

Australia: Greens-backed minority Labor government installed in Tasmania

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Nearly three weeks after the Tasmanian state election delivered a hung parliament, the Greens have effectively determined that next government. Labor Premier David Bartlett last night announced that the state governor had asked him to form the next administration, following an extraordinary series of developments that had threatened a major parliamentary and constitutional crisis. The Greens seized the opportunity to demonstrate their overriding priority: to ensure the stability of the existing political setup, above all for business.

With Labor and Liberal winning ten seats each and the Greens five in the March 20 election, no party was able to form government in its own right. The Bartlett government suffered an anti-Labor primary vote “swing” of 12.4 percent compared to the previous election four years ago. Labor received just 36.9 percent of the total primary vote; of the party’s 14 parliamentarians, six were re-elected, six defeated and two retired. The Liberals gained 7.2 percent to finish with 39 percent of the primary vote, while the Greens received 21.6 percent, up five percent. The vote and subsequent parliamentary logjam reflected widespread hostility towards the pro-business agenda of the major parties and escalating mistrust and disaffection with the official political establishment.

Immediately after the hung parliament was announced, a bizarre spectacle emerged, with Labor government ministers repeatedly insisting that they were prepared to hand power to the Liberals.

On Wednesday Premier Bartlett met with Governor Peter Underwood—who, as the British Queen’s representative in Tasmania, is constitutionally responsible for ensuring that “there is an orderly transition from one government to the next”, as the governor’s web site puts it—and advised him that a Liberal government be formed. Also on Wednesday, Liberal leader Will Hodgman met with the governor and emerged smiling from the meeting, clearly indicating he was ready to assume office.

Later that evening, however, Greens’ leader Nick McKim told the Hobart *Mercury* that the Liberals’ refusal to discuss the possibility of forming a coalition government with his party meant that the Greens had “no choice but to support the government of the day”. He pledged not to move or support no confidence motions against a minority Labor government, except in the event

of gross corruption. He added that if the Liberals changed their position on joining the Greens in a ruling coalition, he would also be prepared to vote Labor down.

“This is not a decision we have made lightly or easily; we recognise that the Tasmanian people at this election voted for change,” McKim declared. “But unfortunately the Liberal Party is now risking the opportunity to deliver that change by refusing to negotiate [with us] and we are very disappointed about that.”

McKim made clear that his decision to back Labor was influenced by neither the final state-wide vote tally nor policy issues. “We are backing the existing government on the basis of this greater stability,” he said. “Ultimately the Tasmanian people, and particularly the Tasmanian business community, want stability of government.”

Premier Bartlett had adamantly refused to speak with McKim and the Greens, insisting that Labor would not consider any deals with the minority party. But having won the Greens’ unconditional backing, he met with the governor again yesterday and afterwards declared that he was “happy” to remain as premier. Bartlett at the same time admitted that the parliament had “entered uncharted waters”.

Liberal leader Will Hodgman was visibly furious. He insisted that Bartlett was forming an “illegitimate government that has no moral authority to govern”, and declared that “Tasmanians now have a Labor-Green government that is built on lies”. Hodgman accused the premier of influencing the governor by refusing to rule out Labor MPs blocking supply or moving no confidence motions against a minority Liberal government. He has pledged to move a no confidence motion against the new Bartlett government as soon as parliament reconvenes.

This appears to have no chance of success, given the Greens’ alignment with Labor. McKim advised Hodgman: “He needs to put that disappointment behind him and not be a destabiliser or wrecker in the new parliament... The Liberal Party should have a look at themselves here and realise that what we need to do is work together.”

These developments amount to a devastating exposure of all the

parliamentary parties. Labor, Liberal, and the Greens are all dependent upon and beholden to one key constituency—big business. For all their election campaign posturing and policy promises, once the votes were tallied, all three parties began scrambling for pole position in the new parliamentary line up, engaging in behind closed doors calculations, offering inducements and issuing threats to one another. None of these manoeuvres had anything to do with the interests or sentiments of ordinary people in the state.

The policies of the Labor and Liberal parties are so similar that Robin Gray, former Liberal premier and now director of the timber company Gunns, last year proposed a Labor-Liberal coalition. The bourgeoisie's only concern with such an arrangement is the danger of a political vacuum emerging, with working class opposition developing beyond the safe confines of the parliamentary apparatus.

As far as the Greens are concerned, their squalid horse trading stands as an indictment of all those tendencies—including the various ex-left and protest organisations—that seek to promote the party as some kind of “progressive” alternative to Labor and Liberal. As McKim's statements underscore, the Greens are consciously committed to doing whatever is required to defend the profit system and its parliamentary apparatus. They have no genuine programmatic differences whatsoever with the major parties.

The Greens' leader has spent every day since his grandiose March 20 election night speech publicly stressing his commitment to ensuring political “stability” on behalf of business and international and interstate investors. He continually urged either Labor or Liberal—or both—to negotiate a coalition government with the Greens, emphasising that any and all of the Greens' policies were negotiable in the context of a formal agreement. At the same time he pledged that even without a deal, the Greens would not block supply—that is, they would vote for the government's budget measures, irrespective of whatever cuts are made to social infrastructure, health, education, and welfare spending.

Federal Greens' leader Senator Bob Brown repeatedly urged that a tripartite coalition government of Labor, Liberal, and Greens MPs be formed. In an op-ed piece published in the *Launceston Examiner* last month, Brown declared: “All 25 [members of parliament] want Tasmania to prosper. All 25 want to enhance its environment and lifestyle. All 25 want to work for better health, education, policing, transport and housing. The differences are of degree or priority and these would be best sorted out in a cabinet most widely representing all 25.”

Nothing could be clearer. The Greens function as a political cover for the right-wing agenda of both political parties as they prepare to implement the new austerity agenda being demanded by the ruling elite.

Labor's record, for example, at both the state and federal level,

has been to ram through a series of pro-business, “free market” measures severely undermining public services. On health, the Bartlett government last year cancelled a new \$1 billion hospital that was to be built in Hobart because of budgetary concerns. On public education, the government's “Tasmania Tomorrow” restructuring of post-Year 10 and TAFE education has generated enormous opposition among teachers and parents, while winning the backing of the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce & Industry. TAFE and school teachers launched several stop-work industrial actions; the Greens responded by working to head off the campaign, with McKim publicly urging the Australian Education Union to call off a planned protest outside state parliament on March 16.

The Labor government's re-election bid was widely backed by business and the media, including Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper.

The new de facto Labor-Green coalition government is set to push through even more regressive economic and social policies amid a deteriorating global economic climate. The key reason for Premier Bartlett's initial post-election insistence that the Liberals form government was his concern about future unrest and opposition within the working class. The *Hobart Mercury* explained last Saturday: “Bartlett [issued a] somewhat unexpected warning on Thursday at his final press conference of ‘dark clouds’ gathering on the economic horizon. He, rather darkly, predicted—as though already opposition leader—that private capital investment in Tasmania was now drying up at the prospect of a minority government. He also warned that the Tasmanian economy is not through the worst of the global financial crisis, and that the real fallout of mass job losses on the North-West Coast and the collapse of the forestry industry sector is still to come.”

The working class remains politically unprepared for the coming onslaught on jobs, wages, and working conditions. It faces the urgent task of establishing its own political independence by breaking with Labor and the Greens and their nationalist, pro-capitalist program, and building the Socialist Equality Party as the new mass party of the working class, based on the program of socialist internationalism.

The author recommends:

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