

Australian Greens join Labor to block registration of new parties

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An unmistakeable air of unity hung over the upper house of the New South Wales parliament earlier this month. With 13 of the 42 MPs belonging to the Greens, Australian Democrats and small parties, the chamber is usually witness to oppositional posturing, on the part of these minor parties, against the ruling Labor Party government and the official Opposition, the Liberal-National Party Coalition.

Yet the unanimous passage of the Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Amendment Bill on November 10 became an occasion for self-satisfaction and mutual well-wishing. The Greens' most prominent MP, Ian Cohen set the tone. He thanked the government and the Opposition for accepting his amendments to the Bill.

"I feel assured that the government is doing a good job to streamline the election system and make it more responsive to and reflective of the desires of the people," he said. "I appreciate the spirit of the government and the Opposition in discussing the matter in such an open and generous manner."

Alan Corbett MP from the obscure "A Better Future for our Children" party agreed. "I congratulate the government on generously accepting the amendment moved by the Greens," he said. "I am pleased to see it."

Special Minister of State and Assistant Treasurer John Della Bosca responded by saying the government had accepted the Greens' amendments "in a spirit of working towards a consensus". The Liberal Party leader rose to voice his agreement, as did the Reverend Fred Nile, the representative of the reactionary Christian Democrats.

For the Unity Party, Dr P. Wong praised the government for having "good Ministers". David Oldfield, the spokesman for the extreme right-wing

Pauline Hanson's One Nation party, and Dr A. Chesterfield-Evans of the Australian Democrats voted for the deal, but chose not to speak.

To understand this unanimity one needs to examine the context and content of the Bill. At the last state election, on March 27 this year, the votes cast for the two traditional ruling parties, Labor and the Coalition, fell to a new post-war low. Nearly 25 percent of the vote went to other parties or independents. In the upper house ballot, the figure rose to 35.3 percent, compared to just 37.3 percent for Labor and 27.4 percent for the Coalition.

The results gave a glimpse of the hostility building up among wide layers toward the old parties and the political system as a whole after two decades of deteriorating living standards. Another expression of this disaffection was the nomination of 264 candidates, sponsored by a plethora of new parties, for the upper house. In order to accommodate all the candidates, the ballot paper was the size of a tablecloth.

So many political groups sprang up that confusion reigned. Many were "single issue" formations trying to push a cause or capitalise on the general disenchantment. Some—it seems—were "fronts" sponsored by the major parties to capture the votes of those looking for a means to express their antipathy to the status quo.

For the established political parties—and this today includes the Democrats and Greens—the outcome was a nightmare. It showed not just the breakup of support for the two biggest parties but the development of highly unstable, unpredictable conditions. While none of the new groupings represented any genuine or coherent opposition to the current economic order, the parliamentary incumbents faced the danger of being displaced by new groups over which they had little

control.

Even before the election was over, the Labor leadership headed by Premier Bob Carr sought to use the impossibly large and complicated upper house ballot paper as a pretext for introducing measures making it virtually impossible for new political parties to run for parliament. These moves came to fruition with the passage of the party registration Bill on November 10.

With almost no publicity in the mass media, the government and the Opposition accepted a series of minor amendments by the Greens. All factions in the state upper house then voted for the Bill, which is currently before the lower house, where it is expected to be rubberstamped shortly.

The Bill is a fundamental attack on the democratic right of ordinary people—those without access to large funds and staff—to form political parties and contest elections. Parties will have to pay \$2,000, and submit signed membership forms from 750 people in the state, 12 months before standing candidates. Instead of the present three-year registration period, they will have to qualify annually, updating their lists each time.

Moreover, the registration applications—complete with the names, addresses and political declarations of 750 members—will be open to public, as well as official, inspection. This is a clear violation of democratic rights. It will leave members of socialist and other opposition parties wide open to victimisation and harassment. It makes a mockery of secret voting, which is meant to protect voters from discrimination or retaliation on the basis of their political preference.

Until now, there was no registration fee and parties only had to show a registrar that they had 200 members. No other state demands a fee for registering a party, and neither does the federal government, but other governments can be expected to follow the Carr government's lead.

The Labor leaders initially proposed even greater barriers to new party registration—1,000 members and a \$3,500 fee—but readily adopted amendments by the Greens to fix on slightly lower figures. The Greens presented their modifications as a halfway house to amendments moved by Chris Breen, a “Reform the Legal System” MP who sought to set the requirements at 500 members and a \$500 fee. Yet even Breen's proposals would have doubled the present membership

rule and allowed a fee to be imposed for the first time.

In addition, parties standing for the upper house will have to pay \$5,000 and nominate a minimum of 15 candidates if they want to participate in a simplified “voting above the line” balloting procedure. Standing individual candidates will otherwise cost \$500 but anyone voting for them will have to number every square on the cumbersome ballot paper. The \$5,000 deposit will exclude small parties, but it will be a hefty discount for the established parties—they currently pay \$10,500 to stand a full list of 21 candidates.

It also costs \$250 to stand each candidate in the lower house. These fees are no problem for the established parties. They rely upon a combination of corporate sponsorship and state electoral funding to finance not only the payment of deposits but advertising campaigns costing millions of dollars per election.

The harmony displayed in the NSW upper house is revealing. Bipartisanship between Labor and the conservatives is hardly new. Today it is a common feature of Australian parliamentary life. Now, confronting a threat to their own position within the official framework, the minor parties are following suit.



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