

Behind the resignation of Australian Greens' leader Bob Brown

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Australian Greens leader Bob Brown announced his retirement from the Senate and his resignation as party leader on April 13, making way for long-time protégé Christine Milne. His sudden announcement triggered an outpouring of praise from virtually every section of the media and political establishment.

Accolades for Brown, plastered across Murdoch and Fairfax newspapers, declared him a “Green colossus” and “a visionary” but were tempered by a large degree of nervousness over the implications of his sudden departure. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* banner headline warned “End of an era: Brown bows out, leaving federal politics in flux.” Brown, observed the *Australian's* Dennis Shanahan, had “outlasted three Liberal and four Labor leaders” and his exit threatened to leave a “gaping hole.”

In resigning as leader—a position he has held since his election to the federal senate in 1996—Brown, 67, cited personal reasons. He told a packed media conference he would be spending more time with his partner on their rural property, helping with “the washing-up.” Yet just eight weeks earlier, the Greens' leader had told reporters he would contest federal senate elections “until at least 2024.” What accounted for the sudden volte-face?

Despite his assiduously crafted public image as a “figure of integrity” standing above the fray, Brown is a consummate political operator, who took the Greens to prominence as one of Australia's three main bourgeois parties. There is nothing even remotely accidental about his resignation, coming just three weeks before the federal budget and as Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Labor government—resting on the support of the Greens—is engulfed in its deepest crisis since Gillard failed to win a majority in the federal election of September 2010.

Labor's reliance on Brown was underscored by the response of Gillard, who released a statement April 13 thanking him for his “remarkable contribution” to Australian politics. That same afternoon she spoke with Milne, who pledged ongoing support for the Greens' deal with Labor.

The Greens—and Brown in particular—have served as the key linchpin for Gillard's minority government. As the deepening global recession, along with escalating geo-strategic tensions within the region, motivated by the Obama administration's new “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific, have plunged the entire political establishment into turmoil, the Greens have assumed direct responsibility for the ruling

elite's agenda of militarism, austerity and wholesale attacks on democratic rights.

At the August 2010 federal election, held less than two months after the inner-party coup that ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister, the Greens registered their largest ever electoral gains, winning 12 percent of the primary vote and their first lower house seat. When public anger over Rudd's anti-democratic removal saw Labor savaged on polling day, Gillard relied on the Greens and rural independents to form the first minority government since World War II.

As Brown admitted during a recent appearance on ABC television's “Q&A” program, Gillard approached him in the immediate aftermath of the election saying she needed his support “to gain momentum.” The outcome was a five-page agreement that formed the cornerstone of her minority rule. The Greens were brought to the very centre of the political establishment with weekly meetings between the two leaders and consultation on “fiscal strategy and budget preparation.” Agreement with the rural independents followed.

The Greens' deal with Labor was a turning point. Brown effectively gave his seal of approval for the most anti-democratic conspiracy in Canberra since the 1975 coup against Whitlam. The forces who deposed Rudd—including Labor operatives working closely with Washington, sections of the Murdoch press, and mining giants such as Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton that led a campaign to destabilise the Rudd government—sought to shift government policy even further to the right. Whereas Rudd had worked to ameliorate tensions between the US and China and was associated domestically with policies of economic stimulus, Gillard pledged to unconditionally align Canberra with Washington's drive to confront China, and to bring the budget back into surplus via deep cuts to social spending. Brown stepped forward as her chief enabler.

Brown has backed Gillard's agenda to the hilt. Last November, when Obama visited Australia to unveil a military agreement with the Gillard government aimed against China, the Greens' leader was fulsome in his praise for the US president. In October 2003, Brown had heckled George W. Bush over Australia's participation in the Iraq war shouting “we are not your sheriff.” But he was upstanding for Obama's far more bellicose speech to parliament, telling reporters “circumstances have changed... [w]e've got a president now who knows a lot more about equality and respect than his predecessor.” Brown has publicly defended the new Gillard-Obama agreement that will transform Australia into a frontline garrison for the US as it

prepares for war in Asia.

The Greens are also complicit in the Gillard government's escalating assault on democratic rights, including Labor's backing for the US government's conspiracy against Julian Assange. On February 28, the Extradition and Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Amendment Act 2012 was rubberstamped in the Senate, with the votes of Bob Brown and his fellow Green senators. The legislative amendments cut off any attempt by Assange to avoid extradition to the US by returning to Australia. The Greens' support for repressive electoral laws that prevent minor parties from contesting elections are of a piece with the attacks on Assange. Both are aimed at buttressing the moribund parliamentary set-up and silencing dissent.

