

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 72):

The Upcoming Election

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(This is the translation of the original Japanese text, which was drafted on 3 May 2022)

Australia will hold a federal election on 21 May. I have received an increasing number of questions about this process from those in Japan. Today, I want to talk a bit about the election.



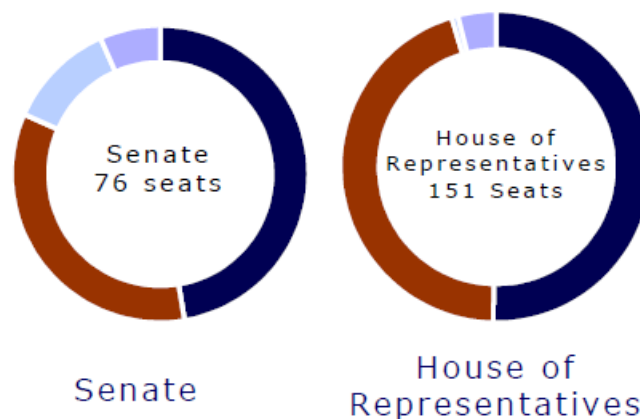
Australia's Parliament House (Source: Parliament of Australia website)

1. The Federal Parliament

Australia has an upper and lower house, called the Senate and House of Representatives respectively. In the Senate there are 76 Senators who serve for 6 years (except for the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory), and the House of Representatives has 151 Members who serve for 3 years. In this election half of the Senate and all of the House of Representatives are up for election.

The below graph shows the current composition of the Federal Parliament. It may be that what the election will do to the composition of the seats in the House of Representatives, which, by convention, tends to have the prior deliberation of bills and other prerogatives is more talked about than that of the Senate. The current composition of the House of Representatives has the Coalition Government (Liberal and National parties) holding 75 seats, and the opposition Labor Party holding 68 seats (however, due to a change in electoral district boundaries for this election, which allocated an extra seat to the state of Victoria, considered to be a Labor stronghold, the ALP are entering the election with virtually 69 seats), the remaining 7 seats are held by minority parties and independents. In order for the Labor party to win they would need to win 7 additional seats.

The current composition of the Australian Federal Parliament
(based on the website of federal parliament)



35	Coalition	75
26	Labor	68
9	Greens	1
6	Others	7

2. Points of contention for this election

Considering that the Coalition has held power for the 9 years since 2013 (under Prime Ministers Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison), the Labor party in Opposition

is naturally focusing on the concept of “change” in their campaign.

The Opposition’s campaign has focused on reminding voters of their accumulated dissatisfaction with the handling of a number of disasters including the bushfires, COVID-19 pandemic, and floods that have occurred during the Coalition’s time in office as well as the rising cost of living, and calling PM Scott Morrison’s credentials into question.

In reply the Coalition has been emphasising their track record in the pandemic response, and arguing that their experience makes them better economic managers and more capable on national security issues such as those concerning China. In response to questions about the trustworthiness of their leader, the Coalition is maintaining the message that as Australia is currently dealing with a number of issues both at home and abroad, “It is a choice between certainty and uncertainty.”

3. Running the election campaign

According to an opinion poll from May 2, 47% support the Coalition and 53% support Labor. When asked to choose the more competent leader, Labor’s Anthony Albanese was initially ahead but has since been overtaken by the Coalition’s Scott Morrison who is polling at 45% of preferences, 6 points ahead of Albanese.

In short, the Coalition is putting pressure on the Opposition’s advantage. The result of the first televised debate among undecided voters was that 40% would back Albanese to win, and 35% would back Morrison, with the rest remaining undecided. The second debate will take place on the evening of 8 May.

The race continues to be close, and predicting the results of the election remains difficult. Unlike Japan, all Australians who are eligible to vote have to do so (if they do not vote they can be fined), so the outcome of swing votes is influential. Additionally, Australia makes use of a preferential voting system where voters do not just mark their first preference, but in the House of Representatives, number all of the candidates in the order of their preference. It is a system that aims to minimise the number of wasted votes. The fact that the election is decided based on more than just first preference votes makes predicting the outcome even more difficult.

On top of this, the accuracy of opinion polls has also been called into question. People still remember that in the previous election 3 years ago almost all of the experts were predicting a win for the Labor Opposition, but in a surprising outcome, Scott Morrison's government held on to power.



