

The ideology and politics of the Australian Greens

Part two

**Nick Beams (SEP candidate for the Senate in NSW)
17 September 2004**

This is the conclusion of a two-part series on the Australian Greens. Part one was published on September 16.

The Greens' defence of capitalism involves more than a willingness to help stabilise governments of both the major parties. Above all, it takes place at the level of ideology. Here, the Greens work to ensure that any political movement to the left, especially among young people, does not go too far—that no serious study is undertaken of Marxism and its political perspective for the socialist transformation of society. As a brief review of their historical origins demonstrates, the Greens were founded in opposition to such a perspective.

The ideological outlook of the Greens was formed in the aftermath of the last great period of political radicalisation, extending roughly from the mid-1960s to the first years of the 1970s.

An international movement of the working class—the French general strike of May-June 1968, the Italian hot autumn of 1969, the mass struggles against the Tory government in Britain and the emergence of a revolutionary situation in Chile between 1970-73, to name but a few examples—was pushed back and defeated as a result of the betrayals of its leaderships, the social democratic and labour parties, along with the Stalinists of the various Communist parties.

These leaderships were aided and abetted by the various middle-class radical tendencies, which, while proclaiming their adherence to socialism and Marxism, repudiated its most fundamental tenet—the fight for the political independence of the working class. Instead, they glorified the supposed revolutionary capacities of such nationalist figures as Castro, Mao and Che Guevara.

There is always a heavy price to pay for the defeats suffered by the working class, not least in the ideological sphere. The period of capitalist restabilisation following the defeat of the upsurge of 1968-1975 was no exception. Marxism now came under attack from disappointed

intellectuals and dispirited radicals who developed new theories based on “identity politics” and “post-modernism”, rejecting any analysis of the historical contradictions of the capitalist mode of production as “fundamentalism.” The ideology of the Green movements formed part of this process.

According to the Greens' outlook, the growing crisis of global society emerged not from the social relations of capitalism, based on private ownership and the profit system, but from something more fundamental—the relationship of mankind to nature. Pollution and the degradation of the natural environment were not produced by the profit system but by technology itself. Consequently, Marxism, with its insistence that the development of the scientific and productive capacities of mankind created the material foundations for a higher form of social organisation, and through that, the achievement of genuine human freedom, was denounced as part of the problem. It refused to take into account questions of ecology, which, the Greens insisted, were more fundamental than the class struggle.

These positions were reflected in Brown's remarks to the National Press Club. Asked to respond to the assertion by Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson that he was a “communist” and whether he found the term offensive, Brown replied that he had known some wonderful people who had been communists all their lives and that the ideology, based on sharing at the community level, was a fair one.

“Call me a social democrat,” he continued, “because ... dictatorship and ruthlessness besmirched the ideology of the past. But really, I think we can do better than be worried about those ideologies of the past. The Greens are into creating a new humanitarian and ecological future. Ecology wasn't the high point in the writings of Karl Marx—I've never read them but I'm told that it didn't really figure. We're in a different world. And we have to move on from that.”

Brown is a medical practitioner. In that profession, he would rightly dismiss anyone who made a virtue of ignorance as a quack, trying to sell snake oil. But in the sphere of politics, he adopts precisely that method.

The claim that Marx and Engels had no interest in, or understanding of, ecology and were not concerned with the relationship of mankind to the rest of nature is easily refuted by reading what they wrote. For them, however, the preservation of the earth for future generations could never be separated from the question of ownership.

In 1844, the young Engels denounced the “huckstering” of land, which “is ours one and all, the first condition of our existence” and the monopolisation of the land by a few, coupled with “the exclusion of the rest from that which is the condition of their life” as immoral.

In one of his last major writings, the mature Engels, after explaining that, whereas the animal merely used its environment, man changed and mastered it, then probed the contradictions in that process.

“Let us not ... flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which too often cancel the first. ... Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery over it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly” [Engels, *The Dialectics of Nature*, p. 180].

Today, the central problem in the relationship of mankind to nature is not that mankind changes nature through the use of technology—that is a fundamental condition of human existence. Rather, the roots of environmental crises lie in the fact that it is impossible to correctly apply the laws of nature in the use of this technology under conditions where the inexorable logic of capital accumulation, arising from the private ownership of the means of production, holds sway.

In *Capital* Marx explained that, “all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social

process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker” [*Capital*, Volume I, Penguin edition, p. 638].

Long before the Greens appeared on the political scene, and even before the word “ecology” had been invented, Marx explained that the rational regulation of man’s relationship with nature required the abolition of private property.

“From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation,” he wrote, “the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* (good heads of the household)” [*Capital*, Volume III, p. 911].

Contrary to Brown’s ignorant musings, Marx remains the most modern of writers and thinkers, because he discovered the laws of motion of capitalist society, based on the accumulation of surplus value, which hold sway over the entire globe.

The eruption of imperialist wars for the appropriation of resources; the economic devastation of vast populations as a result of “structural adjustment” programs, dictated by the banks and financial institutions; the deepening attacks on the social position of the working class; the continuous plunder of the natural environment, without regard to the consequences—all this can only be understood on the basis of these laws and the irresolvable contradictions in the capitalist mode of production to which they give rise.

Today, the werewolf drive of capital for new sources of surplus value constitutes the greatest danger to mankind. Consequently, political thought, if it is really to chart the path to a secure future, rather than leaving Marx behind, as Brown advocates, must strive to appropriate the theoretical conquests he made and then build upon them.

It is this conception, embodied in the struggle to re-establish Marxism as the guiding perspective of the international working class, which animates the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*. It also forms the foundation of the campaign being conducted by the Socialist Equality Party in the 2004 Australian elections.



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