

The ideology and politics of the Australian Greens

Part one

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This is the first in a two-part series.

One of the most significant changes in the Australian political landscape over the recent period has been the rapid increase in support for the Greens. The Greens now register around 10 percent in opinion polls and are likely to win several seats in the Senate, with the possibility, although small, of securing seats in the House of Representatives as well.

Even more significant than the electoral statistics is the fact that in the mass protests of February 2003 opposing the war against Iraq—the largest demonstrations in Australian history—Greens' representatives were prominent on the platforms, in marked contrast to the virtual absence of Labor Party leaders.

The growth in support for the Greens is a product of two processes: deepening hostility to the Labor Party among considerable sections of its longer-standing supporters, and alienation on the part of large sections of youth from the entire official political establishment. In years past, the Labor Party commanded the loyalty of students and youth committed to the ideals of social justice. Not any longer. Those few young people now entering its ranks are motivated not by ideals, but have their eyes firmly fixed on the prospect of a career in parliament, or the party and trade union apparatuses.

In the face of mounting crises—the invasion of Iraq and the return of colonialism, environmental disasters, attacks on social services, health and education, to name but a few—the Greens present themselves as an alternative to the major parties, proponents of a more humane society. But a study of their history and program reveals that, far from being an alternative to the present political order, the Greens play a vital role in maintaining it. They function as a kind of political safety valve, working to ensure that alienation from the political establishment remains at the level of protest, never probing the root causes of the present disorder or searching for any genuine alternative.

Anyone with doubts on this score need only review the September 8 address to the National Press Club by Greens' leader Bob Brown. The address was notable, in the first place, for what was not said. Apart from a passing reference to its cost, and how the money could be better spent on meeting social needs, Brown made no reference to the war on Iraq or the occupation of the country.

Considering that much of the Greens' recent support stems from

a perception that they oppose the war, this was an extraordinary omission. But an examination of their program soon makes clear why.

The Greens' opposition to the war has always been of a tactical, not a principled, character. Their chief objection was not that this was a war of imperialist plunder, but that it should have been carried out under the auspices of the United Nations. Brown repeatedly emphasised in his speeches during the antiwar protests that the UN sanctions regime should have continued. Australian forces, he argued, would have been better deployed in "our region." Not surprisingly, while opposing the Iraq war on this basis, Brown was in full agreement with the Howard government's deployment of Australian forces in a neo-colonial intervention into the Solomon Islands in June 2003. He merely insisted that something should have been done much earlier.

Even though Brown still maintains that the war against Iraq was wrong, 18 months since the invasion the situation has somewhat changed. The UN now officially backs the puppet Allawi regime set up by the US. Support for the UN, which constitutes the cornerstone of the Greens' foreign policies, would dictate that the party now endorse the occupation. But that would provoke opposition from among its supporters, many of whom rightly regard the UN as providing a fig leaf of legality for the predatory and illegal actions of the US.

To oppose the illegal occupation of Iraq, however, would be to call into question the role of the UN. It would begin to make clear that the UN, far from working to secure peace and stability—the political fiction at the centre of the Greens' foreign policy—is, in reality, a clearing house for the major imperialist powers. Faced with this political dilemma, Brown decided that the best course was to say nothing.

Just as revealing were Brown's comments about the Greens' role in defending the status quo in Australia.

The concern in ruling circles is that the rise of the Greens could destabilise the two-party parliamentary system. That is why the first question to Brown after his address was whether, with an expected increase in the number of Greens senators, he would "start negotiating legislation in the Senate rather than obstructing, as you've done over the last eight years."

Recalling his experiences in the Tasmanian parliament from 1989 to 1992, when a Labor-Green accord was responsible for

maintaining the state Labor government in power, Brown argued that the Greens would be prepared to make another such agreement, at the federal level, with either of the two major parties.

