician. You know, he was considered very authentic. Uh, and he was, you know, the guy from public housing and DJ Albo, and and I think he has become he has morphed so far from what he was into what he has become that he is particularly distrusted by the electorate in the way that

You know, I think Tony Burke is unfortunately just a guy in a suit as well. But Albanese has kind of betrayed who he was to many people. Madoc media has been doing this Albanese lies. He lied about falling off the stage thing for ages. Unfortunately, like it's starting to stick because of some of the slippery lies he does tell. the golf grant, the Helen Haynes dirt sheet. Like it's all very politics, but

There is something about him and the way he does politics that feels quite slippery and quite underhanded. And I think there is this growing dislike of him in the electorate. You know, people say they just can't stand hearing him. and I think he also speaks terribly, and has never really, been able to like answer questions smoothly or comfortably.

I think there are so many shortcomings he has as a leader that somebody else

Whether maybe they can't turn around, but I don't think they can be any worse in terms of the feeling, the anti Albanese feeling that exists out there in the electorate.

bk (28:42)

I think there's a process that goes on when you become Prime Minister, which is that

you feel the need to ditch all of the kind of idiosyncrasies and individuality that people liked when you weren't prime minister. So Julia Gillard was such a relaxed and effective communicator, you know, before she became Prime Minister. And once she became Prime Minister, it was, you know, she stuck to the talking points. And Albanese's, very much the same. thought he was a very effective communicator.

before he became prime minister. know, he's the bloke who just sort of, you know, resigned from Ghillar's cabinet because, I, you know, I got into politics because I want to fight Tories.

Beautiful summation of, what drove him as a, as a politician. once he became prime minister, lot of the kind of idiosyncrasies of his communication style, began getting in his way. And because he was just sticking to talking points.

all the time uh and just being relentless in our message. know, his his you capacity for communication, you know, diminished and it's become a negative and something you know something very similar happened to Julia Gillard. I don't

Rachel Withers (29:48)

Julia

Gillard was ever as bad at communicating as as Albanese.

bk (29:51)

no, no, no,

but but that you know, the transformation that you want to and I've seen this with other politicians. I mean, Stephen Smith, if people remember Stephen Smith from

Western Australia, if you've met him privately, you know, he's just so charming and you pleasant and you know like talking to Carrie Grant. But you put a microphone in front of him and he just kind of shriveled into this stiff, formal kind of figure.

There's something about

being in politics that kind of nullifies charm and nullifies authenticity. which is why that we prize authenticity so mean Tony Abbott didn't quite didn't quite succumb to that. but the only pro the only prime minister I can really think of who was kind of, what was in public just like he is in private is Malcolm Turnbull,

who's

even when he was Malcolm even even when he was Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull was always Malcolm Turnbull first, Prime Minister second. and never allowed the role to kind of change how he interacted with people. Um but

Rachel Withers (30:48)

Just his politics and his principles. But yes, you I agree

that he was still himself. uh

bk (30:53)

Yeah, absolutely. And and look, but for professional politicians, I think it's part of the job that if you do get the top gig, then you've got to and Susan Lee talked a bit about this recently in her little essay on you know, on on what it was like being leader. Is that you've got to kind of the discipline of sticking to the message destroys, you know, the positives that you that you might bring to the role. And I think Albanese's, you know, a really good example of that.

to the extent where, as you say, you know, he's actually becoming difficult to listen to. Uh and I do think a lot of people have kind of switched off. But John Howard had the same problem and, you know, he managed to rack up, you know, four terms. a lot of people couldn't stand listening to him either, but, he managed to he managed to survive until he didn't.

Rachel Withers (31:35)

most prime ministers become difficult to listen to and and they become wooden and and wedded to the talking points. Some more than others and I think there are people in the government who are able to sell their their own legislation currently better than Albanese does. but I think even if any new contender became wooden, if they could do a better job of

selling policy and of selling a message. Not just a message, like actual change. we'd be moving in the right direction. I I'm I'm thinking specifically of the of the budget and the changes to negative gearing and capital gains tax that have been part of this spiral for Albanese, you know.