Scott Morrison (Leader of Liberal Party)
(Source: PM&C website)



Anthony Albanese (Leader of Labor Party)
(Source: ALP website)

4. The future

When talking to members of both the Coalition government and the Opposition, I have noticed 3 things they have in common.

The first is that they are both expecting a close race. The results in about 20 closely-contested electoral districts will be key to victory.

Additionally, no matter who wins, both sides agree that a “hung parliament”, where there is no clear majority government, is likely.

Finally, there is an awareness on both sides that a hung parliament would be undesirable for Australia in terms of policy consistency and government stability.

The election campaign is well underway. At 6 weeks long, the campaign is a long-haul. On the first day of the campaign the Labor party leader Anthony Albanese was unable to correctly name the unemployment and cash rates when asked by journalists and this drew a lot of attention. On top of this, he also tested positive for COVID in Week 2 of the campaign and was forced to go into home isolation in the middle of the election campaign.

On the other hand, the Opposition is criticising the Government's handling of relations with the Solomon Islands, one of Australia's close Pacific neighbours, after they suddenly signed a security pact with China. Labor are also criticising the handling of the economy, and blaming the Government for the rising cost of living against the backdrop of inflation and rate rises.

In the remaining days of campaigning the performance of both parties, in statements and policy announcements, will decide who comes out on top. It will be a showdown you won't know until the very last moment how it will end.



The House of Representatives (green)



The Senate (red)

(Source: Parliament of Australia website)

5. The daily life of an MP

Being a Federal MP is exhausting work. As I have interacted with Australian politicians I have felt this more and more strongly. Members of the House of Representatives serve for just 3 years, so they are often up for re-election. In addition to this, you often see people in their 50s leave the world of politics due to the pressure of their home life.

Reflecting on the ever-deepening Australia-Japan relationship, over this last year and a half I have been able to invite to my residence former Prime Ministers Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott, the former and current Speakers of the House, Tony Smith and Andrew Wallace, 9 current cabinet members including Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, Minister for Defence Peter Dutton, as well as Chair

of the Foreign Affairs Committee Senator David Fawcett, and Chair of the Intelligence Committee Senator James Paterson. I was also able to have in-depth conversations with many politicians across the aisle.

Members of Parliament return to their hometowns when Parliament is not sitting, so when I invite them to my residence for lunch or dinner it needs to be during the sitting period. As such, because Parliament sessions often go until 8:00 pm, we start dinners at around 8:15 pm. In these cases it is not rare for us to part ways as late as 11:00 pm.

On top of this, there are no dedicated lodgings for Members of Parliament in Canberra. Quite a few members share apartments, as rental costs in Canberra continue to skyrocket. Some take into account the added burden of doing laundry and dealing with bed-making when renting an apartment and choose to live out of hotels.

The masterful TV series *Secret City* portrayed this kind of lifestyle in one of its episodes. A politician serving as the Defence Minister tells his son “Living in Canberra, my job comes first. It’s a ‘pizza and wine life.’” He convinces his son to give up on his hopes of living with his father and transferring schools to Canberra after facing problems at school in Perth. The son dejectedly returned to Perth to live with his mother. It felt very real, and broke my heart.

Moreover, the frequent round trips between their hometowns and Canberra must also be difficult for politicians. In a place as vast as Australia, the only choice is to travel by plane or car. However, direct flights to the small city of Canberra are limited. This is why I have been gently suggesting “If you put in a high speed rail connection between Canberra, Sydney, and Melbourne it would be much easier on the politicians!”.

6. Japan-Australia parliamentary exchange

In any case, one of the important values that Australia and Japan both share is democracy. The Australian people are currently participating in the democratic process of choosing their representation. I look forward to maintaining and continuing to strengthen the unprecedentedly close Japan-Australia relations with the elected government and legislature.

Quite soon after the election, on 24 May, the Japanese Government will host a

Quad Leaders' meeting in Tokyo.



A virtual Quad meeting took place in March this year

(Source: Cabinet Public Affairs Office)

Further, Japan and Australia are both committed to continuing parliamentary exchanges. On the Japan side Mr AISAWA Ichiro heads the Japan-Australia Parliamentary Association (last year former Prime Ministers ASO Taro and ABE Shinzo, and former Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Mr AMARI Akira joined this group as advisors). On the Australian side the Hon Dr David Gillespie MP, Minister for Regional Health, heads the Australia-Japan Parliamentary Group.

Once travel restrictions have been relaxed, and Australia has held its election, I hope that the lively exchange between Members of Parliament can recommence.

YAMAGAMI Shingo