

The UK could take some lessons from Australia on fixed terms for party leaders so that election winners are guaranteed a full term in office

By Democratic Audit

*The Australian Labor Party has approved proposals from the party's new leader Kevin Rudd, that the party's leadership selection rules be changed so that parliamentarians and party members are able to elect party leaders. **Anika Gauja** writes that the UK's political parties could consider another aspect of the reforms that ensure party leaders cannot be removed if they have won an election, unless it is demanded by 60% of the party. This would increase the public legitimacy of elected leaders and help to create greater party stability.*

Political parties in the United Kingdom broadened their leadership selection processes to include party members more than a decade ago. Now the Australian Labor Party (ALP) has taken the opportunity to become the first of Australia's major parties to follow this trend.



Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd: hoping for a full term in office. Credit: Drew Douglas (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The politics of leadership in Australia have been described as Darwinian, and recent events have been no exception. On 28th June, [Kevin Rudd replaced Julia Gillard](#) as Labor Party leader and Prime Minister of Australia. Rudd was elected by the Labor Caucus 57 votes to Gillard's 45, three years after he originally resigned the posts.

Irrespective of, and perhaps detracting from any policy successes she achieved, the duration of Gillard's leadership of the party (June 2010-2013) was marred by the ghost of Rudd. From the moment that she became prime minister, the legitimacy of Gillard's leadership was brought into question by the manner in which she was installed. The fluidity of leadership removal and selection rules in the party (requiring only a majority vote of the parliamentary party to remove and install a leader at any time) meant that Australians found they suddenly had a new Prime Minister, despite not having the opportunity to go to the polls.

[Kevin Rudd's proposals](#) that Labor leadership selection rules be changed so that both parliamentarians and party members elect the party leader were approved by a special meeting of the Labor parliamentary party. Under the new selection rules, the vote will be split equally between the two groups. A leader who takes the party to an election and wins would be guaranteed a full term in office – a provision that [Rudd has argued](#) is necessary because *“today, more than ever, Australians demand to know that the prime minister they elect is the prime minister they get.”*

The timing of these proposals should not come as a great surprise. Although Kevin Rudd is correct to say that this is *“the most significant reform to the Australian Labor Party in recent history,”* it comes a time when the party has been plagued by internal unrest and allegations of corruption at both state and federal levels. In this sense it is easy to appreciate the rhetoric of reform and democratisation that is associated with the change; three weeks ago Rudd stated: *“I believe it will encourage people to re-engage in the political process and bring back those supporters who have been disillusioned.”* The reforms would also *“ensure that power will never again rest in the hands of a factional few.”*

Yet at the same time these changes also reflect where Kevin Rudd's power base lies: with the party membership. While his leadership style was strongly criticised by his Caucus colleagues, Rudd's popularity amongst the party membership has remained strong. Whilst not widely publicised, the election of the party leader by the membership was an idea that Rudd advocated at the party's last National Conference in December 2011.

With the approval of these reforms, the Labor Party is the first of any Australian party since the Australian Democrats to allow party members to elect the party leader. The Liberal Party, the National Party and the Greens all continue to elect their party leaders through the parliamentary party and seem unlikely to change. In international perspective, Australian parties have been rather unique in their unwillingness to move influence beyond the parliamentary party, when comparable parties in Canada and the United Kingdom incorporated a membership ballot into the process some time ago.

Unlike the Australian Democrats, however, the ALP vote will be shared between the national membership and the federal parliamentary party. What is still to be worked out is where the unions fit in this picture. The ALP may want to consider the UK Labour Party model, in which the leadership vote is split equally between parliamentarians, party members and the unions. However, this may be set to change with the [Refounding Labour](#) reforms endorsed at last year's autumn conference indicating that Labour's leadership franchise might also be widened to party supporters. Automatic union affiliation may now also be a thing of the past, with Ed Miliband [seeking to implement measures](#) that will see union members affiliate voluntarily as individuals with the party. This may, in turn, precipitate a restructure in the leadership franchise to either remove (or drastically reduce) the union bloc vote.

What now sets the ALP apart is the provision that a successful leader (that is, a Prime Minister) may not be removed between elections unless demanded by 60 per cent of the party room. Rudd's threshold originally stood at 75 per cent, but this was reduced to 60 per cent as a concession to parliamentarians who believed that the parliamentary party was giving too much of its power away.

While this requirement may address some of the problems of uncertainty and public legitimacy that have plagued Labor in recent years as a result of frequent leadership challenges, it removes a great deal of the flexibility that any party has to remove electorally unpopular leaders, or at least threaten to do so. It also enhances the power of the prime minister, as the manager of her or his government, by curtailing the ability of parliamentarians to replace their leader.

Fixed term leadership in government is certainly an option for political parties in the UK to consider. Currently the Conservatives and Labour only impose fixed terms on those leaders who are in opposition, operating as a stick to keep leaders on their toes. The ALP proposal essentially reverses this expectation – insulating and rewarding successful leaders from future challenges.

The primary benefit would be in addressing perceptions of public legitimacy by ensuring that voters (by way of a general election) feel that they have sanctioned the process. To the extent that the reforms might also create greater stability within a party, their electoral impact should also be positive. However, these benefits need to be considered against the possibility of a leader who just doesn't perform – either with the public, or their colleagues.

Changing the formal rules for selecting a party leader is one thing; but it will do little to stop resignations that occur under pressure from colleagues or the party. Supporters of alternate candidates could still run very public, and potentially destabilising, campaigns calling for the resignation of their leader. It is hard to see how these reforms might have avoided the campaign from Gordon Brown's supporters that eventually persuaded Tony Blair to resign. Nor will they do anything to alleviate constant media attention upon the (un)popularity of party leaders and speculation about likely challengers.

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and not Democratic Audit, or the London School of Economics.

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