

Victorian state election

Australian Greens pitch election campaign to political and media establishment

Rick Kelly
18 November 2006

Election pundits expect the Australian Greens to make significant gains in the November 25 Victorian election, with opinion polls suggesting they will receive more than 10 percent of the vote. The party may hold the balance of power in the upper house, giving it effective veto power over contentious government legislation.

There is no doubt that many people, especially youth, will cast their ballot for the Greens as a protest against the political establishment. Immense hostility exists towards the right-wing agenda shared by the Victorian Labor government of Steve Bracks and the opposition Liberal Party. But what can people considering voting Green expect from the party?

Contrary to their carefully cultivated image as an anti-establishment and antiwar party, the Greens do not represent an alternative to the major parties. Instead, they play a critical role in maintaining the existing social and economic setup, acting as a political safety valve for the ruling elite by directing the disaffection and anger of ordinary working people and youth into the safe channels of protest politics and parliamentary reformism.

Above all, the Greens strive to block the development of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at removing the root cause of all the fundamental problems facing humanity today—namely the profit system, with its private ownership of the means of production and destructive division of the world into rival nation-states.

The Victorian election campaign has underscored the Greens' orientation and function. While appealing to widespread popular hostility towards the major parties, they have simultaneously stressed their willingness to act as a "responsible" third party, closely cooperating with the next state government. Their priority has been to assure business circles that, if they end up holding the balance of power after November 25, they will not disrupt the right-wing agenda of the next government.

Bob Brown, one of the Greens' federal senators, set the tone in a speech at the party's campaign launch in Melbourne on October 29. He stressed that his party's role would be to pressure the next government. The Greens were necessary, he declared, "to make whoever's [in] government accountable, to bring them into gear, to get them into action ... In the balance of power [the Greens] will improve governance in this state, with the responsible hand on the shoulder of government."

Brown made a pointed reference to the Greens' record in Tasmania from 1989 to 1992, when the party formed an "accord" with the minority Labor government. "We have a terrific record, I'm terrifically proud of this," Brown declared. "In balance of power in Tasmania we with Labor fixed up the economy ten years ago which has made our economy buoyant now. Tough going, but the Greens have got those runs on the board."

What Brown refers to as "fixing up the economy" meant supporting a series of austerity budgets aimed against the working class. Tasmania was

on the brink of insolvency in 1989, with a debt of around \$4 billion in today's terms. Labor and the Greens slashed public spending by sacking thousands of workers in the public service, and cutting health and education spending. As Brown has previously noted, these measures were imposed in the face of bitter opposition from within the Greens party itself. Nevertheless, his party went on to back a minority Liberal government which implemented further right-wing policies between 1996 and 1998.

In referring to these experiences, Brown was telegraphing a clear message to the Victorian financial elite: you can count on us to do the right thing.

The Greens' leading Victorian candidates have reinforced the message. Greg Barber, former Yarra mayor and contender for an upper house seat, denied that the Greens would veto projects they disliked if they held the balance of power. "We're not running for government, we're running for parliament," he declared. "Parliament's job is to have a firm hand on the shoulder of government. Someone has to put the brake on Bracks's spending."

Barber has openly declared that the Greens will support the Bracks government's legislation—including further public-private partnerships—with the only condition being the implementation of reforms to parliamentary procedure and freedom of information law. The party is negotiating these issues with both Bracks and the Liberal Party.

The media has responded positively to the Greens' assurances, and unlike in the 2004 federal election campaign, has not backed efforts by the right-wing Christian fundamentalist party Family First to portray the Greens as anti-business and "extremist". The Murdoch tabloid, the *Herald Sun*, published a favourable story on November 4, "Greens bow to reality", which quoted Barber admitting that he did not expect many of the Greens social policies, such as legalising gay marriage and opening safe heroin-injecting facilities, to be implemented after the election.

On November 10, the Melbourne-based *Age*, ran a feature article titled, "The Green Agenda". The piece noted approvingly that the party's aims "may deflate opponents and apparatchiks alike", and pointed to the Tasmanian record, which saw "periods of answerable, accountable governance" and in which "Green power did not put the state's economy at risk". The *Age* quoted Monash University's Dr. Nick Economou, who noted that the collapse of the Democrats had left a political vacuum, and the "only viable party organisation that can fill that third party role is the Greens".

Bracks has worked to bring the Greens into the fold. Three years ago, he reformed the method of electing members of the upper house, introducing proportional representation that favoured minor parties. Labor introduced the electoral reform despite knowing that the changes would likely result in it losing control of the upper house and would make it difficult to ever

again secure a majority of seats.

None of the central issues facing working people and youth is being addressed by the Greens. Most significantly, the Iraq war has not been mentioned in their advertisements or on their web site.

Opposition to the Iraq war has never been higher, with one recent opinion poll finding that nearly 80 percent of Australians now oppose the initial US-led invasion. The extraordinary refusal of the Greens to even mention the war demonstrates that their opposition has always been of a tactical, rather than principled, character.