Brown has also backed the Gillard government's draconian Fair Work Australia (FWA) laws used to suppress strike action by nurses, Qantas employees, teachers, construction and auto parts workers. The Greens have voted to support the central thrust of Labor's FWA laws in the senate, including provisions for massive fines and jail terms against "unprotected" industrial action. The Greens' lower house MP Adam Bandt has merely called for "green bargaining" to be included in future enterprise bargaining negotiations.

Under the minority government, the Greens' role as defender of the two-party system has been well and truly on display. In February, with Labor's opinion polls heading below 29 percent, and press speculation mounting about a fresh leadership challenge, Brown again stepped in to defend Gillard. "People are incredibly impressed with her ability to deal with what is chucked at her, and so am I," Brown told reporters. He attacked her critics in the media as sexist, seeking to bolster her standing among more affluent sections of the middle class while simultaneously concealing the class nature of the mounting opposition to the Labor government. The hostility felt by working people toward Gillard has nothing to do with sexism, but is driven by her government's deepening assault on jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

The Greens' defence of Labor has come at a political cost, with the party increasingly discredited among voters. According to the most recent Newspoll survey, Labor's approval rating has plunged to historic lows, 27 percent, with the Greens' support also slipping. In each state election held since 2010, Labor has faced a wipe-out, while the Greens vote has either plateaued or dropped. In the most recent Queensland poll the Greens failed to win any of the massive anti-Labor vote that reduced the ALP to a rump of just seven MPs. Instead, their vote also fell.

Brown, like a rat deserting the sinking ship, has exited federal politics on the eve of the most savage budget in decades, leaving his colleagues to help enforce the program of austerity being dictated by global financial markets.

The fear in ruling circles is that the Greens may share the fate of the Australian Democrats. Founded as a minor party in the 1970s, the Australian Democrats established themselves over the subsequent two decades as the party of the "middle ground", acting as a mild lightning rod for broader disaffection with the two-party system. They spectacularly imploded in the late 1990s, following their support for

the Howard government's regressive Goods and Services Tax and the high-profile defection of the party's leader Cheryl Kernot to join Labor. Significantly, in her first public statements as leader, Milne sought to distance the Greens from this week's federal budget, cautioning Gillard against implementing deep cuts to spending.

Brown's replacement as Senator is 44-year-old Peter Whish-Wilson. An economics graduate from Duntroon military academy and a former Deutsche Bank equity trader and Merrill Lynch vice-president in New York and Sydney, Whish-Wilson typifies the upper middle class constituency of the Greens. At the University of Tasmania his lectures in international and environmental finance offer an "in depth" analysis of "risk hedge mechanisms", including "currency swaps and options, forward market cover and currency futures." A viticulturalist since 2003, he was catapulted into public life after his vineyards were threatened by Gunn's planned pulp mill in the Tamar Valley. Introducing Whish-Wilson as Brown's replacement last Friday, Milne ludicrously declared his appointment showed the Greens were reaching out to build "a stronger relationship with rural and regional Australia." More to the point, Whish-Wilson emphasised his experience with "how corporations work."

Far from ushering in "renewal", Brown's exit from the Greens sets the stage for enormous instability. His public dominance of the party for three decades papered over its many internal divisions. While Milne shares Brown's policy orientation, marketing the Greens as responsible economic managers, who can be relied on to push through harsh spending cuts and deliver balanced budgets (as they did in Tasmania during the 1990s), there are factions within their leadership (including Lee Rhiannon and Sarah Hanson-Young) who advocate greater "social activism" over refugee and other "social justice" issues. These layers are concerned to project a left flank and thereby contain broader social opposition within the framework of bourgeois parliamentary politics. Adam Bandt, newly installed as Milne's deputy, is a former industrial lawyer with Slater and Gordon. He enjoys close relations with sections of the trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left organisations.

Brown's swift exit from federal politics reflects a broader crisis of bourgeois rule. A yawning chasm has opened between the working class and the entire political establishment that is set to widen as the implications of Labor's military pact with Obama, and its anti-working class budget cuts become clear, setting the stage for immense social and political upheavals.



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