For some people, they've applauded those changes, myself included. For others it's been like a betrayal, you know, it's

It's part of why the there's infighting in the government right now, apparently. But I think Albanese was uniquely bad at selling the benefits of what was not a radical policy, but was a left-wing policy. And he just doesn't seem to have ability to to even though he had the talking points on housing and affordability and the next generation, he just couldn't really seem to weave it together um and to

sell what was always going to be contentious pieces of legislation um among kind of the asset class,

but he just couldn't even sell it to people it was going to benefit. and I think there are people in the government doing a better job of that.

Charlie Lewis (32:57)

All right, we're onto round three, guys.

I'm going to come in and separate the two of you. Brutal and agreeable.

Rachel Withers (33:06)

From agreeing too much.

Charlie Lewis (33:09)

Honestly, I'm going to start jumping in and saying, he's calling you a liar, Rachel, and things like that to try and get this. Rachel, the obvious question is, mean, you sort of hinted at the fact that you don't really want to get into this, but I think it is an important question. You guys have talked a lot about dearth of

talent that is available to labor in terms of replacing Albanese should he go. I guess the question is Who could conceivably mount a successful challenge of that sort? And I guess on the flip side of that, who would you like to see do that?

Rachel Withers (33:37)

I mean, there's a few names floating around as next in line or people who'd like to be in the front of that line. Um, I guess you just kind of have to look at which ministers get a profile in the AFR or the Saturday paper to know who they are. Smark Butler and Andrew Charlton, who are sort of been like putting their names in the ring recently. things are not going so well for Jim Chalmers, who was always considered the natural successor.

certain people in Labour have decided he should wear the blame for everything that's going on. he and Albanese are clearly not in a good place. so I can't see him actually mounting that challenge. know, I I've mentioned Ed Husick being like a genuinely natural communicator. Someone who I think having interviewed him has a genuine conscience and is really thinking about these things and thinking about the need to

change up the party to save the party. I guess I'm sometimes more of the view that maybe the party is is over. but he, I think, is someone who actually recognises the need for change. I think you've also got someone like Tanya Plibisek, who, you know, Albert Easy's great left rival of many years back, but uh again is a still an excellent media performer despite

the shit sandwiches she's been asked to eat again and again and again by the Albanese leadership. you know, there there are women coming through who have that talent, people like Claire O'Neill.

A lot of duds as well.

Yeah, a lot of duds. I think part of this process for Labor would actually be like clearing out those duds and getting some fresh talent in and getting people to start to get the experience in order to make that rise.

Josh Burns speaks quite well as well and and manages to speak to different groups within the electorate and manages to kind of find a middle ground. and and and you know, is I think more outspoken on climate and housing affordability, the the sort of younger left-wing issues that matter. he's Labour right, but left and right within that party doesn't really seem to mean anything anymore.

I still think the very, very best thing for replacing Alvinese would be an Andy Burnham type situation. Can we get Andy? Can we just bring Andy out? You know, like somebody.

bk (35:47)

The constitution is something to say about that.

Rachel Withers (35:50)

Yeah, unfortunately.

Charlie Lewis (35:50)

you

Rachel Withers (35:51)

Yeah, the whole dual citizenship thing. somebody though who, is liked and respected. I think a premier is the closest thing we have to a mayor.

which is what Andy Burner was, the mayor of a a huge city like Manchester. yeah, unfortunately I can't see any good premiers to pick either. what this moment is about, I think, is that people want an outsider. That's what Trump was. That's what Pauline Hansen is, despite the fact she's been in Parliament, in and out for 30 years.

they want someone who's not part of the establishment. And I think that is really Labour's big problem is that they're not only are they party of a party of the establishment, they're such a factionalized party that it's actually very hard for an outsider to come in and contend with that

system, um, and rise to the top, even if they are generational talent, which they would need to be.

