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Life in the Inner West

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THE FIGHT OF HIS LIFE

🕒 August 23, 2013 📁 Feature Story

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In a matter of days Anthony Norman Albanese (Member for Grayndler, Deputy PM, Deputy Leader of the ALP, Leader of the House of Representatives and the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy) will be either a historical footnote or a Labor Party legend.

The big story on the SMH website the morning I interview Albo is titled 'Ground Control to Major Kev: sorry, you're a goner'. It's one of a deluge of articles insisting the 'sugar hit' generated by Rudd's resurrection has dissipated and the ALP is headed for humiliating defeat.

Presumably the Member of Grayndler has seen the story, along with plenty of frightening internal polling, but if he's worried about becoming the shortest-serving Deputy Prime Minister in Australia's history he's not letting on. When Ciao arrives at his bustling electoral office on Marrickville's main road he bounds up to introduce himself then starts reminiscing with the photographer, who's been shooting him since the heady days of the Kevin '07 campaign. He even laughs when I confess I'd wanted to get a shot of him reading the Daily Telegraph where he was photoshopped to resemble Sgt Schultz (his hovering media advisor unlaughingly makes it clear that certainly won't be happening).

If my dim memories of Hogan's Heroes are accurate, the Sgt Schultz portrayal isn't necessarily as insulting as Murdoch's attack dogs would have wished. Schultz, after all, was a good-natured, fundamentally decent character and Albo has gone surprisingly far in politics by being similarly likeable. He must be the only person in the country who can credibly claim to be close friends with both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard and even those on the other side of the political fence are given to confessing a sneaking regard for him. He's a popular local member and, now the Liberals have committed to preferencing the Greens last, in no danger of being voted out himself, even if many of his comrades are.

"Look, we've got to the point whereby we're competitive. I think there is a real chance of us winning the election, we need to win seats in Queensland and hold them in NSW," Albo tells me once we sit down in his office, which he is quick to point out is where the country is run from whenever he is acting PM.

However dire the polls are looking now, the fact the majority of disengaged voters – the swingers in marginal seats – don't make up their minds until close to polling day is providing some hope.

"I remain firmly of the view that when people focus in the last week, the question will be: Is Kevin Rudd up to the job of being Prime Minister? The answer to that is yes. The answer to the question is Tony Abbott up to being

Prime Minister? I think is a resounding no, even from members of his own caucus, let alone supporters of the Liberal Party. You can't be Prime Minister of the nation if you refuse to engage in serious interviews... he avoids scrutiny."

That's not a charge that could be levelled at Albo, who points out he's been all over the "full gamut of media" in recent weeks, including the likes of Alan Jones, Andrew Bolt and Steve Price. In 2011 Albanese ignored Australian Federal Police warnings and waded into a crowd of 200 enraged anti-carbon tax campaigners staging a demo outside his office. Albanese doesn't mention the personal abuse he copped (he was called a liar, a gutless loser and told his beloved late mother would be ashamed of him) but does recall one of the placards that was waved around. "It is extraordinary that someone thinks standing in the diverse community that is the Inner West of Sydney with a 'Tolerance is our demise' banner is acceptable but they did that," he says.

Unfortunately for Labor, it's not only the perpetually outraged Alan Jones demographic that's offside. Plenty of true believers have been dismayed by the leadership circus, the flip flopping on pricing carbon, the lurch to the right on asylum seekers and the corruption uncovered in the state party by ICAC during the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era.

Unsurprisingly, Albo paints a rosy picture of the last six years and promises big things in the next three. "I sat for 12 years in Opposition and I know how frustrating that can be in terms of the local electorate, which I think was ignored during the Howard Government... a Labor Government makes a difference in terms of the Italian Forum Cultural Centre, Mackey Park, Fraser Park, the Ashfield Civic Centre, the Cooks River Revitalisation. Which is why I'm so determined, not just in Grayndler, but to do my best to re-elect the Labor Government because I do think there's unfinished business in terms of building the nation's future."

