

Australian media promotes right-wing “people’s revolt” against Labor government’s carbon tax

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The increasingly frenzied campaign being waged by the opposition Liberal-National parties against the Labor government’s proposed carbon tax is being used by sections of the media to engineer a further shift to the right in official Australian politics.

Opposition leader Tony Abbott has called for a “people’s revolt”, while right-wing “shock jock” radio talkback hosts are promoting upcoming demonstrations against the tax in Sydney, Canberra and other cities. Liberal and National parliamentarians have denounced the government in hysterical terms, with at least two opposition members comparing Prime Minister Julia Gillard with Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Abbott has accused Gillard of being a liar and of orchestrating a “conspiracy of the parliament against the people”. He has effectively sabotaged normal parliamentary operations this week, with repeated attempts to suspend “question time” in order to move censure motions against the government over the carbon tax.

Rural independent parliamentarian Tony Windsor has denounced the opposition campaign. One of two independents in alliance with the minority Labor government, Windsor belongs to the Labor-Greens multi-party climate change committee. He agreed to the public release of the carbon tax proposal, under the auspices of the committee, though he has not yet committed to supporting the measure.

Windsor said he has received abusive phone calls and a couple of death threats. “It’s not a constituent who’s got angry and snapped over a custody case or some other matter,” he said. “There’s a degree of orchestration in the emails and common language in the phone calls—the police have picked up on that. It’s more of a political exercise ... It’s aimed at destabilising the government, destroying the hung parliament.”

The MP warned of politicians being killed as a result of the right-wing campaign: “There’s been an elevation of incitement in the political messages out there. It’s pretty fragile. It only takes one unhinged person and it will change everything.”

Comparisons have been drawn with recent events in Tucson, Arizona, where Democratic congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot by a mentally disturbed man last January amid a ferocious right-wing campaign waged by the so-called Tea Party movement. These comparisons are entirely apt. There is no doubt that Abbott and his allied “shock jocks” are testing the waters for a potential Australian equivalent of the American Tea Party, a bogus populist “movement” created by the right-wing of the Republican Party and the Murdoch media.

Abbott’s approach has been generally welcomed by significant sections of the media, especially Murdoch’s empire—even as it sides with the government on the carbon tax. The Tea Party in the US was consciously built up and utilised to place further pressure on the Obama administration to draw up the vicious austerity budget cuts now being implemented by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, at both state and federal level. At the same time, the phony movement has provided a safety valve for the enormous anger and social distress generated by the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Obama administration’s program of making the working class pay for its multi-trillion dollar bail-outs of the financial institutions and banks.

Two editorials published alongside each other in the Murdoch flagship *Australian* yesterday pointed to a similar agenda behind the anti-carbon tax campaign. One titled “Who listens to the radio?” urged the Labor government to

be more sensitive to the agendas of talkback hosts, while the other, “Numbers are good, but let’s not get complacent,” demanded that Gillard demonstrate “more economic discipline.” The newspaper cautioned, “Australia may be an island, but it cannot blithely ignore the economic forces swirling around it,” and cited recent warnings issued by outgoing Reserve Bank board member Warwick McKibbin that the bursting of speculative property and commodity bubbles in China would hit the Australian economy far harder than the 2008 financial crash did.

The editorial complained that the Gillard government was not moving quickly enough with the necessary austerity agenda: “On paper, Labor is committed to the goal of a budget surplus by 2013. In practice, there is not much evidence of the long-term fiscal discipline needed to turn the commodity prices boom into ongoing surpluses.”

References to “long-term fiscal discipline” are code for the imposition of the kind of sweeping attacks on the working class rammed through in countries such as Greece and Ireland. In Australia and around the world, maintaining “international competitiveness” requires the destruction of public sector jobs, lowering of wages and conditions, and the elimination of decades-old welfare provisions, including to public health and education. From the moment she replaced Kevin Rudd, Gillard has signalled her determination to implement such an agenda. She has seized upon the catastrophic Queensland floods to announce an initial round of spending cuts ahead of the May budget, which is expected to feature a significant assault on welfare recipients. Nevertheless, the Labor government remains on notice and is under continual pressure from the Murdoch media, the major corporations and financial institutions to go further.

Abbott’s anti-tax, anti-debt, anti-public spending campaign is being used as a spur against the government. The Liberal leader’s cynical and populist appeals to widespread and legitimate concerns that the carbon tax will trigger substantially higher living costs for ordinary people, serve as a means of diverting attention from the unanimous agreement within the entire political establishment—Labor, Liberal-Nationals and Greens—on the need for economic restructuring measures that permanently lower the living standards of the working class.

The Gillard government has not been able to make any appeal to popular concerns over the climate change crisis in order to answer Abbott’s attacks. That is because the carbon tax has nothing to do with tackling the climate change crisis. Labor’s “free market” mechanism will not result in any

significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. On the contrary, the carbon tax is one of the centrepieces of Gillard’s pro-business “reform” agenda. She embraced the measure—repudiating an explicit pre-election promise not to introduce such an impost—after BHP Billiton CEO Marius Kloppers publicly intervened last September, just one month after the federal election. Kloppers demanded immediate action to provide business with long term certainty on the cost of carbon, unlock stalled investments in Australia’s electricity sector, and facilitate the development of new and profitable renewable energy technologies in Australia.

Gillard’s response to Abbott has focussed on urging business and finance lobby groups to take a more active public stand in defending the carbon tax. She has warned that the opposition’s alternative plan, involving the provision of massive subsidies to convert Australia’s privately-owned coal-fired electricity generators to natural gas, would be far costlier to business than a carbon tax. The prime minister has also sought to capitalise on the deep divisions within the Liberal Party on climate change policy.

Former Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull, who was ousted in 2009 after a right-wing caucus revolt over his agreement with Kevin Rudd’s emissions trading scheme, continues to speak out against Abbott’s policies. He told BBC News this week that he still harbours ambitions to be prime minister. Asked if he remained out of step with his party on climate change policy, he replied: “I was out of step with just under half of my own party room. By a one vote margin, just remember that.”



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