I'll throw one out there, Peter Garrett. What about Peter Garrett? Like, he's become a strident AUKUS critic. He was once a Labour MP, uh, never really made sense this one, but he is the kind of like take the bull by the horns and turn the party around and speak to people. and I you know, I dare say that would win back a lot of former Labour voters.

bk (37:03)

Good call. I wouldn't mind seeing Peter back. he's always good value. you I think you put your finger on it, Rachel. I think an outsider is needed. I just it's not just a dearth of talent. there's no one in there who who would be presenting as a kind of a clean skin to go freshen things up. I don't know why Andrew Charlton is mentioned so often.

as good the I

Rachel Withers (37:22)

Worst possible choice.

bk (37:23)

I can't see he's done anything except get captured by the AI industry. So it's a complete mystery to me. yeah I I don't think there's anyone in labor's ranks who you know I I'd be urging as a look the least worst would probably be

I'm a bit

torn because uh Mark Butler is relatively unknown, so he's got a bit of a clean skin potential. I think Penny Wong, who's obviously in the wrong house and is probably gonna retire anytime soon, I think she's got the the the sufficient experience to actually lead the party pretty well. know, has got some sort of political toughness to her and she's a well known brand. If we just

wanna sort of balance things a bit, you get a clean skin who could, know, get get boaters to look anew at labour. Or you get someone who's very definite brand, but not damaged goods. someone like Pennywong. But you know, I I think we're kind of fishing in a very, very shallow pond. mean Rachel talked a little bit before about

You know, it's sort of figure who could attract those sort of votes that are drifting away from labor, those those votes that One Nation's picking up the the resentment, the alienation, the the grievance votes. I think the person who could best do that in Parliament's probably Andrew Hasting. I'd be very excited to see him become leader of of the Liberals because I do think he offers something different.

i it's the things are looking a little bit better now for the for the coalition, so they might actually survive intact as a they might even form government after the next election, but the things do look a little bit better in terms of them surviving uh as a as a you know functioning sort of outfit into the next term of parliament. every time I listen to Hasty or or I read, you know, his transcripts

I feel like I'm listening to a a real person who has interesting views and who doesn't automatically toe the party line but does hit those political beats. He's you know he's gonna can always stick the knife into the Albanese government. he's also good at saying, actually, no, I didn't think that was too bad a move by the Prime Minister. I I I'm

happy with that. know, he seems to be a reasonable person, even though people I'm doubt don't doubt there's a lot of people listening right now saying

You mad, the man's a religious sort of zealot and you know, a you know, f right wing lunatic and et cetera, et cetera. I am very been very impressed by his willingness to actually say what he thinks. And of course that tends to vanish the moment you become a leader. So who knows, he

might, you know, he might go the way of Stephen Smith if he's elevated to leadership. But I think in terms of the person who could pick up that

that resentment vote.

Andrew Hasty's in, notwithstanding, you know, the efforts to demonize him about about the Ben Roberts Smith

Rachel Withers (39:48)

Ben Robert Smith.

bk (39:49)

issue, um, I don't think that has got legs in the long

Rachel Withers (39:53)

Mm.

bk (39:53)

run. But uh, you know, he's not in Labor and you know in many ways

Rachel Withers (39:58)

Maybe

he could be. Maybe he could be.

Charlie Lewis (40:01)

That would be a hell of an outsider

Rachel Withers (40:02)

Yeah.

Charlie Lewis (40:03)

for them to get a hold of.

bk (40:03)

Well, which which faction would

he be in, I suppose, is the question.

Rachel Withers (40:07)

to wrap up the festival of of agreement, think I also have been on record in Crikey as as thinking Andrew Hasty would be a good option for the Libs. I think that's one issue where Byrne and I agree vehemently and most of the readers disagree. but I think it's a good note to end on and Andrew Hasty for Labour leader.

Charlie Lewis (40:24)

was gonna say if the very premise of this chat didn't make our readers furious, I think our conclusion is guaranteed to cause a bit of a plexi. But what are we here for except to provoke? Guys, thank you so much for coming in and chatting this through with us. Thank you everyone

for joining if the work that Crikey does does mean anything to you and the things that we discussed mean anything to you, please do consider taking out a subscription.