

Australia: Tasmanian Greens in government and “opposition”

Richard Phillips
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The first weeks of Tasmania’s Labor-Green coalition government has seen an extraordinary series of opportunist manoeuvres by the Greens. The coalition arrangement was reached after the March 20 election resulted in a hung parliament, with Labor and Liberal winning 10 seats each and the Greens 5. Labor Premier David Bartlett held onto power after the Liberal Party refused Greens’ offers to negotiate a coalition agreement.

As part of the deal with Labor, State Greens’ leader Nick McKim now has ministerial responsibilities for human services, corrections and consumer protection, community development, climate change, sustainable transport and alternative energy. Greens’ MP (and McKim’s life partner) Cassy O’Connor is a cabinet secretary, with specific responsibility for disability services and housing.

The pair now have a combined parliamentary salary package of over \$385,000 and are provided with a staff of 10, two chauffeured limousines, and two personal cars. When McKim became Greens’ leader in 2008, he rejected a chauffeur-driven vehicle as an environmentally unsound and “unnecessary luxury”. Now, however, he said that “road safety and workload grounds” justified accepting such perks.

In an extraordinary arrangement, the Greens not only have two cabinet positions, but also have shadow portfolio responsibilities—under parliamentary convention, it is only opposition parties that nominate shadow ministries. In addition to his cabinet responsibilities, McKim is the Greens shadow portfolio spokesman for innovation, science and technology, economic development, sport and recreation, attorney-general and justice. O’Connor is shadow minister for environment, parks and heritage, animal welfare and the arts. The three other Greens’ MPs not in the cabinet have also been assigned shadow portfolios.

McKim declared that he and O’Connor’s dual ministerial and shadow roles provided “a unique opportunity to not only deliver on Greens policies through having seats at the cabinet table, but also to continue our historic role of scrutinising a government and holding a government to account”.

In reality, the bizarre setup reflects the Greens’ nervousness about being too closely identified with the two major parties. While the Greens are a bourgeois party committed to bolstering the existing political apparatus, they have promoted themselves as an anti-establishment and progressive alternative to Labor and Liberal. Having denounced the previous Labor government during the election campaign, the Greens are well aware that their credibility is stake. They are trying to distance themselves from the Labor-led coalition even while belonging to it.

Such calculations descended to the level of outright farce earlier this month when the Greens demanded a remodelling of the Tasmanian parliamentary chamber. Despite a \$4 million renovation completed last year, the *Mercury* reported, “The Greens have won agreement from the Government for the elegant new blackwood and huon pine parliamentary desks and benches in the Lower House to be literally split into three segments.” McKim explained that he wanted Greens MPs seated “in a separate section of seats that clearly delineates the Greens as neither government nor opposition”.

Parliament opened on May 4 (with the Greens sitting alongside their Labor coalition colleagues). Greens and Labor MPs defeated an attempted no-confidence motion brought by Liberal leader Will Hodgman. In another vote that had clearly been arranged as part of the coalition deal, Labor MP Michael Polley was elected parliamentary speaker courtesy of the Greens. When the vote was taken for deputy speaker and chairman of committees, however, the Greens and the Liberals jointly voted in Greens MP Tim Morris.

In line with post-election calls by federal Greens’ leader Bob Brown for a grand coalition of the three parliamentary parties in Tasmania, McKim has stressed the need to close collaboration with the Liberal Party opposition. On May 5, McKim foreshadowed a parliamentary motion calling for the establishment of tripartite policy commissions. These bodies, he said, “would represent a departure from adversarial politics and would help establish a new consultative and cooperative model that would encourage

the building of a broad consensus around the overall direction of change”.

The “consensus” shared by Labor, Liberal, and the Greens is the need to implement far reaching pro-market economic reforms, including major public spending cuts. Tasmania already has the highest unemployment rate in Australia, officially standing at 5.9 percent, with thousands of jobs lost in forestry, agriculture and manufacturing over the past two years. The coalition government is due to hand down its first budget on June 17.

Immediately after the March election, the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) demanded a “dose of post-election budget realism”. TCCI chief economist Richard Dowling declared: “The spending promises are unsustainable and now that the election is out of the way, the incoming government must take a cold sober look at its commitments and their impact on the budget.” Dowling called for “greater public sector efficiency” and insisted that there must be job cuts.

On May 19, the Labor Party announced that it was hiring Dowling as an economic advisor to deputy premier Lara Giddings. The appointment was no doubt intended to send a clear signal to big business—the coalition government will deliver on the demands for austerity. The decision prompted not a murmur of opposition from the Greens, whose election campaign centrally focussed on promises to defend social services and improve living standards.

Writing in the Hobart *Mercury* earlier this month, columnist Greg Barns declared that “the size of Tasmania’s public service needs an urgent downsizing”. Citing TCCI figures, Barns reported that the state’s public-sector wages bill increased from around \$1.2 billion in 2003 to more than \$2 billion now. Referring to the 1989-92 Greens-backed Labor minority government, Barns said: “Just as Bartlett’s mentor, Michael Field, and his Labor-Green Accord had the courage to restructure government 20 years ago, so must [Treasurer Michael] Aird and McKim today.”

These comments are a clear warning to the working class. Between 1989 to 1992, Labor and the Greens rammed through a series of savage budget cuts, which included thousands of public sector sackings. Now the coalition government is set to proceed with an even more regressive agenda amid a deepening global economic crisis.

Public education is also under fire. Labor and the Greens are currently working out arrangements for the continuation of Labor’s “Tasmania Tomorrow” policy. Introduced in January 2009, Tasmania Tomorrow involved the restructuring of post-Year 10 and TAFE education into three new organisations—the Tasmanian Academy, Tasmanian Polytechnic and the Skills Institute. This was accompanied by an attack on teachers’ working conditions and the

downgrading of education standards, and generated widespread opposition including strike action and protests by teachers. Business groups strongly endorsed the government’s reforms.

The Greens have postured as opponents of Tasmania Tomorrow. During the state election campaign, however, McKim publicly appealed for teachers to call off planned industrial action. Now the Greens are preparing a slightly modified version of Tasmania Tomorrow with Labor. Greens education spokesman Paul O’Halloran declared that there were “some elements of Tasmania Tomorrow that are actually working and it would be foolhardy to discard anything that is working well that’s why there needs to be a period of consultation and collaboration.”

Bartlett last week similarly indicated his willingness to come to an arrangement with the Greens while maintaining the essential aspects of Labor’s education agenda. “I recognise that in the Tasmania Tomorrow reforms that there needs to be change,” he declared. “What I won’t be doing is allowing the gains ... that we have made to be swept away.”

None of their political manoeuvring can obscure the fact that the Greens are part of the government and are therefore politically responsible for the deep inroads that are being prepared to social services and public sector jobs.

The author recommends:

Australia: Greens form coalition state government with Labor

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