

Australian Greens seek collaboration with Liberals, pledge fealty to the banks

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Greens' leader Bob Brown has issued a series of statements in the past two days aimed at shoring up the minority Labor government, cultivating close relations with the opposition Liberal Party, and convincing big business and the financial sector that the Labor-Greens alliance will advance their interests.

On Wednesday Brown urged the opposition Liberal-National coalition to collaborate with the Greens and four independents to pass legislation in the House of Representatives. "If the opposition and Greens and crossbenches get together, then legislation will pass the parliament even if the government is opposed to it," he stated. "Please think about that. We're used to it, many people in this place aren't, and we will be seeking a close working relationship with the opposition as well as the government, but our priority at the moment is for stable, productive government."

The Greens' leader also urged opposition leader Tony Abbott to agree to regular fortnightly meetings. "I think it would be very sensible to be working with the opposition to get good outcomes out of this parliament," he declared.

Brown yesterday appealed to Abbott to rein in senior members of his party who have described the minority government as illegitimate. "They need to lay off on the role, as they see it, as wreckers," he said. "The coalition [is] close [to] saying that the vote of the Australian people is illegitimate and that the constitution is illegitimate. That's nonsense. This will be a legitimate Gillard government."

These remarks point to the central role that the Greens are now playing within the political establishment. The August 21 election revealed enormous disaffection and anger towards the major parties—reflected in the high number of spoiled ballots and the inability of either Labor or the opposition to win a majority. The record high vote for the Greens, resulting in the doubling of their parliamentary

representation from five to ten members, also reflected this sentiment, with the Greens viewed by many people, especially students and youth, as some kind of alternative to the right-wing agenda of the major parties. Political developments are now rapidly exposing such illusions.

Once the hung parliament was announced, the Greens stressed their absolute commitment to parliamentary stability. Even before the government was formed, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young pledged that her party would work to "make this a secure government" and avoid triggering another election for three years, regardless of whether Gillard or Abbott became prime minister and irrespective of the policies they enacted.

Brown now adamantly defends the legitimacy of the Greens-backed Labor government. His reference to the "vote of the Australian people" is especially farcical. The ten-week period between the June 23-24 parliamentary coup that ousted Kevin Rudd, to the formation of a minority Labor government, was marked by the fashioning of a more right-wing government by sections of the corporate and media elite, behind the backs of the electorate. Gillard now heads a government that is committed to bolstering Australian militarism abroad and imposing an austerity program that will reduce the living standards of the working class at home—without discussing any of this agenda during the election campaign.

The Greens' insistence that the Gillard administration is "legitimate" is directed not so much at the Liberals. It is directed against the millions of ordinary people who viewed with deep unease the manner in which Gillard first assumed office—through the coup against Rudd—and then retained it through backroom payoffs and deals with the Greens and so-called independent parliamentarians. Brown is clearly signalling that any movement by the working class in opposition to the Labor government will immediately face a determined opponent in the Greens.

In an interview with Reuters published today, Brown assured business and the financial sector of his support. “[There] is a political bias that has got no basis in reality—that says that Labor and the Greens are not good for markets,” he declared. “Forecasts that a Labor, Greens and country independents alliance would be bad for the markets have been proven wrong. The Australian markets have had their strongest week in a long time since the Greens made its agreement.”

Brown rejected a report that Merrill Lynch analysts were concerned that a mining tax could lay the basis for a future tax increase targeting the banks. “There is no proposal for that at all,” he stated. “It is not a policy, it is not a proposal and it is not on the drawing board.”

This pledge of fealty to the banks and their enormous profits came as the Greens’ leader also issued an extraordinary pledge that the Greens would not vote for any measures in parliament that involves increased government spending or higher taxes. “We won’t be supporting legislation which raises taxes or puts an impost on the exchequer,” he declared. “If we need to raise revenue through some piece of legislation, then the Greens will be seeking agreement from the government on that before proceeding.”

Brown’s statement was made in response to concerns expressed in business and media circles that his earlier remarks that the Greens could vote for Liberal Party policies in defiance of the government left the door open for new spending programs. The opposition has proposed a paid maternity leave scheme that is far costlier than Labor’s, being based on the impost of a 2.5 percent tax levy on big business, while its mental health plan involves public funding that is five times higher than Labor’s. The possibility of the Liberals, Greens, and rural independents passing such legislation through the House of Representatives throws into question the ability of Gillard’s minority government to deliver its promised three-year return to budget surplus. It also raises the spectre of a constitutional crisis—under section 56 of the constitution, spending bills require the assent of the British monarch’s representative, the governor-general. By convention this is given on the basis of government assent. Any standoff between the parliament and the executive government would likely trigger the downfall of the minority government and the calling of another election.

Brown’s pledge to avert this scenario involves the Greens

issuing a blanket pledge to support Labor’s austerity program. A major crisis of public funding already exists in a wide range of areas—from the public education and health systems, to aged care and mental health services, and poverty-level pension and welfare payments. Despite this, over the next three years the Greens will vote against any legislation in parliament that involves an increase in government spending unless the Labor Party agrees. Gillard has made perfectly clear that her government is committed, above all, to fiscal “discipline” involving “tough decisions”. In the event of an economic slowdown over the next three years—whether triggered by a double-dip recession in the global economy, lower Chinese demand for mineral imports, or some other shock—the government will immediately move to impose savage cutbacks like those being implemented in Britain and Europe.

The Greens’ role as a lynchpin of the precarious parliamentary setup at the federal level comes as they are being closely integrated into government at the state level. In Tasmania, the Greens serve in cabinet as part of a ruling coalition arrangement with Labor. The power-sharing deal was finalised after the March 20 state election delivered a hung parliament, and after the Liberal Party rebuffed Bob Brown’s appeal for an all-parliamentary coalition involving Labor, Liberal and Greens. A hung parliament has also been in operation in the Australian Capital Territory since October 2008, with a Greens-backed minority Labor government.

In Victoria, the Greens are preparing for state elections in November and anticipate winning as many as four lower house seats. In the event of a small swing away from the incumbent Labor government, this will likely result in yet another hung parliament. The *Age* recently reported that the Greens are eager to serve in cabinet, holding the transport ministry and potentially others as well, in a coalition arrangement with either Labor or Liberal. The party’s candidate for Melbourne Brian Walters confirmed the Greens may join the Liberals. “It remains to be seen,” he told the ABC’s “Stateline” program. “The Greens have supported a Liberal government before. We did that from 1996 to 1998 in Tasmania. All options will be open and we won’t shut any option off.”



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