

Gay marriage “victory” diversion at Australian Labor Party conference

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An elementary question of democratic rights—the removal of discriminatory prohibitions against the legal recognition of same-sex marriages—became a significant political diversion at last weekend’s Australian Labor Party (ALP) national conference. Mainstream media reports presented the stage-managed “debate” on marriage equality as the most important issue discussed at the gathering.

Under the banner headline, “I do: Labor to gay marriage,” last Sunday’s Sydney *Sun-Herald* reported: “A bill to legalise gay marriage will be rushed into Parliament early next year after Labor voted overwhelmingly yesterday to adopt marriage equality as its official policy—but granted a conscience vote to its MPs to avoid a damaging split.”

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, “Labor has endorsed gay marriage in a historic policy change that puts Julia Gillard at odds with her own party.” Summing up the conference on ABC television’s “7.30” current affairs program last Monday, political editor Chris Uhlmann asserted, “[T]here were genuine policy fights. The headline was the showdown over same-sex marriage.”

Such commentary was in keeping with the elevation of the issue to centre stage since Labor took office in 2007. “Gay marriage” has become something of a cause celebre in media and middle-class “left” circles, as the global economic crisis has worsened and austerity measures are devastating the lives of working people.

At the ALP conference, the issue served as a convenient diversion from the Gillard government’s anti-working class policies as well as continuing tensions within the leadership. The conference’s endorsement of the government’s policy of eliminating the budget deficit—that is, slashing jobs and social spending—was completely overshadowed. There was no discussion on the last month’s decision to station US troops in northern Australia putting the country on the frontline of

Washington’s developing confrontation with China.

The marriage equality debate itself was a sham. While a majority of the delegates voted to amend the ALP’s platform to recognise same-sex marriages, that vote had already been nullified by the previous resolution, moved by Prime Minister Gillard, to allow Labor MPs a “conscience vote” on the legislation. Gillard’s resolution, adopted comfortably by 208 votes to 184, effectively means that any marriage equality bill will be defeated in parliament, with a layer of Labor parliamentarians voting alongside opposition Liberal-National Party MPs to reject it.

Ironically, while Gillard’s motion gave Labor MPs a choice to defy the formal vote to amend the party platform, no such “conscience vote” was permitted for conference delegates. “Right” and “Left” faction heavyweights ensured that sufficient votes were marshalled, under strict factional discipline, to avoid a humiliating defeat for the Labor leader.

Gillard had made a commitment to publicly oppose marriage equality, as part of her alliance with the dominant National Right faction, which includes Roman Catholic and other elements prejudiced against homosexuals. Its speakers insisted—contrary to opinion polls—that it would be electoral suicide to challenge the legal definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

For all the differences professed on the conference floor, both factions came together to prop up Gillard. That exercise underscored her reliance on the same backroom bosses who undemocratically ousted Kevin Rudd and installed her as prime minister in June 2010, behind the backs of the population. With Labor’s opinion poll ratings languishing at historic lows of around 30 percent, the government faces electoral oblivion and Gillard’s position remains precarious.

Despite the purported “passion” of the conference

debate, all the participants knew that the numbers for Gillard's "conscience" manoeuvre had been sewn up in advance. The same-sex marriage session became a showcase, seeking to prove that real discussion of political differences is possible inside the ALP, despite the fact that its economic and military program is being fundamentally determined by the interests of Washington and the financial and corporate elite.

Those speakers advocating marriage equality primarily did so for electoral reasons—they represented inner-city constituencies where the issue was regarded as being of singular importance. Numbers of them warned that Labor would lose all credibility as a party that purported to defend human rights if it failed to change its anti-gay marriage platform. While they spoke ardently of championing equal rights, their speeches contained other revealing themes.

Canberra MP Andrew Barr, the "Rainbow Labor" representative who moved the marriage equality resolution was at pains to say that Rainbow Labor members had "the same interest in a strong economy" as other delegates. In other words, they were equally committed to the pro-market offensive being carried out by the government against working people. The motion was seconded by Finance Minister Penny Wong, who is playing a central role in the assault on public sector workers.

To applause from the public gallery, "Left" leader and former cabinet minister John Faulkner declared: "It's not for governments to grant human rights but to recognise and protect them." However, he argued that a conscience vote on human rights "is not conscionable," especially because a conscience vote had never been allowed on sending troops to war, even conscription. Although he did not elaborate, this remark echoed Gillard's opening address to the conference, in which she invoked the heritage of Labor Prime Minister John Curtin, who during World War II introduced conscription to support the last war fought by the United States for control over the Pacific.

Gillard's victory on the conscience vote was so assured in advance that within minutes of the count being tallied, journalists were handed a media release from the lobby group, Australian Marriage Equality. It declared a "day of celebration" because "momentum for change is unstoppable" despite its likely defeat in parliament. Echoing Barr's statement in the debate, the document stated that marriage equality was "not about left versus right."

Outside the conference, a rally of about 5,000 predominantly young people was told that it was an "historic day," because the ALP had amended its platform. Among the organisers of the rally were the Greens and several pseudo-socialist groups that have increasingly made the gay marriage issue the axis of their political activity.

Marriage equality is a basic democratic right. There should be no legal discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexual preference. Nevertheless, the prominence given to this question reflects the preoccupation of a layer of the privileged middle class with life-style issues, even as ordinary people face an onslaught on their basic rights and conditions. This milieu is well represented inside the ALP.

For the Greens and ex-radicals, their focus is part of their embrace of identity politics—feminism, gay rights, black nationalism, Islamic minorities, etc.—which elevates questions of sexuality, gender, skin colour, ethnicity, religion and nationality above the fundamental and ever-widening class divide in capitalist society between the ruling wealthy elite and ordinary working people.

In opposition to these tendencies, genuine socialists fight to *unite* all sections of the working class, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender, against the ruling elite and its agencies, which continually attempt to pit sections of workers against one another. Fundamental democratic rights can be won and defended only as part of the revolutionary struggle against the capitalist profit system, which is the root source of all forms of economic and social oppression.

As the events at the ALP conference illustrate, the gay marriage campaign has been a vehicle through which the ex-left groups, which are deeply hostile to any politically independent movement of the working class, have sought to channel mounting political and social discontent back into the arms of the Labor Party. Hence, the fraudulent claims of "victory" when in reality the conference ensured that the government prevailed on this, as on every other issue.



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