

Australia: Greens manoeuvre for de facto coalition with Labor

Patrick O'Connor, SEP candidate for Senate in Victoria
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The Greens 2010 election campaign has been dominated by preparations for a de facto, if not direct and explicit, ruling coalition with the Labor Party. As Labor and Liberal lurch ever further to the right, in bipartisan agreement on virtually every significant issue, the Greens are playing a key role as a safety valve for the official parliamentary apparatus—winning support from those hostile to the major parties, especially young people, while at the same time striving to keep them trapped within the official political establishment and the current social order.

With their standing in opinion polls at record highs—between 12 and 16 percent—the Greens hope to win their first House of Representatives seat, the electorate of Melbourne, in a federal election, and hold the balance of power in the Senate, giving them unprecedented influence over the next government's legislation.

These calculations were given a boost in the opening moments of the official campaign, when officials from the Greens and the Labor Party stitched up a sordid preference swap deal. Greens' leader Bob Brown immediately insisted that he had nothing to do with the arrangement and that he remained entirely opposed to preference deals.

Brown's attempt to maintain a "clean hands" image as his party engages in various backroom manoeuvres with Labor is utterly bogus, and reflects the two-faced character of the Greens' campaign. On the one hand, they make a certain appeal to the widespread opposition towards the war in Afghanistan, neglect of the environment and inaction on climate change, and various social issues, while on the other, they assure the Australian ruling elite that they will do whatever necessary to uphold its interests—in alliance with the two major parties.

When asked how the Greens would act if they held the balance of power in the senate, Brown invariably replies: "responsibly", and insists that they will not function as an oppositional fraction against the next government. At the party's official campaign launch, Brown declared, "We will never just say no [to voting on government legislation]... The Greens' record in the senate demonstrates our ability to negotiate and deliver outcomes for the community when the [opposition] coalition has said no."

Part of this record, over the three years of Rudd/Gillard Labor, was the Greens' support for Labor's fiscal stimulus measures, aimed at bolstering consumer spending and boosting corporate profits in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In an address to the National Press Club on July 14, for example, the Greens' leader boasted that the "Rudd-Swan-Brown package" had "saved this nation from recession".

In reality, all over the world, including in Australia, governments are now being directed by global financial markets to make the working class

pay the price for the multi-billion dollar sums expended to bail-out the banks and financial institutions, which are now on government books as debt, through the implementation of savage austerity measures. Both Prime Minister Julia Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott have committed themselves to eliminating the budget deficit within three years while at the same time cutting the corporate tax rate. Such measures can only be carried out through the slashing of public spending, including for health, education, welfare, social infrastructure, and public sector jobs and wages.

Brown's emphasis on the Greens' "responsible" record is aimed at sending a clear signal to corporate Australia—the Greens are ready and willing to impose this agenda in collaboration with the next government.

Bob Brown and the Greens' deputy leader Christine Milne have a definite track record in this regard. During the last major economic recession, between 1989 and 1992, both Brown and Milne led the Tasmanian Greens in an Accord partnership with a minority state Labor government. In 1990, the Labor-Greens government gutted total government discretionary spending by a record 6.7 percent. The budget was described by the Hobart *Mercury* as "the worst since the 1930s Depression." Approximately 8 percent of the public sector workforce was laid off, affecting more than 2,000 workers. A raft of regressive taxes was also imposed, together with increased TAFE fees, higher public transport charges, and new charges for school bus services in rural areas.

The Greens backed every one of these savage, anti-working class measures, insisting that Tasmania (that is, the corporate elite) had to be saved from pending bankruptcy. When a series of militant strikes and protests, involving public sector workers, teachers, farmers, and miners, erupted against the cutbacks, Bob Brown moved a parliamentary censure motion against the state Liberal leader, accusing his party of "inciting various community groups to resist the budgetary cuts". Christine Milne addressed one rally and provocatively urged protestors not to oppose a government education review, which had recommended 1,000 job cuts and 47 school closures—because "parents and teachers had warned about waste in the education bureaucracy for years and should welcome the devolution of decision-making responsibility to local communities".

Brown and Milne have repeatedly referred with pride to their Accord partnership with Tasmanian Labor, using it to demonstrate their bone fides to the ruling class and tout their dependability at the federal level.

During the 2004 federal election campaign, for example, Brown was asked if the Greens would negotiate rather than obstruct legislation in the senate. He replied: "I was in the Labor Green accord in Tasmania ... There were savage budget cuts. We had Greens' supporters protesting outside our offices. We went to some very angry public meetings, but we Greens

held the line.”

Likewise, in October 2008, at the height of the US financial meltdown, Milne delivered a speech at the Sydney Institute. She said: “The most fiscally responsible periods of government in Tasmania have been during minority governments. The majority Liberal government of Robin Gray had driven the state into a parlous economic situation and the Labor-Green Accord had to turn it around. It was a difficult period of protests and unrest as the public service was slashed and public spending was cut. The Greens never wavered from the task.”

The message is that the Greens “will not waver” from pressing through a new wave of austerity measures against the working class, in tandem with a federal government—whether Labor or Liberal.

During the past decade, the Greens have become ever-more integrated into the official political establishment. In Western Australia, they have “responsibly” held the balance of power in the state’s upper house for most of the past ten years. In the Australian Capital Territory, a Greens-backed minority Labor government has been in power since October 2008, while in Tasmania, the Greens have entered government for the first time anywhere in the country. State leader Nick McKim and fellow Green MP Cassie O’Connor are cabinet members in the Labor-Green coalition government that was formed last April.

