

Sussan Ley and the PRC

Elena Collinson
May 13 2025

On May 13 2025, Sussan Ley was elected leader of the Liberal Party, narrowly defeating her opponent, Angus Taylor, 29 votes to 25. In doing so, she became the first woman to lead the Liberal Party. Yet the tight margin also exposed enduring factional and ideological tensions within the party. The outcome reflected a finely balanced caucus, divided between a centre-right and moderate bloc and the party's more conservative flank. Ley assumes the leadership without an overwhelming mandate, and her immediate task is twofold: to unify internal ranks and to reposition the Coalition as a viable alternative government.

The simultaneous election of Queensland MP Ted O'Brien as deputy leader could be interpreted as part of a strategic effort to strengthen the Coalition's standing among Australian-Chinese communities. Described by *The Australian Financial Review* as 'the Coalition's chief China whisperer', O'Brien brings linguistic fluency and first-hand regional experience to the Liberal leadership team. Prior to entering Parliament, he spent three years in Taiwan and another three in the People's Republic of China (PRC), managing a family business. A fluent Mandarin speaker, he played a central role in outreach efforts to reconnect with Australian-Chinese voters – an increasingly influential demographic in a number of strategically important electorates – during the 2025 federal election campaign.¹

Ley, who has represented the rural New South Wales seat of Farrer since 2001, is aligned with the centre-right faction associated with former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, though she also enjoys support from the party's moderate wing.²

Over the course of her ministerial career, Ley held a range of portfolios. She served as Health, Sport and Aged Care Minister under Tony Abbott but resigned as Health Minister from Malcolm Turnbull's frontbench in January 2017 following scrutiny over her use of parliamentary travel entitlements. While maintaining she had not breached any rules, she acknowledged the controversy had failed the 'pub test'.³ She returned to Cabinet in 2019, appointed Minister for the Environment under Scott Morrison. After the Coalition's federal election defeat in May 2022, she was elected unopposed as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party under Peter Dutton and held shadow portfolios including Small Business, Industry and Skills, and Women. She was passed over for the foreign affairs portfolio during a January 2025 reshuffle, reportedly due to concerns that shifting her role would reduce her effectiveness as a 'daily domestic attack dog' against the Albanese government.⁴

- 1 Phillip Coorey, 'The Coalition's secret weapon to win back Chinese voters', *The Australian Financial Review*, April 11 2025 <<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/ted-o-brien-nuclear-warrior-one-day-china-whisperer-the-next-20250410-p5lqn9>>.
- 2 Anton Nilsson, 'Infighting and leadership battles rock Australia's four biggest parties', *Crikey*, May 12 2025 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2025/05/12/liberals-nationals-greens-leadership-angus-taylor-sussan-ley-jacinta-price/>>; Dan Jervis-Brady, 'The Liberals are about to select Peter Dutton's replacement. Here's who is in the running', *The Guardian*, May 13 2025 <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/may/13/the-liberals-are-about-to-select-peter-duttons-replacement-heres-who-is-in-the-running>>.
- 3 Stephanie Anderson and Henry Belot, 'Sussan Ley quits as health minister as Malcolm Turnbull flags political expenses reform', *ABC News*, January 13 2017 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-13/sussan-ley-tenders-resignation-parliament-expenses-scandal/8180602>>.
- 4 Paul Sakkal, 'Dutton overlooks deputy in surprise frontbench pick, creates gender parity with Labor', *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 25 2025 <<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/dutton-overlooks-deputy-in-surprise-frontbench-pick-creates-gender-parity-with-labor-20250125-p5l76d.html>>.

Although she has never held a foreign affairs portfolio, Ley's public record offers a consistent, if evolving, view on PRC policy. This UTS:ACRI brief outlines the contours of her approach.

An evolving PRC stance

In the earlier phase of her career, Ley subscribed to the bipartisan orthodoxy of engagement. She was a proponent of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA), signed in June 2015, calling it a 'landmark deal' and a 'win' for her rural electorate. 'This agreement is not just good news for the region's farmers,' she said at the time, 'it will benefit the entire community through the creation of jobs, economic growth and greater prosperity.'⁵ Later that year, as Health Minister, she visited Beijing and signed a memorandum of understanding on health cooperation with her PRC counterpart, reinforcing the then-stable bilateral trajectory.⁶

However as relations between Canberra and Beijing soured in the late 2010s and early 2020s, Ley's position shifted. As Environment Minister, she publicly suggested that the PRC had influenced UNESCO's 2021 recommendation to list the Great Barrier Reef as 'in danger'. She said, 'Clearly there were politics behind it. Clearly those politics have subverted a proper process'.⁷ While she avoided direct attribution, media reporting confirmed she had raised concerns about PRC influence within the Coalition party room, linking it to a broader pattern of coercive behaviour by Beijing.⁸

From opposition, Ley has advanced a dual-track approach – affirming the importance of trade and dialogue while advocating for a hardened stance on national security.

Following the Coalition's defeat in 2022, she defended the Morrison government's assertive PRC policy. She stated that the Albanese government ought to adopt a similarly unambiguous position:⁹

Sometimes we were criticised for this [approach]... but it was an issue that we never took a backward step on. It's important that we see exactly the same approach from the Prime Minister.

