

Australia: Greens willing to join coalition government with Labor or Liberal

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25 August 2010

The Australian Greens have doubled their parliamentary representation following last Saturday's federal election. Their current five senators have now been joined by one member of the House of Representatives and another four senators. As a result, they will hold the balance of power in the parliamentary upper house once the new senators take their seats in July next year. Both the Liberal-National coalition, with 34 seats, and the Labor Party, with 31, fell short of the 39 vote majority required to pass legislation. The Greens will also share the balance of power in the lower house, with three or four independents, depending on the final vote tally.

The Greens are utilising their new power to demonstrate their "responsibility" and commitment to "stable government". They have already begun closed-door discussions with both Prime Minister Julia Gillard and opposition leader Tony Abbott, exploring the prospects of joining a minority government led by either Labor or Liberal. With the two-party system plunged into deep crisis, the Greens are playing a key role in buttressing the official parliamentary setup and demonstrating their function as a political safety valve for the profit system itself.

On Monday, several Greens' members of parliament, including party leader Bob Brown and newly elected representative of the inner-city Victorian electorate of Melbourne Adam Bandt, met with Prime Minister Julia Gillard in Canberra.

Afterwards, Brown stressed his eagerness to begin negotiations as well with the leader of the opposition. "I would be very happy to catch up with Abbott when he makes a call or I make a call to him," he declared. "Negotiation is what the Greens are about and when you negotiate in politics you have an open door to all comers. That includes, of course, Tony Abbott and his team... Before you side with somebody you talk with them. It's very simple. You have a yarn with them."

These remarks were intended as a clear rebuke to Adam Bandt. Before the August 21 election, the new Greens MP pledged to back Labor in the event of a hung parliament in order to deliver what he called a "stable, progressive and effective" government. Standing next to Brown during Monday's press conference, Bandt maintained this position, insisting that the best option was to "work with a Gillard government".

The emerging division within the Greens over whether to lean towards Labor or Liberal has no principled content whatsoever.

Whichever of the major parties ends up forming a minority government, they will be committed to advancing the interests of corporate Australia and undermining the living standards of the working class through further free market "reform" and public spending cuts.

The Greens' tactical differences reflect the different political calculations of rival tendencies within the party. Bob Brown's overtures towards Tony Abbott are not simply a manoeuvre aimed at strengthening his hand in negotiations with Gillard—there is no question that he would get into bed with a Liberal-led government if the price was right.

In Tasmania in 1996, the Greens installed a minority Liberal state government. Current federal deputy leader Christine Milne was then the Greens' Tasmanian leader, and she developed a close working relationship with the Liberal premier over the course of the following two years. More recently, after the Tasmanian state election last March resulted in a hung parliament, Bob Brown called for the formation of a coalition government uniting Labor, Liberal, and Green. Only after the Greens' pleas for coalition negotiations with the Liberals were rebuffed did they form government with Labor. Notably, the coalition arrangement did not involve Labor having to commit to implementing a single Greens' policy. Negotiations instead revolved around the number of cabinet seats the Greens would receive.

It appears that a similar process is underway in Canberra. Brown declared: "I'm not a demander, the Greens aren't into demands, we're into getting the best outcome through negotiation." He added that it was incorrect to presume his party would be asking either Labor or Liberal to commit to policies on climate change or a mining tax: "They [these issues] are not going to be at this stage of any process, parliamentary process, of getting a very stable outcome for the people of Australia."

Neither Bob Brown nor Christine Milne has ever regarded themselves as left-wing. Both hail from rural conservative backgrounds and are hostile to socialism and the working class. They regard the Greens' core constituency as that privileged layer of upper-middle class inner-city professionals who are preoccupied with sexuality, gender, and other forms of identity politics. Thus Saturday's election delivered the highest Green votes in the inner-city electorates of Melbourne and Sydney, formerly working class centres, many of which have been largely gentrified, or in which that process

has well and truly begun, over the last two decades. 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.