Brown played a key role in establishing the partnership, having initially urged the formation of a tripartite coalition government uniting Labor, Liberal, and Green. At the time, he left no doubt that he would support a similar governing line up at the federal level.

Fake “left-wing” credentials

None of the Australian Greens’ parliamentary leaders has ever identified themselves as left-wing. The party’s reputation among layers of youth as being in some way “anti-establishment”, derives in no small part from its enthusiastic promotion by the various pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, who seek to use the Greens as a means of keeping students and youth within the safe channels of parliament, amid escalating alienation from Labor. In the current election campaign, for example, Peter Boyle explained in the *Green Left Weekly*: “Socialist Alliance members are campaigning not only for our own candidates but also for the Greens and other progressive candidates... If the Greens have greater numbers in the Senate, they may be able to slow down some of the bad laws the next government, ALP or Coalition, will introduce.”

Greens’ leader Brown is very conscious of the role of the ex-lefts. In a recent interview on the ABC’s “Lateline”, he took care to repeatedly identify Socialist Alliance among several parties to which Greens’ voters could direct their preferences.

Sections of the trade union bureaucracy are also backing the Greens, including the Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU). With the ETU membership recently voting to disaffiliate from the Labor Party, saving about \$100,000 in annual fees, state secretary Dean Mighell has transferred the same amount of money into the Greens’ senate campaign, together with tens of thousands more for their Melbourne electorate fund. Like the ex-lefts, the ETU and other self-styled “left” unions that back the Greens, aim to pre-empt the emergence of any independent political movement of the working class against Labor. The unions are also hoping to use the Greens as a means of pressuring the Gillard government to use them more directly as it implements its post-

election austerity agenda.

Far from being a “progressive” alternative, the Greens is a bourgeois party, organically hostile to the needs, interests and aspirations of the working class. Its membership base, which has steadily grown over the last decade to an estimated 9,000, predominantly comprises upper-middle class inner-city dwellers. Its major preoccupation is the “lifestyle” predilections of the upper middle class, not the deepening social and economic crisis that confronts workers and youth. A September 2003 survey of the party’s membership in New South Wales found that Green members’ average age was 47; 67 percent had university degrees, compared to 29 percent of the general public; of those with university degrees, 40 percent had Masters or PhD qualifications; 59 percent worked in professional occupations, with the next highest occupational category being managers and administrators at 10 percent; and just 9 percent spoke a language other than English at home, compared to 24 percent throughout NSW.

Internationally, Greens parties have a similar social composition and class orientation. Once in office, they have proven to be among the most vicious proponents of big business interests. In Germany, for example, the Greens joined the social democrats in office between 1998 and 2005, playing a key role in legitimising the deployment of German troops outside Germany, for the first time since World War II, and supporting the bombing of Serbia in 1999. At home, they attacked the conditions of welfare recipients through the draconian Hartz IV legislation. In Ireland the current Fianna Fail and Greens coalition government has rammed through unprecedented cutbacks in public spending, as part of one of the severest austerity programs imposed in Europe.

The Greens’ reputation as an anti-war party, committed to defending the environment, is just as undeserved as their “anti-establishment” credentials.

The Greens call for the withdrawal of Australian troops from Afghanistan, but on a purely nationalist and tactical basis. Their position has nothing to do with a principled opposition to imperialist violence. Brown has repeatedly urged, for instance, that more US troops should be sent to Iraq and Afghanistan to replace the Australian forces, which he wants to be used to strengthen Canberra’s neo-colonial operations in East Timor and the South Pacific. In April 2007, Brown declared: “The 300 [additional SAS troops then sent to Afghanistan] should remain in our region where instability is rife and our defence forces are already stretched. The current Afghanistan mire comes out of the Bush administration’s mistake in withdrawing from Afghanistan and invading Iraq. It should be President Bush dispatching the extra contingent to Afghanistan, not Australia.”

On refugees, the Greens call for “compassion” and compliance with international law. However, they accept the entire framework of so-called border security—that is, they support the Australian government’s “right” to restrict the entry of refugees into the country. Brown has repeatedly demanded that any asylum seeker deemed not to have a “legitimate” claim be deported to their country of origin. Because of the very narrowly framed official definition of what constitutes a refugee, this means that men, women, and children suffering abject poverty and extreme physical insecurity in their home countries are routinely rejected. The Greens also line up with Labor and Liberal in demanding stricter restrictions on immigration, promoting the bogus and reactionary line that protecting the Australian “way of life” and physical environment requires the exclusion of people from other countries.

On the environment and climate change the Greens have no viable solution, given their defence of the profit system. They support, in principle, the establishment of a carbon emissions trading scheme (ETS)—the bogus “free market” fix for the ecological crisis generated by the operations of the capitalist market itself. Their proposal for an interim “carbon tax” would do nothing to resolve the mounting global warming crisis, while immediately triggering a massive hike in the cost of living borne by working people.

The only genuine solution to climate change, militarism war and the assault on social conditions and democratic rights is the development of an independent political movement of the working class, aimed at the abolition of the capitalist profit system, and its replacement with a rationally planned global economy, geared towards the satisfaction of the social, intellectual and cultural needs of all humanity. That is the socialist and internationalist perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party is fighting in the 2010 federal elections.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign
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