

# Australia: Greens form coalition state government with Labor

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Today's official swearing in of a coalition Labor-Greens cabinet in Tasmania marks the first time that the Greens have been assigned ministerial posts in Australia. The party's state leader Nick McKim is to serve as minister for sustainable transport and alternative energy, and another Greens parliamentarian, Cassy O'Connor, as a cabinet secretary. The coalition agreement is a significant milestone in the right-wing evolution of the Greens, underscoring the party's bourgeois character and making clear its increasingly important function as a prop of the political establishment.

The March 20 Tasmanian state election resulted in a hung parliament, reflecting widespread hostility toward the major parties. The incumbent Labor government of Premier David Bartlett, in power since 1998, suffered a 12.4 percent swing against it, while the opposition Liberal Party was unable to win a parliamentary majority. The two major parties finished with 10 lower house seats each. The Greens won 21.6 percent of the primary vote and had five members elected to parliament.

Working in close collaboration with national Greens leader Senator Bob Brown, the Tasmanian Greens regarded the parliamentary logjam as an opportunity to demonstrate their bona fides for office. McKim appealed to both Labor and Liberal to enter discussions, stressing that the Greens' overriding priority was to ensure political stability on behalf of business and investors. The party leader stated that he was placing no preconditions on coalition negotiations with either party—that is, any or all of the Greens' policies and promises could potentially be junked in return for a share of power. McKim also assured Labor and Liberal that in the event that no coalition was formed, the Greens would vote for the minority government's annual budget anyway, irrespective of whatever cuts and regressive measures were included.

The Greens revelled in their role as post-election "kingmaker". Premier Bartlett initially indicated that the Liberals should form a minority government. However after the Liberals spurned the Greens' offer of coalition negotiations, McKim declared the Greens would instead back a minority Labor government, not initiating and voting against any no-confidence motions put to parliament. Less than 24 hours after this intervention, on April 8 the Tasmanian governor, Peter Underwood, commissioned Bartlett

to form a government.

Returned to office courtesy of the Greens, without being forced to make any concessions, Bartlett then initiated his first post-election discussions with McKim. Policy considerations played no role whatsoever in the coalition negotiations; McKim did not insist that the incoming government commit itself to implementing a single Greens' policy. The horse trading instead revolved around the carve-up of lucrative government posts, with two senior positions the price finally settled on for the Greens to get into bed with Labor.

McKim declined Bartlett's original proposal on Saturday that the Greens should have just one cabinet position, but agreed after the cabinet secretary spot was added. Right up to the last minute, the Greens appealed to the Liberals to make them a better offer. McKim declared Sunday: "I hope the Liberals get over their stubbornness, decide that they actually do want to deliver the real change they promised during the election... I can't drag them to the negotiating table."

Greens MP Kim Booth had discussions with an unnamed Liberal parliamentarian in recent days. According to the *Examiner*, "North and North-West Greens members had been working frantically behind the scenes to try to open a dialogue between Mr McKim and Liberals' leader Will Hodgman". Booth later revealed that he had voted against the deal with Labor in the Greens' caucus meeting because Bartlett's government was "corrupt" and "unfit to govern"—but nevertheless insisted that he would abide by the majority decision and not oppose the coalition arrangement.

The potential Liberal-Greens deal was not without precedent. The *Australian's* Tasmanian correspondent noted on Saturday: "In many ways the Liberals, who governed in minority with support from the Greens from 1996 to 1998, have been closer to the Greens in Tasmania than has Labor... The decision, then, of the Greens to suddenly back Labor after the election... came as a genuine surprise."

No one should be surprised, however, as Labor and the Greens have worked closely together before. Between 1989 and 1992, a Labor minority administration governed with the support of Bob Brown's "Green Independents". An Accord committed the Greens

to pass Labor's budgets and oppose no confidence motions in return for what Brown described as "access to and influence on the whole range of government decisions". That Labor government implemented a series of savage budget cuts—thousands of public sector workers were sacked, and health and education spending gutted—which the Greens MPs supported in the face of widespread opposition, including from their own constituents.

Now heading government ministries, the Greens have accepted direct responsibility for implementing the incoming government's right-wing agenda, involving austerity measures likely to surpass those seen in 1989–1992. The Bartlett government has long been among the most pro-business state administrations, and its re-election campaign was backed by the Murdoch press. Bartlett won plaudits for responding to the 2008 financial crash by cutting spending, including cancelling a planned \$1 billion hospital in Hobart. Even harsher cuts are now required, in the context of a second phase of the global economic crisis, which is seeing the working class being made to pay for the emergency fiscal and bailout measures taken to stabilise the financial markets.

Under the terms of the deal, the two Greens representatives will have full voting rights in cabinet and will also be bound by conventions of cabinet confidentiality and solidarity. McKim and O'Connor are permitted to absent themselves from cabinet meetings held to discuss matters in which they have "significant concern", and afterwards vote against the relevant legislation in parliament.

This measure is designed to allow the Greens the option of posturing as opponents of certain aspects of the government's agenda, such as logging policy, while remaining loyal members of the administration. Bartlett's letter of offer to McKim, sent last Saturday, states that in the event that McKim and O'Connor absent themselves from cabinet decisions, the Greens are not permitted to "criticise, comment upon or disclose the relevant decision until the decision has been publicly announced by the government". Moreover, the Greens MPs are not permitted to reveal any cabinet discussions relevant to the contested decision at which they were present. They will, in other words, be complicit in the implementation of any legislation they claim to disagree with.

The active involvement of national Greens leader Brown is a clear indication of what is being prepared at a federal level. Brown reportedly has a close relationship with McKim, a former marketing executive whom he encouraged to enter politics. After the state vote delivered a hung parliament, Brown called for the formation of a coalition uniting Labor, Liberal, and Green. On April 9, he issued a press release stating that he "backs, one hundred percent, Tasmanian Greens Leader Nick McKim and his colleagues in their decisions".

The Tasmanian deal has set the stage for a coalition arrangement in Canberra between the Greens and the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in the event that the Greens win the balance of power in the Senate in the federal election due this year.

Acting Greens leader Christine Milne yesterday declared that the "breakthrough in Tasmania bodes well for the coming federal election" and formed "part of the growing positive role Greens are playing at all levels of government".

The Greens' integration into official bourgeois politics expresses the political physiognomy of a tendency that was founded on a consciously anti-socialist basis. Hostile toward the social aspirations and political interests of the working class, the Greens' "radicalism" was always confined to various lifestyle issues. With regard to participation in right-wing governments, the Australian Greens are merely catching up with their international counterparts. In Germany, the Greens joined the social democrats in office between 1998 and 2002, with party leader Joschka Fischer playing the critical role, as foreign minister, in deploying troops to Afghanistan, the Germany army's first foreign operation since World War II. The "red-green" coalition also rammed through unprecedented attacks on welfare recipients. The German Greens have since joined state coalition governments, including two with the conservative Christian Democratic Union.

Developments in Tasmania have exposed the class character of the Australian Greens. The formation of the Labor-Green coalition also stands as an indictment of the various ex-left and ex-radical tendencies, all of which have supported the Greens in one way or another—either directly campaigning for them and helping build the organisation, or by working to promote illusions among young people that the party represents some kind of left alternative to Labor.

*The author recommends:*

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