Albo claims not to indulge in the fratricidal hatred that characterises relations between the Greens and ALP but when talk turns to one of his grand obsessions – building a second Sydney airport – he has trouble controlling his frustration. "I do think that the simplistic slogans of the Greens political party need to be put under examination... and I think that when they are, they are found wanting. We support a second airport for Sydney, I've said that I want to see construction commence in the next term. The idea you could have Sydney Airport shut down and no second airport in what is a global city, it is quite frankly absurd. I don't understand how people would get into Sydney. Are they going to parachute out of planes?"

"They [the Greens] say what they think people want to hear when they campaign against Sydney Airport but they also campaign in western Sydney against a second airport. So you end up with no realistic solution and Sydney Airport entrenched as a monopoly."

If the prospect of less aircraft noise isn't enough to sway undecided Grayndler voters, Albo is hoping the ALP's newfound enthusiasm for legalising gay marriage will be.

"You have leadership from the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the leader of the Labor Party in the Senate – the three key people are all supportive of marriage equality. We've said there should be a vote within 100 days, we would be pushing for a conscience vote across the parliament, this is reform that's time has come."

Whether Labor wins or loses on election day, Albo says he'll hang around for the next term but makes no promises beyond that. "I don't think these are jobs for life and I've always considered before I've re-nominated. You give up a lot in terms of time with family, time at home. But if I do have the opportunity to continue to be Deputy Prime Minister, [I hope] I can look back at the end of that term and say, 'Construction has been started on a second airport, marriage equality has been advanced, the NBN has been rolled out to millions of people, DisabilityCare, the Better Schools plan, the Murray-Darling plan are all entrenched.' All those things are I think, as Ben Chifley said, things worth fighting for."

- **Words:** Nigel Bowen
- **Photo:** Ben Cregan

***Scroll down for a full transcript of our interview with Anthony Albanese**

All relatively quiet on the Inner Western front

Will your electorate be red, green or blue come Election Day?

Grayndler

Ever since Adam Bandt snatched the seat of Melbourne from Labor in 2010 pundits have been insisting Grayndler would be the next to fall, heralding the unstoppable Greenification of inner city elitist enclaves. Given the ongoing gentrification of the Inner West it's certainly feasible what was once Labor heartland could veer to the right or post-materialist left in the not too distant future but it won't be happening this election.

Ciao's prediction: Neither Hall Greenland (Greens) nor Cedric Spencer (Liberals) will be able to tear down the popular Deputy PM.

Sydney

Gentrification means this traditionally Labor seat can no longer be taken for granted either (anyone who can afford a house in Balmain, Annandale or Newtown isn't likely to be keen on wealth redistribution) but neither the Greens Dianne Hiles nor the Liberals Sean O'Connor is likely to be able to make up enough ground to roll the high-profile Tanya Plibersek.

Ciao's prediction: O'Connor (like Greenland) is likely to be cursing the Greens-Liberal ideological antipathy that ruled out mutually beneficial preferencing deals in the Inner West come the evening of September 7.

Reid

While Albanese and Plibersek will survive the anti-Labor swing in NSW, it's unlikely John Murphy will be so lucky. It'll probably be close but the tireless Craig Laundy, scion of the \$500 million Laundy Hotel Group empire, looks certain to establish an Inner West beachhead for the conservatives. Nonetheless, this seat should provide political tragi-comedies with some election-night entertainment as it switches back and forth between the Liberal and Labor columns as booths from areas as diverse as Auburn and Drummoyne are counted.

Ciao's prediction: Don't expect the new member for Reid to support any calls for stricter regulation of pokies or pubs.

ALBO UNCUT

On Thursday the 15th August, Ciao's Nigel Bowen interviewed Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at his Marrickville office for Issue #217's cover story. Here is a transcript of the conversation.

Nigel Bowen: So how are you finding the campaign?

Anthony Albanese: You know, it's pretty exhausting. It's my first campaign as Deputy Prime Minister and just the difference in terms of demands is enormous. I've already launched, I think, seven campaigns [for other ALP politicians].

NB: You've spoken about growing up in Camperdown as the child of a single mother. I'm just wondering if, four decades ago, you imagined you would

ascend to the second highest office in the land? Was that an ambition of yours?

AA: [Laughs] Certainly not and you know I had... I think it says a great deal, it says a lot about this country that someone can be Deputy Prime Minister who grew up in a single parent, public housing household and whose mum was an invalid pensioner. Partly it pays tribute to her and her nurturing but is...

NB: Did she tell you, "You can grow up to be Prime Minister, Anthony"?

AA: No, but she was always very proud of me and very confident. She did say, she was one of those people who said, "You can be whatever you want to be." But I certainly wouldn't have... even when I was elected to Parliament, I thought it would be good to be a minister. That's the difference, ministers get to make decisions. I sat for 12 years in Opposition and I know how frustrating that can be, in terms of the local electorate that I think was ignored during the Howard Government. There was no support for any community infrastructure or community initiatives during that 12 years and a Labor government makes a difference in terms of the Italian Cultural Centre, Mackey Park, Fraser Park, the Ashfield Civic Centre, the Cooks River revitalisation, a range of local projects. Which is why I'm so determined, not just in Grayndler, but to do my best to re-elect the Labor Government because I do think there's unfinished business in terms of building the nation's future, the National Broadband Network, Disability Care Australia, the Better Schools Plan – all of those require a longer term in government to see realised, as well as the second Sydney Airport.

NB: Do you think being Deputy PM helps or hinders you in terms of holding onto your own seat?

AA: The feedback I've had from the community is they're very proud their local member, their local MP, is also the Deputy Prime Minister of the country. People understand that brings recognition to the area. I have on three occasions now been the acting Prime Minister, so the Government's been run literally from my electoral office in Marrickville Road.

NB: When Kevin Rudd returned there were a few policy changes. Things like the PNG solution were brought in, which will presumably raise the [Labor] vote in the marginal seats you need to win. What's been the reaction in a fairly educated, middle class electorate?

AA: I think there's an understanding that these are really complex issues and there's no simple solution. There are mixed views as to what the solution should be but people recognise that it's not simple, that a compassionate response to asylum seekers also requires measures which will ensure people don't drown at sea. The fact that we've been prepared to, firstly, lift the number of refugees Australia takes up from 13,000 to 20,000 and said we would consider increasing it further up to 27,000 is also... has been received positively. A number of people who are recent arrivals themselves are very concerned that because people are coming by boat, rather than through the

UN processes, then people from Sierra Leone [and other people's] prospect of getting relatives out under the humanitarian refugee program were diminished. So the concern about boat arrivals was also coming from a number of the refugee groups themselves in the electorate, particularly from the African community.

NB: What about the Greens? Do you think they are a serious threat, particularly now the Liberals – along with, possibly, Labor – are preferencing them last?

AA: No, no, we won't be putting them last. Look, people will make up their own mind. The Greens certainly have relied upon getting Liberal preferences, they keep speaking about this seat being a marginal seat but I received almost double the number of votes the Greens received at the last election. ^[L]_[SEP] I think the Greens political party have put up a particularly poor candidate for the seat. Someone who has a long track record of being involved in issues but not someone who has been involved in mainstream issues. The comment that I saw from Hall Greenland being critical when I was elevated to Deputy Prime Minister, the feedback I got, was that went down very badly, that he couldn't even have the good grace to say congratulations. He said that the Member for Grayndler becoming Deputy Prime Minister would be bad for the electorate. I think that is a real misreading of how the electorate views these issues and the sense of pride that they had that their representative had been elected Deputy Prime Minister.

NB: There are a lot of people in this electorate who alternate between voting Greens and Labor or who perhaps vote Labor in the Lower House and Greens in the Upper House. Especially at the end of this period of minority government, what do you think of this fratricidal hatred between Labor and Greens that seems to have grown even more intense?

AA: I certainly don't have that [hatred] and I don't have that towards people who are [Greens] voters and supporters. I do think that the simplistic slogans of the Greens political party need to be put under examination, just as our policies are put under examination. And I think when they are they've been found to be wanting. A policy, for example, on the airport. We support a second airport for Sydney, I've said that what I want to see is for construction to commence in the next term.

NB: But politicians have been saying that for 20-30 years, haven't they?

AA: Well, what we've done is, at the 2010 election, I commenced a process of a proper joint study to try and take the politics out of it [and got the] federal and state government to co-do that study. It reported last year more work was required looking at the sites going into the geo-technical analysis but it highlighted that Wilton and Badgery's Creek were the two possible sites. It said more work was required and we're doing that. The idea that you could have, you know, Sydney Airport shutdown and no second airport for Sydney,

essentially they're arguing for no airport in what is a global city – it is quite frankly absurd. I don't understand how people would get into Sydney, what are they going to do, parachute out of planes? The idea of an airport in Canberra, another city, and you have a train or what have you to Canberra. Of course, the Greens political party in Canberra are arguing for a curfew and restrictions on Canberra Airport. It is, I think, an interesting distinction between the political parties, it says a lot. They say what people want to hear at the time they campaign against Sydney Airport but they also campaign in western and south-western Sydney against a second airport, so you end up with no realistic solution and Sydney Airport entrenched as a monopoly as a result of that. If you look at the comments of Max Moore-Wilton recently, his comments say a lot, he doesn't worry about attacking the Greens. He attacks me pretty consistently and personally because I want to make sure that the interest of the community, the whole of the Sydney community, are represented – not just the monopoly interests of the owners of Sydney Airport.

NB: How about gay marriage? What is the prospect of that going through in the next term?

AA: Look, I think the fact you have leadership from the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the leader of the Labor Party in the Senate – the three key people in the government are all supportive of marriage equality. We've said that there should be a vote within a hundred days, we would be pushing for a conscience vote across the Parliament, this is a reform that's time has come. One of the first things I did in my first term of parliament, I introduced the same sex entitlement to superannuation bill, that was about giving equal rights to same sex couples for super.

NB: What have you made of the Murdoch campaign, particularly that Sgt Schultz cover?

AA: Oh look, the whole of [News Ltd] campaign has been pretty consistent and I think people discount what they read if they know it's not coming from a level playing field. The Telegraph on day one made clear its positions with a front-page editorial. Since then they've been very critical [and] I think people will discount what they read on that basis.

NB: So you're completely relaxed about all those people in Western Sydney seats reading the Telegraph?

AA: Well, would you prefer to always receive positive publicity? Yes you would but that clearly is not going to be the case during this campaign. But what I believe is we've got a strong record, we've got strong plans in terms of building the future and that that will cut through. We have the Better Schools plan, the National Broadband Network, strong record on environment, strong record on jobs and growth, strong record on childcare, strong record on living standards. The first thing we did was out-of-school-hours care, it had a big

impact in this electorate. So we have to put our case, we can't be distracted by any particular article in any particular newspaper. If we did that, we wouldn't bother to campaign.

NB: You toyed with some sort of media reform during this term and even people who aren't necessarily supporters of the Labor Party have been somewhat appalled by the Murdoch campaign against Labor. Might that be something that might be revisited were you to be returned?

AA: No, we're not considering that, that's not on the agenda. But one of the things that is occurring is increased diversity in terms of opinion out there. Whether it be through social media, whether it be through people reading their local papers such as *Ciao*, or looking at websites. ^[1]^[SEP] I think this campaign is the first real Twitter campaign, for example, where people are receiving information directly from the source and that's a big difference even to three years ago. So technology is making diversity of opinion more. I think the concern that people have is that opinion should be labelled as such, as opinion, not as news, not as fact, and certainly people do have that concern. My understanding is, because I got contacted by the Press Council, there's a number of complaints. Last Saturday there was a front-page story in the *Daily Telegraph* that said that I had, allegations had been made that I had allowed 10 Virgin flights to land outside of the curfew hours at Sydney Airport because MPs were on board. There was no decision by me, there were no planes outside the curfew and there were no MPs on these non-existent planes. Now, I think I had the opportunity to get that message out but you've got to call it out and that's a distraction, no doubt, from our positive message of what we're doing. I mean that was a day where I was in Melbourne and in Sydney campaigning on positive initiatives that we had, including public transport initiative in Melbourne.

NB: I'm presuming there are a disproportionate number of high-powered career women – including your own wife – in this electorate, who perhaps looked at Julia Gillard as a role model. Have you many people come up and express distress about the way she was treated?