While calling for dialogue, including support for a meeting between Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and President Xi Jinping, she has emphasised that such engagement must not compromise national interest: '[D]ialogue, constructive conversation is always good', she said in 2022, 'but... nothing can come at the cost of our national interest.'¹⁰

She welcomed renewed commercial missions to the PRC and encouraged Trade Minister Don Farrell to support market re-engagement – 'It is incumbent on the Trade Minister to support trade relations missions to China. It is important to smooth the way for good trade and the export process'¹¹ – but has remained cautious. In 2023, when asked whether Labor had managed to improve the diplomatic relationship with the PRC in ways the Coalition could not, Ley replied:¹²

We continue to wish Labor well in terms of the relationship with China. We want it to be a constructive relationship. But we also know that it has to be clear eyed, with no strings attached.

When it comes to trade as a rural Member of Parliament, I know the value of that trade and I know that the people in China would really appreciate access to the fine quality products that we produce here in Australia.

But a constructive relationship with no strings attached is absolutely what that should be.

5 Sussan Ley, 'China Free Trade Agreement a win for Farrer', media statement, June 17 2015 <<https://sussanley.com/china-free-trade-agreement-a-win-for-farrer/>>.

6 National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 'Li Bin meets Australian health minister', July 1 2016 <http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2016-01/07/c_68723.htm>.

7 Andrew Tillett, 'Great Barrier Reef dragged into row with China', *The Australian Financial Review*, June 22 2021 <<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/great-barrier-reef-dragged-into-row-with-china-20210622-p58332>>.

8 'China 'specifically mentioned' in Coalition meeting about UNESCO', *Sky News Australia*, June 22 2021 <<https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/china-specifically-mentioned-in-coalition-meeting-about-unesco/video/6d6d8cb51f276d2a893a01c0409c1dbf>>.

9 AAP, 'China responds to mid-air RAAF incident', June 6 2022 <<https://www.sheppnews.com.au/national/china-responds-to-mid-air-raaf-incident/>>.

10 Jack Mahony, 'Sussan Ley admits 'constructive conversation' between Anthony Albanese and President Xi Jinping is 'always good'', *Sky News Australia*, November 10 2022 <<https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/sussan-ley-admits-constructive-conversation-between-anthony-albanese-and-president-xi-jinping-is-always-good/news-story/399261a81c520a6d0c6afde6bf145b70>>.

11 Allan Wilson, 'MP welcomes tariff lift but says water buybacks a key issue for industry', *The Irrigator*, April 10 2024 <<https://www.irrigator.com.au/story/8585646/farrer-mp-sussan-ley-on-china-tariffs-and-water-buybacks/>>.

12 Sussan Ley and Angie Bell, doorstop interview, Sydney, May 18 2023 <<https://angiebell.com.au/transcript-doorstop-sydney/>>.

She has repeatedly emphasised that while ‘Australia deserves a respectful relationship with China and strong trade ties will always be a part of that’, dialogue and economic engagement must not come at the expense of sovereignty or security.¹³ Her core message has remained consistent since 2022:¹⁴

For all the interests that we have in our relationship with China we have to remember this, that silence from our Prime Minister on the things that matter to Australians should not be the price of a ticket to Beijing.

National security as a political fault line

Ley has persistently framed national security as a vulnerability for the Albanese government. In an October 2022 interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Ley indicated that she wanted to lead attacks on the government over national security. She criticised the Prime Minister for failing to distance himself from former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating’s scepticism of AUKUS and the Quad, saying that Keating’s statements would be ‘picked up, cabled, weaponised and transmitted around the world. And [it will be used as] evidence that there are people in Australia that share China’s view of the global world order.’¹⁵

In a November 2023 opinion piece in *The Australian*, Ley criticised what she described as a growing ‘gap between expectations and delivery’ with respect to the Albanese government’s response to challenges presented by Beijing. She wrote:

It took President Biden and ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess to remind Australians of the threats posed by the Chinese Communist Party when Anthony Albanese failed to do so.

She charged Albanese with abandoning scrutiny of critical infrastructure, specifically PRC-linked investment in the Port of Darwin. She further alleged discrepancies between public messaging and internal briefings about the intent behind the Prime Minister’s diplomatic overtures to Beijing, claiming that while Albanese was publicly reassuring Australians that his November 2023 visit to the PRC was strictly business-focused, government officials were privately telling diaspora communities the trip was ‘purely political’. She also noted that ‘the alarm is... being sounded by national security experts about how Labor is running Defence.’¹⁶

Her criticism extended to operational matters. Following reports that Australian divers had sustained minor injuries from the use of sonar by a People’s Liberation Army – Navy vessel,¹⁷ Ley denounced the Prime Minister for failing to raise the incident with President Xi during talks in San Francisco. She said:¹⁸

“Co-operate where we can, disagree where we must” should never mean stage managing CCP aggression that injures our ADF personnel. More weak leadership from Anthony Albanese who appears to be prioritising photo ops with Xi Jinping over speaking up for our people. Disgraceful.