“I was in the Labor Green accord in Tasmania ... We negotiated morning, noon, and night with the Liberals as well as Labor before the Liberals backed out and we went into an arrangement with Labor.” While there were continuous negotiations under the accord and certain conflicts, the key to the package was that the Greens supported Labor’s budgets and backed the government during confidence votes.

“We found that the Liberal Gray government had left a \$100 million deficit. So there were savage budget cuts. We had Greens’ supporters protesting outside our offices. We went to some very angry public meetings, but we Greens held the line,” Brown declared proudly.

Here was an unmistakable message to the ruling elites: don’t be misled by Liberal Party electioneering that we have “kooky” policies, or by claims that we are really communists in disguise—green on the outside but red on the inside, like watermelons—the Greens can be relied upon in a political crisis to maintain stability. Our record in Tasmania proves it.

It should be recalled that the accord with the Tasmanian Labor government took place during the last global recession at the end of the 1980s. In the past 14 years, the Australian economy has enjoyed continuous growth. But this expansion has, to an ever greater extent, been dependent on an expansion of debt, both foreign and domestic. A crisis in the US economy, or an international recession, could well see the Australian economy start to unravel in conditions where neither of the major parties were able to command sufficient parliamentary support for the savage measures they would be compelled to implement on behalf of the banks and financial institutions. Under such conditions, the Greens could be called upon to provide the government, either Labor or Liberal, with a majority. Brown has already answered with a clear “ready and willing.”

The Greens advance economic and social policies that contrast with the “user pays”, “free market” agenda of both the Liberal and Labor parties. They oppose the growing use by both parties of tax-cut handouts, generally benefiting corporations and upper-income earners, at the expense of social spending on health, education and repairing damage to the environment.

Generally, when confronted with mounting problems, most people hope to find easy, or at least reasonable, solutions at hand. And nothing seems more reasonable than the measures proposed by the Greens.

These days, Brown told the National Press Club, tertiary education had to be regarded as a right. But the HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) fees imposed by both Liberal and Labor governments prevented thousands of high school leavers each year from accessing tertiary education. Less than half the \$14.7 billion tax cuts, mainly directed to the wealthy, announced in the last federal budget and supported by Labor, would “set young Australians free of the yoke of the HECS fees.”

Likewise, Brown pointed out, an increase in the corporate tax rate from 30 percent to 33 percent—still less than the 2001 rate of

34 percent—would provide additional revenue to fund the creation of jobs, particularly for people who have been unemployed for more than 12 months. In the field of health, the government’s \$2.5 billion subsidy to the private insurance industry, also supported by Labor, could be used to expand the public health system.

The obvious question is: why have such policies not been carried out? Or, to put it more broadly, why has there been an unending assault on social spending over the past 20 years? What lies behind “user pays” and the introduction of a two-tier system in the fields of health, education and social services, in which those able to pay can access quality services and those who cannot are condemned to a meagre “safety net”? To put this down to the adoption of “market fundamentalism”, as do the Greens, explains nothing.

The doctrines of the “free market” and “economic rationalism”, which have swept the world in the past 20 years, are not the cause of the assault on government spending and the precipitous decline in the social position of the working class. Rather, these doctrines are themselves a response to profound changes in the world capitalist economy, above all the ending of the period of stationary or rising profits of the 1950s and 1960s and the emergence, from the 1970s onwards, of continuous downward pressure on the average rate of profit.

Cuts to social services and government spending, coupled with measures to drive down the social position of the working class, have been the means by which the corporate and financial elites in every country have sought to overcome this pressure. In the final analysis, they have not been motivated by “ideology”, but by deep-seated contradictions within the capitalist economy itself.

Consequently, they can only be reversed in the fight for a program that directly challenges the profit system, with the aim of overturning it and reconstructing society on socialist foundations—where human need, not the accumulation of corporate wealth, is the central economic concern. While the Greens will, at times, issue denunciations of the destructive logic of capitalist accumulation, they are organically opposed to such a perspective. In fact, as Brown’s remarks about the Green-Labor accord make clear, the Greens do not oppose the profit system, but stand ready to come to its defence.



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