

Australian election crisis

Greens sign deal backing minority Labor government

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Greens' leader Bob Brown this morning signed a formal agreement with caretaker Prime Minister Julia Gillard, guaranteeing the Greens' support for a minority Labor government over the next three years. While Green parliamentarians will not serve in cabinet, the deal nevertheless amounts to an effective coalition arrangement, with Bob Brown and his colleagues bound to vote for the government's budgets and oppose any no confidence motion.

Gillard now has 73 votes in the House of Representatives—still three short of the majority required to form government. But the Greens are doing their utmost to rescue Labor. “We hope by this time next week there will be a Gillard government, because we believe we can work with a Gillard government,” Brown declared. “We are the first people in this balance of power in both houses to make a decision. We think that will help lead to others making a decision.”

Brown was referring to the four independent parliamentarians. The three from rural areas—Bob Katter, Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott—have been negotiating as a bloc with Labor and Liberal and are likely to announce which party they will support later this week. Hobart-based former intelligence analyst Andrew Wilkie today described as “disappointing” an offer made by Gillard in response to his list of 20 demands (ranging from more funding for the Royal Hobart Hospital, to restrictions on poker-machine gambling, to reform of parliamentary procedures) and said he would continue negotiations with both the major parties in the next couple of days.

As well as delivering an important extra vote in the lower house—ensuring Gillard has as many seats as the opposition coalition, or one more, if West Australian National Party MP Tony Crook is counted as a cross bencher—the Greens' deal

with Labor provides the government with important political cover, especially on the issue of climate change. Under the agreement, a Climate Change Committee will be formed, comprising experts and selected parliamentarians, and tasked with discussing how to best establish a “carbon price”. Gillard has seized the opportunity to junk her much derided election campaign proposal to launch a “Citizen's Assembly” of randomly selected ordinary people that would assess the climate science and determine what to do. Now the Labor government can shelve the ill-fated policy, continue to protect the major corporate polluters by doing nothing to reduce greenhouse gases, while at the same time acting with the imprimatur of the Greens.

The Gillard-Brown agreement, which will only take effect if Labor forms government, underscores the key role of the Greens within the Australian political establishment. After capitalising on widespread hostility to the major parties and their right-wing agendas, and winning a record vote for a minor party in the August 21 election, the Greens are now determined to demonstrate their credentials to the ruling elite as a “responsible” force for “stability”.

The Greens have no principled differences with either the Labor or Liberal parties. At his press conference today, Brown made clear that he had asked both Gillard and Abbott for the Greens to be given cabinet seats. But, he explained, “They [the major parties] can't digest it. That's coming down the line [but] we're not forcing that to the point where you don't get a resolution ... our job here is to form government as expeditiously as possible and that meant we had to be a little bit modest.”

The five-page deal—signed by Gillard and Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer Wayne Swan for the Labor Party and by Brown, deputy leader Christine Milne, and the party's lower house member Adam Bandt for the Greens—formalises

close relations between the two parties.

The prime minister is bound to meet with Brown and Bandt at least once a week when the parliament is in session, “principally to discuss and negotiate any planned legislation”, and once a fortnight at other times. The Labor government’s budgets will be “subject to an exchange of information and views between the parties”. Bandt and the Greens’ treasury spokesperson will receive ongoing briefings from the treasurer, finance minister, and treasury officials, and will also hold regular discussions with the treasurer and finance minister regarding “fiscal strategy and budget preparation”.

These provisions make clear that the Greens will be fully responsible for future Labor budgets, including the inevitable spending cuts to areas including education, health, welfare, and social infrastructure. Only yesterday the prime minister addressed the National Press Club and emphasised her commitment to “tough spending decisions” and “discipline” in order to return the budget to surplus by 2013. Any downturn affecting the Australian economy in the next three years—whether caused by a slowdown in China’s demand for Australian mineral exports or a “double-dip” global recession—will result in even sharper cutbacks, lowering the living standards of the working class and poor.

In return for their support for a Gillard-led minority government, the Greens neither sought nor were offered anything of substance.

On parliamentary and constitutional reform, the Labor government has promised to examine political donations and public party funding reform, hold referenda on “Indigenous constitutional recognition and recognition of local government in the Constitution”, alter rules governing the conduct of Question Time in the lower house, extend the ability of minor parties and independents to propose new legislation through private members’ bills, and establish a Parliamentary Budget Office and Parliamentary Integrity Commissioner. Gillard had already announced many of these measures following initial discussions with the rural independents.

The only policy issues raised in the Labor-Greens agreement, in addition to the Climate Change Committee, were dental care (“proposals for improving the nation’s investments in dental care should be considered in the context of the 2011 Budget”), rail infrastructure connecting Australia’s major cities (“an implementation study for High Speed Rail should be completed by July 2011”), and the war

in Afghanistan (“there [will be] a full parliamentary debate”).

On dental care and high speed rail, the Labor government has committed itself to nothing beyond “considering” the Greens’ suggestions. Moreover, Gillard has already promised that any new public spending arising out of negotiations with the Greens and independents will be offset by equivalent spending cuts in other areas.

As for the proposed so-called “debate” on the Afghanistan war, this will be utilised by the major parties to whip up new diversions and pretexts justifying Australia’s continued participation in the criminal, neo-colonial occupation. The Greens, for their part, will no doubt use the opportunity to repeat their demand for the redeployment of troops to East Timor and the South Pacific, to shore up Australia’s regional corporate and strategic interests against rivals like China.

In the meantime, the Greens will continue to vote for Labor’s budgets, including those provisions that funnel more than \$20 billion to the Australian war machine each year, further underscoring the bogus and hypocritical character of their nominal opposition to the Afghanistan war.

Likewise the Greens claim to oppose the government’s brutal treatment of refugees, but will cast their vote in parliament to continue Labor’s funding of asylum seeker detention centres. They claim to oppose the Northern Territory intervention against Aboriginal communities, but will vote for its funding in the budget. They claim to oppose the anti-democratic construction industry policing body, the Australian Building and Construction Commission, but will vote to finance the body’s ongoing activities, including threatening workers with imprisonment and massive fines for taking “unlawful” industrial action.

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