

SEP's Carolyn Kennett exposes Greens' role at public education forum

Our reporter
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Carolyn Kennett, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the Sydney mid-western seat of Reid, exposed the role of the Greens and condemned the efforts of the teachers' unions to promote them as a progressive alternative when she addressed a public education forum on Thursday evening. Kennett and the Greens' candidate for the neighbouring electorate of Bennelong were the only candidates to speak, after Labor's Maxine McKew and her Liberal opponent, John Alexander, both contemptuously refused to participate.

Kathy Greer, representing the Federation of Parents and Citizens, reported with disgust to the gathering of teachers and parents, hosted by the Bennelong Public Education Alliance, that McKew had told her that public education was "not on my radar".

Kennett opened her remarks by explaining that the SEP was the only party advancing a socialist alternative for the working class against Labor, Liberal and the Greens. "Regardless of which party is elected on Saturday, none of the pressing problems confronting working people, including the ongoing destruction of public education, will be resolved. This is because all of the major parties—including the Greens—are committed to the defence of the profit system."

The SEP candidate, as president of the Macquarie University branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) for the past four years, has opposed the complicity of her own union in helping to impose the Labor government's free-market "education revolution". At the forum, she denounced the school teachers' unions, as well as the NTEU, for publishing education "score cards" that urged a vote for Labor or the Greens.

"The SEP completely rejects these positions that are designed to trap workers within the confines of the parliamentary system," she said. "The past three years has seen Labor implement policies across the education sector long advocated by the Liberal party and right-wing thinktanks. Julia Gillard has been at the forefront of these policies."

Kennett pointed out that Gillard had been installed as prime minister, backed by business, in the June 23-24 coup that removed Kevin Rudd, precisely because of her track record in "subjecting every aspect of education to the immediate profit requirements of big business, across schools, TAFEs [technical colleges] and universities".

In Labor's "education market place", there would be "winners and losers" like in any market place, Kennett warned. "Schools that 'underperform' in NAPLAN tests will face sanctions and closure, while teachers who fail to 'value add' by lifting their students' test scores will face intense pressure, and, ultimately, disciplinary action. Similar reforms in Britain and the United States have produced a disaster. They have been used to victimise and sack teachers, and close hundreds of public schools."

Kennett said Gillard had been hailed by right-wing media commentators like Janet Albrechtsen and Miranda Devine as Australia's "iron lady" for "staring down" the teacher unions. "The truth is she has been completely reliant on the unions—including the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the NTEU—to ram through the government's agenda ... They have acted to isolate teachers and academics and suppress opposition. In April, for example, the unions called off a national boycott of NAPLAN by teachers. They signed a deal with Gillard to form a joint 'working party' that will oversee and enforce Labor's

standardised test regime.”

The SEP candidate said it was “time to face facts”: “Labor’s agenda is the subordination of education to the dictates of the market; it can only be defeated by a movement that directly challenges the capitalist free market system ... The SEP advances a socialist program. Billions of dollars must be poured into education to ensure free, well staffed, quality public education, including child care and kindergarten, is available to all.”

Kennett concluded by warning about the Greens, noting that the education unions were depicting them as an alternative option because of the mounting anger and disgust toward Labor and the Liberals. “The Greens are not an alternative. They are a capitalist party, hostile to the needs of workers. Just look at their record: in 1989-92, the Greens were in a coalition government in Tasmania that brought about massive cuts to public spending. More than 2,000 public sector workers were laid off, regressive taxes were imposed and TAFE fees were increased.”

Despite this record, NSWTF organiser Theo Bougatsas told the forum: “The Greens are the best of the major parties. That is just a fact.”

Nevertheless, Kennett’s contribution struck a chord. A TAFE teachers’ representative, Pierre Masse, thanked her for mentioning the TAFE colleges, whose funding has been cut dramatically over the past 15 years, a process that had accelerated under Gillard. Masse said federal funding cuts, including the loss of a \$50 million literacy education contract, had been a central factor in the bitter TAFE teachers’ dispute in NSW earlier this year, which resulted in a 17 percent increase in teachers’ workloads.

The Greens candidate Lindsay Peters appealed to everyone present to vote Greens for the Senate, in order to send a “committed friend of public education” to Canberra. He claimed that Lee Rhiannon, the party’s NSW lead Senate candidate would be a “loud voice speaking fearlessly” for public schools. Peters said that Gillard had simply “caved in to pressure” from the private school lobby, and his party would fight to “tip the balance back” toward public education.

However, Peters’s true colours became clear in the question period. He tried to counter a statement by Kennett, in answer to a question, that all the claims of the trade unions and the Greens that the parliamentary

system could be reformed to defend public education had “proven dead”.

Peters insisted that the “system is good” and “reform is possible”. He invoked US President Barack Obama’s message that not every principle, including public education, could be equally maintained. It was necessary, Peters contended, to “prioritise and work with other parties to get the best outcomes possible”.

An SEP member in the audience asked Peters if he were proud of the record of the Greens, led by current federal leaders, Bob Brown and Christine Milne, in sacrificing public education, including TAFE, in Tasmania. Peters declared that he certainly was. “It was one of those difficult choices that we had to make,” he said. “We did allow the cuts to education to go through, in order to get the best deal for Tasmanians.” It had been, he argued, a test of the “maturity” of the Greens, which had helped make them now “one of the major parties”.

If the Greens won the balance of power in the federal parliament after Saturday’s election, Peters said, they would again demonstrate their “maturity” by being prepared to make deals with the major parties. “We know we can’t have everything,” he stated.

Peters’s response laid bare the essential class character of the Greens. While posing as a progressive and more humane party, in order to appeal to unprecedented disillusionment with the Labor government, they are seeking to channel that revulsion back into a parliamentary partnership with Labor—or the Liberals. Far from representing a “fearless voice” for public education, or any other fundamental social need, their perspective is to stabilise the political order—in order to impose the austerity requirements of the financial elite.

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