

Australia: Murdoch and Howard join forces to vilify the Greens

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One of the most striking features of the first week of the campaign for the October 9 Australian election was the official focus on vilifying the Greens. Just a day after calling the election, Prime Minister John Howard warned voters against backing the Greens, describing their policies as “very, very kooky”. He insisted that people had to understand that, “The Greens have a radical agenda that goes far beyond just being warm and fuzzy about the environment.”

Deputy Liberal Party leader Treasurer Peter Costello weighed in behind Howard, labelling the Greens’ policies “quite extreme”. Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, who heads the rural-based National Party, issued a media statement entitled, “Don’t Trust Your Vote with Wacky Greens”. Justice Minister Chris Ellison joined the fray, and the Liberals’ Victorian state branch issued a “background paper” to its candidates and campaigners “to assist in combating that party’s radical economic and social views”.

The barrage followed a slanderous piece in one of Rupert Murdoch’s tabloids, the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, accusing the Greens of advocating the supply of ecstasy and other illegal drugs to young users. The newspaper claimed that the Greens had other “extraordinary” plans for Australia, including laws to force people to ride bicycles more often and eat less meat; driving farmers from their land; and Medicare funding for sex-change operations.

As befits the gutter journalism traditions of the Murdoch media, the article was completely misleading. On the issue of drugs, for example, the Greens web site, the nominated source of the *Herald Sun* “exposé”, suggests “investigations of options for the regulated supply of social drugs such as ecstasy in controlled environments”. While there is nothing progressive about this proposal, which promotes substance abuse

without addressing its underlying social causes, it is a far cry from the newspaper’s claim that the Greens want to make drugs freely available “over the counter”.

Murdoch’s flagship, the *Australian*, took up the offensive several days later, with foreign editor Greg Sheridan deriding the Greens’ policies as “pure moon juice quality”. The Greens, he insisted, were paranoid “extremists” with a “hatred of modern society” whose probable emergence from the election as the country’s most important “third party” would “be a sad and a bad day for our political culture”. An accompanying editorial labelled the Greens “a threat to the prosperity and well being of all Australians”.

What explains this preoccupation with the Greens? For all the efforts to dismiss them as dangerous lunatics, both the government and the media have definite concerns that go to the heart of the political crisis that they face in this election. They recognise that the Greens are consciously making an appeal to the deep disgust and alienation that exists among broad layers of society, particularly young people, toward both the Coalition government and the opposition. Sheridan warned that the Greens were seeking to “embody a sentiment of rage and frustration”.

While in fact, the Greens represent no fundamental challenge to the current economic and social order, or, for that matter, the bipartisan policies of Labor and Liberal, they have carefully identified key issues that have aroused mass resentment—the criminal invasion of Iraq, the accompanying assault on democratic rights, the growth of social inequality and environmental destruction. For all their appeals on these questions, the Greens remain defenders of the private profit system, working to ensure that political opposition remains trapped within the safe confines of parliament.

But such is the fragility of the official political

framework that Murdoch and Howard fear any challenge to the domination of the two major parties that has prevailed in Australia since Federation in 1901. They have responded to polling showing substantial support for the Greens with the only political methods they know—demonisation, slanders and scare campaigns.

Even according to highly distorted media polling—which requires respondents to nominate a party they will vote for, rather than one they support, and portrays Labor and the Coalition as the only viable possibilities—the Greens’ vote could top one million for the first time, a substantial increase on the 570,000 lower house votes they won in 2001.

The results point to the ongoing antiwar and anti-establishment sentiments that last February saw more than a million people in Australia join the unprecedented global demonstrations against the impending assault on Iraq. At a federal by-election in October 2002, in the lead-up to the invasion, the Greens won their first-ever seat in the House of Representatives. They took a working class seat in the industrial city of Wollongong that Labor had held previously for half a century. Earlier this year, voters in key areas rejected Labor and Liberal candidates in municipal elections across the state of New South Wales and ousted longstanding mayors in favour of Independents and Greens.

By contrast, despite the widespread loathing for Howard, his domestic and foreign policies and his record of lies, the same polls suggest that Labor’s vote is still languishing near the historic low recorded in the Keating government’s landslide defeat in 1996. Given that Howard’s Coalition is rating little better, that leaves a large disaffected core of voters, which has grown steadily since the mid-1980s.

And the Australian Democrats, who cultivated a “neutral” balancing position between the two main parties and functioned as a safe “middle” party within the parliamentary establishment for more than two decades, are likely to be decimated on October 9. Their demise has been assured since they assisted the Howard government to introduce its highly regressive Goods and Services Tax in 1999. The Greens hope to exploit the resulting political vacuum to take over the “balance of power” in parliament.

The hysterical campaign against them raises

important issues about the atrophied state of the current political order. Its viciousness is designed to intimidate any opposition, with complete contempt for basic democratic rights. Such is the decay of bourgeois democracy that no serious discussion about ideas can be tolerated. Any suggestion, however mild, that in any way questions the official economic and political framework is painted as dangerous, illegitimate and insane.

Beneath the media-generated appearance of a “normal” election campaign, there exists a profound disconnect between official politics and the increasingly bitter experiences of millions of people. The SEP is standing candidates in this election to provide this deepening social and political discontent with a genuine and progressive socialist alternative. In opposition to every attempt by the political and media establishment to suppress discussion, we seek to encourage the widest possible debate on all the critical issues confronting ordinary people.



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