

Australian Greens assume balance of power in the Senate

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The Australian Greens' leadership this week marked the formal installation of four new senators—giving the party the balance of the power in the upper house of parliament—by again stressing its loyalty to the Labor government and commitment to “parliamentary stability.” The ceremony underscored the minor party's function as a key prop for the political establishment, and as an eager facilitator of the right-wing, pro-business agenda advanced by Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Four Greens members were among the 12 new senators—elected at last August's federal poll, but only now commencing their duties—sworn in on Monday. The five previously installed Greens' senators have been joined by Penny Wright (from South Australia), Lee Rhiannon (New South Wales), Larissa Waters (Queensland) and Richard di Natale (Victoria). The Labor Party has only 31 of the 76 seats in the Senate, so in order to pass legislation the government must secure the support either of the Greens' nine senators or the opposition Liberal-National coalition, which has 34 seats.

The Greens have buttressed the minority Gillard government ever since last year's election delivered the first hung federal parliament in seven decades, amid unprecedented hostility toward the major parties. Party leader Bob Brown quickly signed an agreement with the Labor Party, pledging to vote for Gillard's budgets, irrespective of any spending cuts or other regressive measures included, and block parliamentary no-confidence motions. In return, Brown and other Greens' members, including the party's sole lower house representative Adam Bandt, secured regular confidential meetings with Gillard, Treasurer Wayne Swan, and other senior Labor cabinet members.

The de facto coalition deal exposed the Greens' posturing as some form of “progressive” alternative to the major parties. The environmentally-based party is thoroughly

committed to the profit system and to Australian imperialism. While still attempting to appeal to young people and others opposed to the right-wing policies of the Labor Party, the Greens' function is to provide certain political camouflage for Gillard's regressive agenda. On every issue, from the Afghanistan war to refugees and asylum seekers, its nominal policies are marked by rank hypocrisy and opportunism.

Brown greeted the Greens' control of the balance of power in the Senate with further pledges of “responsibility”. He told the National Press Club on June 29: “We will continue to serve Australia on our current responsible course. We will contribute sensible ideas to solve policy and political problems and we will continue to work to provide stability for the duly constituted Gillard government. The Greens will be a secure rock of stability in the Senate... To that end, we will not be supporting any Coalition move in the Senate, whether by legislation or amendments, that threaten instability. The Coalition may move such a motion, but we will not be supporting it.”

The Greens' pledge to serve as a “rock of stability” comes as the government comes under mounting pressure from the ruling elite to introduce the kind of vicious austerity measures seen in Europe and the US. The last budget, containing \$22 billion of cuts and savings, was regarded as grossly inadequate. Business groups and the media, in the name of maintaining the international competitiveness of Australian capitalism, are demanding unprecedented spending cuts, targeting key welfare programs, social infrastructure, and public sector jobs and wages.

Brown has clearly signalled his advance support for such measures.

According to the Associated Press, the Greens' leader told reporters on July 1 that “he would use his experience of power-sharing state governments in Tasmania to guide the

party” as it assumed control of the senate balance of power. Brown explained: “I led the Greens here in Hobart in the Tasmanian parliament from ’89 to ’92, we got good outcomes, including giving Tasmania greater financial wherewithal. We also had other gains and I’m looking forward to this very big responsibility in the federal parliament.”

The experience to which Brown referred is the Labor-Greens Accord government in Tasmania, which between 1989 and 1992 implemented savage attacks on working people in order to deliver business what the Greens’ leader now describes as “greater financial wherewithal.” The 1990 state budget was described by the Hobart *Mercury* at the time as “the worst since the 1930s Depression.” About 8 percent of the public sector workforce was sacked, and a series of regressive taxes were imposed, along with increased TAFE fees, higher public transport charges, and new charges for school bus services in rural areas. The measures sparked widespread protests and strikes, but Brown and his colleagues refused to back down.

This experience is now to guide the Greens MPs in Canberra.

Brown emphasised the message cabled to ruling circles by pointing to recent developments in Tasmania, where a Labor-Greens coalition government is in office and last month unveiled an austerity budget. Overall public spending has been gutted by 10 percent in real terms over the next four years. Twenty schools in the state were slated for closure—a measure enforced by Nick McKim, the Tasmanian Greens leader and education minister. McKim declared that the closure of public schools in rural and working class areas provided an opportunity for the Greens “to show that we’re prepared to roll up our sleeves and make decisions that aren’t necessarily going to be popular.”

Following widespread protest action by parents, teachers, and other working people in Tasmania, the government announced earlier this week that it was postponing the school closures.

Prior to this, however, Brown had weighed in to defend McKim and the education cuts. Calling for adequate “consultation” with affected communities—as a means of defusing opposition to the school closures—on July 1 the Greens’ federal leader denied an earlier media report that he intended to “counsel” McKim over the matter. Brown told ABC Radio: “This is a Labor inherited policy. It’s come out of mismanagement of the budget by the [former Labor]

Lennon and Bacon governments, and it’s one that the Greens have I think quite courageously taken on. I would remind people here that it’s a very difficult ... there is a budgetary limit, it’s a very tough decision.”

The Greens’ assumption of the balance of the power will in no way serve as an obstacle to the Gillard government’s right-wing agenda—as has been previously suggested by the trade unions, online lobby group GetUp!, and various pseudo-left protest organisations. On the contrary, as has been the case in Germany, Ireland and other countries, the rising parliamentary power of the Greens in Australia will only facilitate the assault on workers’ living standards and conditions.

The situation underscores the extraordinary gulf between the political establishment, of which the Greens are a critical part, and the vast majority of the population. The urgent task is for the working class to develop its own independent political movement, through the development of a revolutionary party based on a socialist and internationalist program. The Socialist Equality Party is convening weekend conferences in Melbourne and Sydney at the end of August on “The Failure of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism Today” to discuss these political tasks posed by the new situation internationally and in Australia. We urge readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, members and supporters of the International Students for Social Equality, and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party to register here.



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