

# Australian Greens embroiled in Tasmanian school closures debacle

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Events in the Australian state of Tasmania over the past few weeks have shone a revealing spotlight on the role of the Greens in spearheading austerity measures. In what the Murdoch-owned Hobart *Mercury* described as a “stunning backdown”, the Labor-Green state government was forced by public outrage to postpone plans to shut down 20 schools by the end of the year.

Closely supported by national Greens leader Bob Brown, the party’s state leader Nick McKim had been assigned the task—as education minister—of implementing the closures, a substantial attack on the public education system in a state with just over half a million people.

Together with equally sharp cuts to public health, the closures were pivotal to the state budget handed down by Premier Lara Giddings in June. The budget set a new national benchmark in decimating public services and jobs—cutting spending by 10 percent over the next four years and eliminating 1,700 full-time jobs.

McKim’s selection to spearhead the offensive was no accident. Giddings—who hails from Labor’s nominal “Left” faction, as does Prime Minister Julia Gillard—was well aware that the school closures would ignite outraged opposition. Giddings’ predecessor as premier, David Bartlett, had foreshadowed closures of that magnitude at least two years earlier.

McKim and the Greens were brought into the Labor government after the March 2010 state election, not just to provide a parliamentary majority but to trade on their claim to be a party of “compassion, common sense and a fair go” in order to impose such cuts.

In the 2010 state election campaign, the Greens had declared that “education will be a major funding and

policy priority for any responsible government” and pledged to “strongly advocate a high quality, state funded, inclusive public education system.”

Nevertheless, as soon as the June budget was unveiled, McKim made it clear that he regarded the school closures as a test of the Greens’ capacity to deliver painful cuts to social spending. “The Greens have to show that we’re prepared to roll up our sleeves and make decisions that aren’t necessarily going to be popular,” he declared.

Likewise, Senator Brown welcomed the opportunity for the Greens to demonstrate to the financial and political establishment their preparedness to impose “economically responsible” measures nationally. At the federal level, the Greens had already signed off on the Gillard government’s May budget, which inflicted spending cuts of \$22 billion.

Brown blamed Tasmania’s financial problems on “mismanagement” by previous state Labor governments and applauded efforts of the Tasmanian Greens to slash spending. “Nick McKim’s stepped into this thankless position of trying to sort that out. Well good on him.”

For nearly three weeks, McKim and the rest of the government sought to stare down the protests of teachers, parents, students and entire rural and working class communities across the state. As well as forcing students to travel up to one hour each way to get to school, the closures meant devastation for numerous small towns and several suburbs of Hobart, the state capital.

The threatened loss of vital educational and community facilities brought home the wider implications of the government’s assault on basic services and jobs. Despite short notice, hundreds of people attended “Save Our

School” public meetings, and more were planned, leading to a proposed parliament house demonstration on July 7.

McKim was given a personal police bodyguard as he began to tour the schools slated for closure, ostensibly to “consult” with parents and teachers. He arrived at schools with barely a day’s notice, but was still greeted with loud protests.

Insisting that closures were essential, McKim told a parliamentary committee that the state’s government school population had declined by more than 6,000—about 10 percent—since 1995. In part, the falling numbers are due to parents transferring their children to private schools from a public education system that has been rundown by successive state and federal governments.

Such was the popular hostility to the closures that various Labor politicians, as well as the Liberal Party opposition and some trade union officials, began to join the protests, opportunistically claiming to oppose the closures. Giddings and McKim were finally forced to make a temporary backdown on July 4, announcing that the closure process would be postponed by 12 months.

Far from abandoning the plan, McKim announced that a “reference group” would examine the “viability” of all Tasmanian schools, with a view to establishing “broader community consent” for shutting down schools. While apologising for the “harm” and “distress” he had caused, he declared: “It would be cowardly in the extreme, in my view, for the government to walk away from the viability challenges facing our government education system.”

McKim also ordered his department to find other ways to cut the education budget, starting with the axing of two critical programs—one for functional numeracy and literacy skills and the other for learning services. This was on top of other measures in the June budget, including scrapping payments to schools to reduce class sizes, and a 14 percent reduction in so-called discretionary costs, which is already leading to the removal of teachers’ aides and cuts to electricity, cleaning and computer purchases.

For now, McKim and Giddings have beaten a tactical retreat, fearing that the schools revolt could spread to other areas. Other confrontations are brewing over sackings throughout the public sector. On June 22, despite election promises of no forced redundancies, all 15 Labor

and Green lower house MPs voted for legislation allowing public sector dismissals. On July 9, it was revealed that the budget cuts threaten about 300 jobs at the Royal Hobart Hospital.

The government is under pressure from the financial markets to proceed. Commenting in the *Mercury* on July 8, Natasha Cica, an academic and business communications consultant, noted that “the optics [of the school backdown] were disastrous for the Labor-Green Government,” but insisted that “some hard bullets will still need to be bitten on the fiscal front in Tasmania’s public sector.”

The newspaper published an editorial on the same day pointing to the mounting political difficulties confronting the increasingly discredited Greens, and the unstable character of the Labor-Green coalition, but applauding the Greens’ determination to continue with the unpopular austerity agenda. “For all the day-to-day drama of minority government, there is no real sign of them quitting yet,” it declared.

The Tasmanian experience already provides a graphic warning of the role that the Greens will attempt to play nationally, as an integral part of the ruling elite, amid the deepening global financial crisis. The Tasmanian budget has set a new yardstick for historic cuts to public spending, above all by Gillard’s federal Labor minority government, which is also propped up directly by the Greens.

*The author recommends:*

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