



Navigating The Great Dividing Voter Range

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Joel Fitzgibbon's decision not to recontest the seat of Hunter will shift the Labor Party further from its working-class base.

Fitzgibbon was one of the last voices within the federal ALP holding the party back from becoming a party of the inner-city left. Following Labor's surprise election loss in 2019, Fitzgibbon declared, "We need to get back to our working-class base. We need to send the clear message that we are on their side. I want to put labour back into the Labor Party."

Fitzgibbon has been outspoken within the ALP in his view that the party is abandoning its traditional voters by moving towards the left with radical climate policy, a disregard for jobs in coal and gas, and an overemphasis on progressive social issues. He has gone so far as to warn of a party split, with one party representing the regions and the other representing inner-city progressives.



This divide in the ALP is represented by Fitzgibbon's seat of Hunter at one end and ALP leader Anthony Albanese's seat of Grayndler at the other. These seats sit at opposite ends of Australia's demographic divide.

Hunter is relatively low income, low education, with high rates of employment in mining and manufacturing, below average public sector employment, and with a high rate of families with children. The inner-Sydney seat of Grayndler is high income, high education, with high rates of professional and public sector employment, and with fewer families with children.

In 2019 the people of Hunter observed that the ALP was becoming the party of Grayndler and not the party of Hunter. Fitzgibbon suffered a 9 per cent swing against him on a two-party preferred basis, the highest swing against an incumbent across the country, and Hunter went from being a safe seat to a marginal seat with a margin of just 3 per cent.

The dissatisfaction with the ALP from its working-class base was not isolated to the seat of Hunter in the 2019 election. The nearby ALP held seats of Patterson and Shortland swung strongly against the party, with modest but substantial swings also occurring in several outer suburban Labor seats in Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne.

Navigating the divide between inner-city elites and mainstream Australians in the suburbs and regions is not a problem unique to the ALP.

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The Coalition is also increasingly divided between elites in the seats of Goldstein, Higgins, Kooyong, and Wentworth in inner-city Melbourne and Sydney and its regional base. In a bid to defend their inner-city seats, the Liberal Party has moved towards the environmental and progressive left in what can be described as a "teal strategy" that blurs the lines between the Liberals and the Greens. This defensive strategy risks alienating the Coalition base in the regions and prevents them from effectively targeting the ALP's outer suburban seats.

It is not just the major parties that have turned their back on mainstream Australians. Australia's major institutions across government, big business, the union movement, and the media are dominated by elites and no longer reflect the values and aspirations of mainstream Australians. This is undermining trust in our institutions and leaving many Australians disaffected.

This presents the opportunity for either the ALP or the Coalition to become a voice for these disaffected Australians by realigning to represent voters from across the country, from farmers in the regions to blue-collar workers in the outer suburbs. Without a significant realignment, the current trajectory of both major parties will ensure that mainstream Australians are left without a political voice.



Given the Coalition's strong hold in regional Australia, they are perhaps better placed than Labor to enact this realignment. Joel Fitzgibbon's retirement from federal parliament will further weaken the ALP defence of its blue-collared electorates and open up the opportunity for the Coalition to hold the vast centre of mainstream Australia.

Fitzgibbon was a voice for blue-collared workers and represented the ALP's traditional base. These voters will become more disillusioned as the ALP turns its back on the working-class and moves further towards the progressive left. A Labor party without the likes of Fitzgibbon will be a party that is labour in name only.

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