Not surprisingly, large Green votes were also recorded in some of the wealthiest electorates of the country. In Wentworth, the seat covering Sydney's inner-eastern suburbs and held by the Liberal's Malcolm Turnbull, the Greens won 17.1 percent of the vote, 2.1 percent higher than in 2007, while in Higgins, which covers Melbourne's elite suburbs, the Greens won 17.3 percent of the vote, 6.6 percent higher than in 2007.

The vote was more mixed in working class centres. The Greens performed poorly in many of these seats, despite saturation media coverage—in Blaxland, in Sydney's west, they won just 5.9 percent of the vote. This was just 0.4 percent higher than in 2007 and less than half the area's informal vote of 14.2 percent. In nearby Fowler, the Greens gained 6.2 percent, 0.3 percent higher than in 2007. In several working-class electorates in Melbourne, however, the Greens recorded more than 10 percent, and in southern Brisbane, where Labor suffered heavy losses, the Greens won between 10 and 15 percent of the primary vote in several seats, 6 to 9 percent higher than their 2007 vote.

To the extent that the Greens benefitted from the large protest vote that was especially cast by young workers and students against Labor's right-wing record, it was largely by default. The Greens' election campaign was virtually devoid of political content—in Melbourne, for example, the sole slogans featured in their numerous billboards, posters, and newspaper advertisements were "Make history Melbourne", and "This time I'm voting Green". This approach served to promote as little scrutiny of their actual policies as possible. On every issue the party spoke out of both sides of its mouth: on the US-led war in Afghanistan, public support for the withdrawal of Australian troops, less well known support for the presence of US troops there, as well as demands for a heightened Australian military presence in East Timor and the South Pacific. On the environment, support for action on climate change but only in terms of the imposition of an ineffective and pro-business emissions trading scheme; on refugees, public support for humane treatment consistent with international law, while at the same time backing Labor's proposed East Timor processing centre and demanding the deportation of all asylum seekers who failed to meet the government's restrictive criteria for official refugee status.

Adam Bandt is no doubt aware that while presenting to his constituents a Greens-backed Labor government as "progressive" would prove difficult, any effort to mount a similar argument for a Liberal-led government would fuel enormous opposition, threatening his re-election at the next poll. This, however, is not the only reason for his reluctance to follow Brown's bidding and back Abbott.

Sections of the trade union bureaucracy bankrolled the Greens'

campaign. The Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) donated \$125,000 to Bandt and another \$200,000 to the Greens' senate campaign in the state. The Victorian branch of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) reportedly donated another \$50,000.

Bandt, a former student radical, has practised industrial law with major Melbourne firm Slater and Gordon and represented key industrial unions in different legal cases. He is one of several prominent Greens to have cultivated ties with the trade unions. In NSW, newly elected Greens' senator Lee Rhiannon previously worked with the maritime and manufacturing unions. She is an ex-member of the Socialist Party of Australia, the hardline pro-Moscow Stalinist outfit (now named the Communist Party of Australia). Rhiannon, who is widely expected to challenge for the Greens' leadership after Brown retires, has publicly backed Bandt's promotion of Gillard over Abbott. "What Adam has been very clear about in the campaign is his concern about how Mr Abbott has conducted himself and the policies of the coalition and that he wouldn't be supporting an Abbott government," she declared last Sunday.

The ETU and CFMEU backed the Greens as a means of pressuring the Gillard government into passing legislation that would further integrate them into the industrial relations regime as the policemen for imposing wage cuts and productivity speedups. The unions also want to abolish the draconian building industry watchdog, the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), created by the former Howard government and retained by Labor. The unions have no concern for construction workers' democratic rights; they oppose the ABCC because it hinders their ability to function on building sites and also because it has hit them with millions of dollars in fines over "unlawful" industrial action.

A Greens deal with the Liberals, therefore, would cut across the agenda of the ETU and CFMEU. Union officials have no doubt made crystal clear that further donations to the Greens will be conditional on a deal with Gillard.

The author recommends:

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