

Australian Greens manoeuvre for coalition government in Victoria

Patrick O'Connor, SEP candidate for Melbourne
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In the Melbourne by-election campaign, the Greens have capitalised on the bitter hostility among workers and young people toward the Labor Party. According to some forecasts, the Greens will win the July 21 poll, securing their first lower house seat in the Victorian state parliament.

The Greens' campaign has underscored their role as crucial props for the existing political setup. Their aim is to secure the seat of Melbourne in order to strike a coalition government deal with either the Labor or Liberal parties in the event of a hung parliament.

The overlapping federal seat of Melbourne was won by the Greens' Adam Bandt in the 2010 national election. After the first federal hung parliament in 70 years was announced, Bandt and his colleagues in the Senate rushed to declare their commitment to "parliamentary stability." He and then Greens' leader Bob Brown signed an agreement supporting a minority Labor government led by Julia Gillard, which included an unconditional pledge to vote for the government's budget every year.

As a result, the Greens bear direct political responsibility for all the Gillard government's reactionary policies. These include the continued war in Afghanistan, the provocative US military agreement directed against China, and antidemocratic "terror" laws, as well as pro-business economic restructuring measures and austerity spending cuts—such as 12,000 public service job cuts and ruthless programs penalising single mothers and other welfare recipients.

Despite this record, the Greens have attempted to promote Bandt's "achievements" in parliament, especially his claim to be "bringing dental back into Medicare." In reality the Greens have done no such thing. The last federal budget involved an additional \$515 million in dental funding over four years, a drop in the bucket compared to what is required. Dental is not part of the Medicare public health

insurance scheme and the Labor government has no plans to make it so. A parliamentary research paper issued last May noted: "It remains unclear if the capacity building measures announced will reduce long public dental waiting lists, estimated at 400,000 nationwide, or correct the rural dental workforce shortage ... the approach taken in this budget still leaves many without access to affordable dental care".

At the state level, in Tasmania the Greens have entered the cabinet as part of the Labor-Greens coalition installed in 2010. They have helped impose some of the most severe spending cuts of any state government, with Greens' state leader and education minister Nick McKim taking personal responsibility for the government's attempt to shut down 20 public schools.

The Greens are now seeking to emulate this record in the Victorian state parliament. Liberal Premier Ted Baillieu has only a one-seat majority in the lower house. A hung parliament could emerge before the scheduled 2014 state election if one or more Liberal Party backbenchers were forced to resign. The Greens' candidate for Melbourne, Cathy Oke, and state leader Greg Barber have repeatedly refused to rule out supporting a minority Liberal government or joining it in a ruling coalition. They are clearly concerned to keep their hands free to cut a deal with either of the major parties if the opportunity arises.

During the 2010 state election campaign, the *Age* reported that the Greens had already settled on a price for a coalition with Labor or Liberal—the transport ministry. The Greens' candidate for Melbourne two years ago, Brian Walters, emphasised: "The Greens have supported a Liberal government before. We did that from 1996 to 1998 in Tasmania. All options will be open. We won't shut any option off."

In the end, the Liberal Party directed its ballot paper preferences to the Labor Party in the 2010 state election, and

the Greens won none of the four inner-city seats they had targeted. Now the Greens see a new chance to increase their influence in parliament.

The Greens' manoeuvres with the major parties underscore the reality that they have no significant policy differences with either Labor or Liberal. The Greens are an increasingly important component of the political establishment in Australia, posturing as a "progressive" alternative to Labor only in order to function as a political safety valve, channelling mounting opposition to the right-wing agenda of the major parties back into the existing parliamentary framework.

In several countries around the world, Greens parties have been central in ramming through austerity spending cuts and other anti-working class measures, as demanded by big business and the financial markets. In Ireland, between 2007 and 2011 the Greens served in a coalition government that bailed out the banks while imposing savage wage and benefit cuts, tax hikes and large-scale public sector layoffs. In Germany, the Greens joined the Social Democrats in office between 1998 and 2005, and played the critical role in rehabilitating German militarism by agitating for the 1999 NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia. Since then, the German Greens have joined various state coalition governments, including ones led by openly right-wing parties committed to drastic cuts in public expenditure.

Like their international counterparts, the Australian Greens constitute a capitalist party that advances the interests of privileged sections of the middle class, while also representing sections of big business, especially renewable energy conglomerates and other "green" enterprises. The Greens' core membership base and targeted constituency is a tertiary educated, high income layer that is hostile to the working class and to any proposal to reorganise society in the interests of the working people. Those within this social milieu are preoccupied instead with various strands of identity politics based around gender, race and sexuality, and above all with improving their own lifestyles.

The Greens' campaign in the Melbourne by-election has reflected these priorities. Oke, the Greens' candidate, has insisted that the election will be decided by "local issues" and that federal politics will not be a factor—a claim that flies in the face of internal Labor Party polling that found hostility toward the Gillard government was driving a shift to the Greens in Melbourne. (See: "Melbourne election triggers federal Labor government infighting")

Oke, a Melbourne City councillor since 2008, has as her main slogan, "Keep Melbourne Liveable," a message plastered over large billboards in the electorate. The slogan is oblivious to the reality that for wide layers of working people, students, and welfare recipients the city is *not* "liveable." Escalating housing costs and other living expenses are compelling many residents to move to cheaper outer suburbs, a process that is accelerating the gentrification of much of the electorate. Nevertheless, the Greens' message is clearly intended to resonate with wealthier property owners satisfied with their lot.

At the same time, the Greens appeal to the disenchantment and opposition toward the major parties, especially among students and young people, and also widespread concern over climate change and the environment. The pitch is bogus on every level. On climate change, the Greens' defence of the capitalist market and the nation-state system has led them to embrace "free market" carbon taxes and emissions trading schemes that do nothing to lower carbon emissions by even a nominal amount, let alone to the extent that climate scientists have advised is necessary to avoid devastating global warming.

A balance sheet must be drawn on the record of the Greens in Australia and internationally. Workers and young people cannot advance their interests through this bourgeois parliamentary formation. As the deepest global economic crisis since the 1930s continues to intensify, only an internationalist and socialist program can halt the promotion of war and militarism, attacks on democratic rights and brutal pro-business austerity measures. The central purpose of my campaign in the Melbourne by-election is to help build the only party fighting for this revolutionary perspective, the Socialist Equality Party.

See the SEP web site for further information on our election campaign.

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