AA: Certainly, I'm distressed with the way Julia Gillard was treated by the media in terms of... Julia remains a close friend of mine, she voted for me to be Deputy Prime Minister ahead of Simon Crean. And, I think, in terms of Julia's achievements as Prime Minister, particularly in the context of minority government... I mean history will treat Julia Gillard's period as Prime Minister well... disability care, the education reforms, in particular, I think are standouts. Us putting a price on carbon, which will now evolve into an emission tradings scheme, all of these were achieved in the context of minority government.

NB: But what do you say to women who say she was really treated appallingly. That Anne Summers school of thought, women who are traditional Labor voters who don't feel they shouldn't vote Labor this time.

AA: Well, I don't get anyone saying they shouldn't vote Labor from that perspective. I think people understand in terms of our political opponents, represented by the Abbott opposition, you know, this is an opposition leader who stood in front of banners and encouraged a campaign of a people's revolt, as he called it, that led to people standing in front of banners that were entirely offensive. [There was] a concerted campaign, including by some elements of the media, to say things that were beyond the pale, including a demonstration outside this electoral office of which one of the main themes, apart from personal attacks on Julia Gillard, was 'Tolerance is our demise'. It is extraordinary in 2013 someone thinks standing in the diverse community that is the Inner West of Sydney with 'Tolerance is our demise' banners is somehow acceptable in 2013 but they did that. What I know about Julia is she's campaigning each and every day to make sure the Labor government is re-elected.

NB: After Kevin returned there was a miraculous rise in the polls, which seems to have tapered off now. How optimistic are you? You've got to the point where you can save the furniture but can you get over the line?

AA: Look, we've got to the point whereby we're competitive. I think there is a real prospect of us winning the election, we need to win seats in Queensland and hold them in New South Wales, that's essentially the formula around this election. I remain firmly of the view that when people focus in the last week, the focus will be: is Kevin Rudd up to the job of being Prime Minister? The answer to that is yes and I think that is agreed to even by many conservative voters. [1]The answer to the question: Is Tony Abbott up to being Prime Minister? I think is a resounding no, even from some members of his own caucus, let alone supporters of the Liberal Party. You can't be the Prime Minister of the nation if you refuse to engage in serious political interviews on Lateline, on 7.30, on AM, on Insiders, on Q&A. He avoids scrutiny. [1]Since I've been Deputy Prime Minister, I've done two interviews on Lateline, I've done 7.30, I've done Q&A, I've done the full gamut of the media, including not just on the progressive side but I've got interviewed by Alan Jones and Graham Richardson, together, last week. I've done Andrew Bolt and Steve Price. I do the full bit and don't run from debate [just] as I didn't run from the demonstration out here. Part of the feedback I get, the positive feedback of my strength as a local member, is I will stand up and argue the progressive case, whether it's in parliament, in the media or literally at demonstrations where the Australian Federal Police are saying it's probably best if you don't speak at this demonstration. [1]And I think people respect that. People mightn't agree with all my views at all times but people know what I stand for and people know I'm prepared to argue for it.

NB: You mention before you came into parliament in 1996 and endured 12 years in opposition. In the worst-case scenario would you have the stomach to continue or would you be looking to do something else?

AA: Well I certainly would continue on in terms of serving the full term and I'd wait and see. I don't think these are jobs for life and I've always considered before I've re-nominated. You give up a lot in terms of time with family, time at home. I did almost 300 flights last year. Since I've been Deputy Prime Minister... I've been to every state and territory in the country at least once in the last month and many of them multiple times and not just to capital cities but regional centres as well. ¹¹~~SEP~~ But I believe passionately in this country, I'm in a position as Deputy Prime Minister that I have respect for the position and respect for the opportunity that I have and I feel that responsibility to make a difference and in the next term of government, if I do have the opportunity to continue to be Deputy Prime Minister, I can look back at the end of that term and say, well, construction's begun on a second airport, I believe that marriage equality will be advanced, I believe that the National Broadband Network will have been rolled out to millions of people, the Better Schools Plan will be entrenched, Disability Care Australia will be entrenched, the environmental initiatives that we have, including the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, the largest marine park in the world, will be entrenched. Australia's position in the world will have been advanced because of what we've done with our position on the UN Security Council. All of those things, I think, as Ben Chifley said, are things worth fighting for.

