

Australia: Labor joins Murdoch media smear campaign in Victorian election

Mike Head
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Having helped launch the right-wing Tea Party movement in the US, backed the Tory Cameron government and its massive cuts to public spending in Britain and the backroom coup that installed Julia Gillard as PM in Australia, it appears the Murdoch media has turned its attention to the November 27 election in the Australian state of Victoria.

Within days of the launch of the state election campaign by Labor Premier John Brumby, a Murdoch-owned News Limited newspaper initiated a smear operation against Greens candidate, Melbourne barrister Brian Walters. As to be expected, Brumby's Labor government immediately joined in.

On Sunday, the Melbourne tabloid, the *Herald Sun*, ran a front page lead and editorial, accusing Walters of doing "dirty work" by representing in court a brown coal company being prosecuted by the state's workplace safety agency over the death of a worker in 2006. Labor Party state secretary Nick Reece and Education Minister Bronwyn Pike, who could lose her seat to Walters, were quoted echoing the newspaper's attack. Brumby and Treasurer John Lenders soon followed.

On Monday, the rival Fairfax-owned Melbourne *Age* reported that Labor had stepped up its vendetta against Walters by contacting prominent members of the Jewish community over the fact that the barrister represented an alleged Nazi war criminal, Konrad Kalejs, in the early 2000s. The *Age* said it had obtained a dossier of documents used as part of a "dirt campaign" prepared by Brumby's office against Walters and other Greens candidates.

The accusations against Walters constitute a threat to basic legal rights. There is a principle, dating back to the struggles against the absolute monarchy in Britain, that barristers must accept any brief within their field of

expertise. This "cab-rank" rule is a protection against controversial defendants being denied representation in court.

Walters was under a legal obligation to take the coal mine and Kalejs cases since his specialities include criminal law and occupational health and safety. In criminal law, Walters, a former president of Liberty Victoria, the state's civil liberties council, has a record of defending terrorist suspects, many of whom have been the subject of hysterical media attacks prior to their trials.

In a column in the *Age*, Michael Colbran, QC, chairman of the Victorian Bar, cited rule 86 of its Practice Rules, which states that barristers must accept briefs in fields in which they practise, and asked: "What else would stand between the state and the accused individual, between the powerful corporation and the consumer?" Some of Victoria's most senior barristers have come to Walters's defence, describing Labor's attack as "shameful".

While Brumby and co. are cynically condemning the barrister for representing a coal company and an alleged Nazi, their allegations establish a precedent that could be used to scandalise lawyers defending unpopular clients, such as terrorist suspects, victims of media witchhunts, and government opponents, including socialists.

The timing of the campaign points to the involvement of Rupert Murdoch himself, who visited the country last week. Addressing business leaders, he railed against the "bloody Greens", declaring that they would "mess up" the country. An accompanying editorial in the *Australian* expressed alarm at the rise in support for the Greens in Victoria and nationally, insisting that their "anti-growth" policies posed "real risks" to the economy.

These warnings reflect concerns in the corporate establishment that the popular hostility to both traditional ruling parties—Labor and the opposition Liberal National Party—could produce yet another hung parliament, with the Greens holding the balance of power in Australia’s second most populous state, as they already do federally and in Tasmania.

The latest Newspoll results, released last week, indicate that the Greens could pick up a record share of the votes on November 27, doubling their percentage from the 2006 state election. Labor’s primary vote has fallen to 35 percent, trailing the Liberal-National Coalition on 40 percent, with the Greens on 19 percent. On those results, the Greens could win four inner-Melbourne seats, including the one being contested by Walters, and possibly several others.

Brumby’s government faces a precipitous decline in electoral support. Labor has been in office in Victoria for 12 years, and has established an unparalleled record of pro-market attacks on the living standards of the working class, including privatisation of basic utilities, slashing of corporate taxes and undermining of key public services, including transport, health and education. The Victorian Liberals, who have no real policy differences with Labor, are also widely discredited. The Greens, by opposing some of the government’s most blatant business deals, such as its public-private partnerships to operate transport services and a water desalination plant, have become a catchment for disaffected voters.

While posturing as a progressive force, the Greens are desperately seeking to assuage the concerns of the corporate elite. They have already signalled their willingness to join or support the next state government, whether Labor or Liberal, just as they have done in Tasmania. In Canberra, the Greens have signed a pact with the minority Gillard government, and function as enablers of its right-wing policies—including its continuing participation in the Afghanistan war. The essential political role of the Greens is to channel mounting public disaffection, particularly among young people, with the entire official political establishment back into the safe waters of parliament.

Nevertheless, as far as the Murdoch outlets are concerned, the breakdown in the two-party system is a threat to their corporate agenda, including at the state

level, where they have been demanding that governments implement major cuts to public health, education, housing and other essential services. The scene has been set for a gutter campaign of “dirt files” and slanders to distract attention from the impending destruction of jobs, working conditions and social services.

The bid to blacken Walters’s name is designed to create an atmosphere of political intimidation in which further inroads can be made into basic legal rights. It is therefore significant that one of the pseudo-left groups, Socialist Alternative, has lined up behind the witchhunt. Its web site, while describing Labor’s accusations as “hypocritical”, denounces Walters as “a wealthy upper middle-class shark that sells his skills to the rich and powerful”.

By falling in behind Labor and the Murdoch media, the Socialist Alternative’s response only legitimises the kinds of smears and attacks on democratic rights that will increasingly be brought forward as the economic and political crisis intensifies. The Greens, who are, above all else, seeking to cement their place as a force for “stability” within the political establishment, may be the Murdoch empire’s immediate focus, but its ultimate target is the working class, as disaffection and anger continue to grow.

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Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne 3051



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