On Taiwan, Ley has expressed some support for political engagement. She backed then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s August 2022 visit to Taipei, saying, ‘[M]embers of governments should be able to visit other governments, and it’s quite a sensible thing to do and it’s always happened, including the current congressional visit’.¹⁹ Her comments aligned with then-Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, who expressed general support for Pelosi’s visit while personally ruling out a trip of his own to avoid political escalation.²⁰

13 Angira Bharadwaj, ‘Beijing’s vibing with ‘handsome boy’ Albo’, *Courier Mail*, November 16 2024, p 4.

14 Phillip Coorey, ‘Cautious business backs PM’s China mission’, *The Australian Financial Review*, November 3 2023 <<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/cautious-business-backs-pm-s-china-mission-20231103-p5ehfc>>. See also, Jason Clare and Sussan Ley, interview, *Channel 7 – Sunrise*, October 25 2024 <<https://jasonclare.com.au/media/transcripts/television-interview-with-natalie-barr-sunrise-friday-25-october-2024/>>; Angira Bharadwaj, ‘Beijing’s vibing with ‘handsome boy’ Albo’, *Courier Mail*, November 16 2024, p 4.

15 Anthony Galloway, ‘Gender targets and teal seats: Sussan Ley’s plan for the Libs’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 23 2022 <<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/gender-targets-and-teal-seats-sussan-ley-s-plan-for-the-libs-20221021-p5brox.html>>.

16 Sussan Ley, ‘We’re a poorer, weaker and more divided country’, *The Australian*, November 6 2023 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/were-a-poorer-weaker-and-more-divided-country/news-story/68dfe7a15c89e226dda6f6aa429dc573>>.

17 Richard Marles, ‘Unsafe and unprofessional interaction with PLA-N’, media release, November 18 2023 <<https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-11-18/unsafe-and-unprofessional-interaction-pla-n>>.

18 Sussan Ley (@sussanley), ‘Cooperate where we can, disagree where we must’ should never mean stage managing CCP aggression that injures our ADF personnel. More weak leadership from Anthony Albanese who appears to be prioritising photo ops with Xi Jinping over speaking up for our people. Disgraceful.’, X (formerly Twitter), November 20 2023 <<https://x.com/sussanley/status/1726426529218043964>>.

19 Sussan Ley, interview, *Seven Network – Sunrise*, August 5 2022 <<https://sussanley.com/sunrise-seven-network-transcript/>>.

20 Charis Chang, ‘Explainer Nancy Pelosi’s Taiwan visit infuriated China. How could tensions impact Australia?’, *SBS News*, August 10 2024 <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/nancy-pelosi-taiwan-visit-infuriated-china-how-could-tensions-impact-australia/m9v6dk5j2>>.

Ley has also been vocal on human rights and consular issues, repeatedly calling on the government to elevate the cases of Australian citizens Cheng Lei and Yang Hengjun in bilateral discussions.²¹

Positioning the Coalition

Sussan Ley's stance on PRC policy reflects continuity with established Coalition precedent. Her emphasis on 'constructive engagement, with no strings attached' and support for 'dialogue not at the expense of national interest' reflects an effort to blend firmness with pragmatism. As Opposition Leader, she is positioned to maintain the Coalition's strategic orthodoxy on the PRC while courting middle-ground voters wary of rhetoric that veers into overt hostility or partisanship.

However, her ability to maintain this balance internally is far from guaranteed. Elements within the Coalition, particularly from the conservative right, favour a significantly more confrontational approach. These voices advocate stronger parliamentary condemnations, expansion of Magnitsky-style sanctions, increased scrutiny of PRC-linked investments and diaspora communities and a less restrained stance on Taiwan.²² These positions risk destabilising the party's messaging discipline, particularly if leveraged through backbench dissent or media interventions.

Ley must therefore navigate intra-party pressure while maintaining a coherent public stance. Her success will depend on her capacity to harmonise divergent internal views under a disciplined framework. This will require managing the expectations of security hawks while preserving credibility with key voter blocs, including multicultural communities and export-dependent industries.

The challenge for Ley is not simply to articulate a viable PRC policy, but to enforce message unity across a fractured party, one where ideological coherence cannot be assumed. In the contested terrain of Australia-PRC relations, Ley's leadership will be judged as much by her ability to manage internal dissent as by her capacity to hold the government to account.

Author

Elena Collinson is Manager, Research Analysis at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).

²¹ 'Ellen Ransley, 'Heartbreaking' case won't deter China visit', *news.com.au*, August 12 2023, via Factiva; 'It is vital' PM doesn't ignore Dr Yang during China trip', *Sky News Australia*, November 1 2023 <<https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/it-is-vital-pm-doesnt-ignore-dr-yang-during-china-trip/video/f921666b16f984146d86d92f540b2c82>>.

²² See, e.g., Elena Collinson, *Framing the Future: Australia's China Policy in the Lead-Up to the 2025 Election*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, April 24 2025 <<https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2025/04/framing-the-future-australias-china-policy-in-the-lead-up-to-the-2025-election>>.