NB: ALP Reform, much like fixing Parramatta Road or a second Sydney airport is something a lot of people think is a good idea and there are constant studies into it but not much action. Win or lose, will there be reform of the party post-election?

AA: There has been already pre the election. The reforms that we have undertaken are the largest ever reforms of our internal processes in our 130, no, 120, 122 precisely, year history. We have given party members a direct say in who the leader will be, we have reformed the New South Wales branch by taking away factional decision making and making sure that the processes of the State Executive, the Administrative Committee, and other party bodies have proper processes in place. We have already trialled a number of preselections that have allowed for the whole community to vote. So I think there have been really significant reforms. Is there more to be done? The job of reformers is never done; the job of reformers is to continue to...

NB: Well, what other reforms then?

AA: I want to see more direct voting across more positions in the Labor Party. I want to see an empowering of the Labor Party membership and that's the way that we've conducted ourselves in terms of the party in this area. I think it's worked very well, it's an open, inclusive party and we need to reflect that.

NB: How much of an albatross has the state party been around your neck in this election?

AA: Look, I think people draw a distinction between the different levels of government and they know that across the spectrum federal politics has been completely clean in terms of ministers doing their job free of corruption and that's, I think, a positive aspect of Australian political life.

NB: Sure but senior members of the state party have been fronting ICAC. Are you saying people say, 'Oh well, that just state [ALP politicians]' and that has no impact?

AA: Well, there's also more senior business people than there are politicians and I don't think people say that all business people are somehow engaged in improper practices.

NB: I hate to bring up the leadership issue but are you satisfied with your current station in life or do you harbour any dreams of advancing any further?

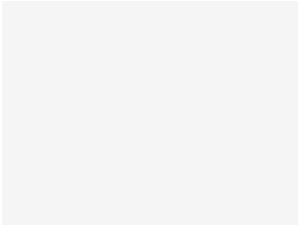
AA: No no, absolutely not! I want to be Deputy Prime Minister in Kevin Rudd's government and I don't have leadership ambitions. I think in terms of the role that I play... in what has been a difficult internal time for the party, I think at all times I acted with integrity. I received support in the ballot for deputy leader, where there were no deals done, I received the votes of Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Wayne Swan, Stephen Conroy, Penny Wong, Craig Emerson, Peter Garrett, Greg Combet and Chris Bowen. I received very broad support to be deputy leader and I'm very proud of that, that I remain friends [with people] across the party. I'm proud of the fact that as leader of the House, in what was a minority government, the Government got all of its legislation passed, not a single Bill defeated on the floor of the House of Representatives, not even an amendment carried without government support. Given that we started with 70 votes out of 150, I think one of the things that that showed was not only that I could work with people in my own party but across the parties as well. I worked with the cross benchers where I had to secure five non-Labor votes for every single piece of legislation that was before the Parliament. And people with views as diverse as Adam Bandt and Bob Katter and Tony Windsor. So I think I showed there that I could work with people to make a difference and I think we did make a difference, I believe we have been a very good government since 2007. ¹ We would be an even better government if we're in a position to form a majority government after the next election because the backdrop to Julia's Prime Ministership in the last term was always the fact that the media talked it up and Tony Abbott talked it up as instability even though it was actually pretty stable government. But you had an Opposition that literally tried to wreck the parliament at every single day, and I mean, it's been very important for Australia's democracy that that didn't happen.



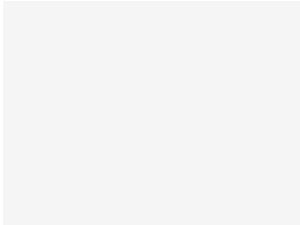
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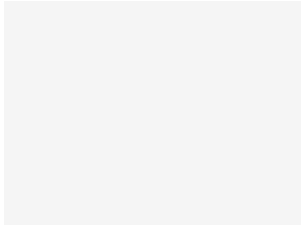
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