Bob Brown and other senior Green figures argue that Australian troops should be deployed in the south Pacific, rather than Iraq. In 2003, they placed themselves at the forefront of the antiwar demonstrations in order to head off the mass movement and propagate illusions in protest politics. Rather than denouncing the political and media establishment for its complicity in a criminal war to seize Iraq's resources and subjugate its people, the Greens appealed to the UN and advocated pressuring the Labor Party.

The Greens are now silent about the war, because raising the issue would cut across their efforts to present themselves as the "responsible" third party. Any genuine public discussion on Iraq would also raise other uncomfortable questions, such as the role they played in promoting illusions that the Labor Party, the UN or France and Germany would stop the invasion. It would raise as well their support for and complicity in Canberra's own neo-colonial aggression in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

The Greens' election campaign is also completely silent on the "war on terror" and its accompanying program of attacks on democratic rights, vilification of Muslims, and promotion of militarism and "Australian values". Notwithstanding their various criticisms of the Howard government's approach, the Greens have no fundamental differences with the "war on terror".

This was most clearly demonstrated when the Greens' federal senators voted for the government's "emergency" anti-terror legislation in November 2005. Amid lurid warnings of an imminent threat of terrorist attack, Howard recalled parliament to ram through the first instalment of the draconian Anti-Terrorism Bill. While protesting against Howard's manipulation of parliament, Greens' senators Bob Brown and Kerry Nettle nevertheless voted for the legislation. Just days later, police used the new laws to launch a series of violent raids in Sydney and Melbourne. Many of those arrested—including 13 young men from Melbourne—remain in prison and, a year later, have not yet been brought to trial.

There was nothing accidental about the Greens' conduct in the senate. Their vote reflected the true character of the party's political physiognomy.

This has already been demonstrated internationally, most clearly in Germany. There, the Green movement was founded by middle-class layers from the "generation of 1968" who promised radical change and a break from the old politics. Between 1998 and 2005, however, the party formed government with the Social Democrats and helped push through a series of social spending cuts, public sector redundancies, and pro-business reforms. In 1999, the Greens, and their leader Joschka Fischer, who became the German foreign minister, played an indispensable role in sending German troops overseas for the first time since World War II to participate in the US-led war on Yugoslavia.

In the Victorian election campaign, the Greens' slogan is, "Think long term". At their campaign launch, Bob Brown declared that the Greens' ability to consider the lives of future generations is what separated them from the other parties. "Think long term for a health system based on need not wealth," the party's television advertisement declares. "Think long term so every student receives the attention they deserve. Think long term for a public transport system that everyone can use. Think long term to preserve our precious resources in the face of climate change."

However the problems identified by the Greens are not simply due to the short-sightedness of the major parties. They are the product of the moribund capitalist system that these parties defend. The anarchy of the market, production for profit and the outdated division of the world into nation states ensure that rational long-term planning is impossible.

Take the question of the environment. There is now considerable scientific evidence of the potentially devastating consequences of global warming caused by consumption of fossil fuels. Why then have governments around the world proven completely incapable of producing a solution? The reason is that the profit system is structured so that every issue is determined, not by the long term needs of the world's people, but by the immediate interests of capital. Corporate ledgers cannot account for the social cost of melting the polar ice caps, and so uncontrolled carbon-emitting production continues. Fierce economic rivalry between major powers undermines any genuine international cooperation over global warming.

The only realistic solution to the environmental crisis is the establishment of a democratically planned international socialist economy. Such a system would coordinate production and distribution on the basis of humanity's social needs, rather than the accumulation of profit and private wealth. A rigorous scientific assessment of the stability and health of the environment would be an integral aspect of such an economic plan. New technologies would be developed and harnessed for their objective utility, not for their corporate value.

All this can only be established through the struggle to build an international movement of the working class independent of and implacably hostile to the establishment political parties.

The Greens are fundamentally opposed to such a perspective. Their plan to protect the environment and halt global warming boils down to pressuring national governments to implement various tokenistic measures, such as funding solar energy projects, and signing fundamentally inadequate international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol. The Greens advocate individual or "community-based" action, which can never solve the major problems because it never addresses their real source.

In the final analysis, the Greens blame the environmental crisis, not on the rapacious profit system, but on consumerism and population growth as well as modern industry and technology. They propose to wind back the clock and replace globalised production with a productive system confined to the national, or even local, level. This program, which is as futile as it is reactionary, would entail a massive decline in the living conditions of billions of people and a reversal of critical scientific and technological developments.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party campaigning in the Victorian elections against the bipartisan program of war and militarism, anti-Muslim scapegoating, attacks on democratic rights, environmental destruction, attacks on public health and education, and rising social inequality and poverty.

The SEP and its candidate for Broadmeadows, Will Marshall, are utilising the campaign to lay the foundations for the development of an independent mass political party of the working class. We call on all working people and youth to study the party's election statement, actively support the campaign, and fight to build the SEP.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact