

New Australian Greens platform marks further rightward shift

Mike Head**17 January 2013**

As the worsening global economic crisis impacts on Australia, the Greens have adopted a platform that evermore openly embraces austerity, pro-business economic restructuring and militarism. The document, accepted at a party conference last November, was released during the final week of December.

Founded in 1992, the Australian Greens are a bourgeois party, committed to maintaining the profit system, while, at the same time, posturing as a “progressive” alternative to the increasingly right-wing policies of the two major parties—Labor and Liberal-National. By promoting illusions that capitalism can be reformed to produce peaceful and socially just outcomes, the Greens function to divert political disaffection back into official parliamentary channels.

The Greens have held the balance of power in the federal parliament since the 2010 federal election produced the first hung parliament since World War II—with no party able to command a majority. They signed a de facto coalition agreement with Labor, enabling Prime Minister Julia Gillard to form a minority government, and thus bear full responsibility for Labor’s pro-market domestic agenda, including the slashing of welfare and social services, and its unconditional support for the Obama administration’s aggressive militarism.

With a federal election due this year, amid widespread anger and hostility among millions of ordinary people toward the entire political establishment, the Greens are trying to position themselves as king-makers of the next government. Their latest policy platform has been designed to tout the party as a “responsible” coalition partner, giving their federal parliamentary representatives ample flexibility to enter either a Labor or Liberal-led government.

Significantly, the document drops any policies that could be interpreted as opposing Australia’s military alliance with the US. The Greens had previously proposed to “end the ANZUS treaty”—the military arrangement between the US, Australia and New Zealand—“unless Australia’s membership can be revised in a manner which is consistent with Australia’s international and human rights obligations.” This token clause proved no barrier to the party uncritically embracing the Obama administration’s criminal interventions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya and Syria, or its preparations for military

aggression against China.

Now, the Greens call for “a renegotiated defence relationship with our allies that promotes Australia’s independent role in our region.” This formulation, while designed to be vague, will be clearly understood by both Washington and Canberra as signifying that, in government, the Greens will erect no barriers to the prosecution of Australian imperialism’s predatory interests throughout the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, the platform diplomatically calls for an end to “foreign troop deployments” in Australia—a reference to the deal between Gillard and Obama in November 2011 allowing the stationing of 2,500 US marines at bases in the north and west of the country, as part of the US president’s “pivot” to Asia. Here, the platform reflects the concerns that have been expressed within significant sections of the corporate and military elite that the Gillard government’s alignment with the US against China could severely damage their relations with China, Australia’s largest export market.

The document, however, makes an unequivocal commitment to boosting the Australian military. Whereas the Greens previously called for a reduction in Australia’s “military expenditure,” the rewritten platform insists on the need for “an ADF [Australian Defence Force] adequate to Australia’s defence and peacekeeping needs.”

Over the past two decades, Greens leaders have backed every Australian military operation in the Asia Pacific region, most notably the Howard government’s deployment of troops to East Timor, in order to assert Australian imperialism’s interests in the territory’s offshore oil and gas reserves. Now, utilising the same bogus “humanitarian” cloak as that employed by NATO and the major imperialist powers to justify their neo-colonial wars in the Balkans, the Middle East and now Africa, the platform calls for more assertive Australian military interventions. “Australia must act decisively within UN supported operations,” it declares, “to prevent and oppose acts of genocide and violations of international human rights law.”

Domestically, the platform lines up with the implementation of austerity measures against the working class and youth, like those imposed by governments of all stripes across Europe, the UK and the US. Previous commitments to various social reforms—none of which the Greens ever had any intention of

delivering—have been scrapped. “Increase age pensions” has been replaced by “adequate age pensions.” “Abolish” university fees and “forgive” student debts has become “phase out” fees and “reform” the debt repayment regime. Specific proposals to legislatively protect the right to strike, scrap secret ballots for industrial action and increase casual pay loadings to 30 percent have totally disappeared.

In a bid for business backing, the document no longer proposes raising the company tax rate from 30 to 33 percent, and drops support for death duties, estate taxes and ending capital gains tax concessions.

Likewise, it shifts from lifting the marginal income tax rate from 45 to 50 percent for those on incomes exceeding \$1 million, to a nebulous call to “increase the marginal rate” for the wealthiest layers of society. Significantly, this policy exempts most of the top 10 percent—those on more than \$180,000, protecting the affluent upper middle class stratum that forms the Greens’ constituency.

For the same reason, the platform no longer calls for a freeze on federal funding for private schools, instead advocating that money be denied only to the “very wealthiest schools.” Any mention of abolishing the 30 percent private health insurance rebate has been dropped; instead the platform now talks vaguely about “redirecting funding from subsidising private health insurance towards direct public provision.”

The revamp is in line with the sudden departure, last April, of veteran Greens’ leader Bob Brown, who was closely identified with Gillard and the Labor government. While Brown’s replacement, long-time protégé Christine Milne, shares his overall political outlook, she is more overtly oriented toward business. In an interview last August, Milne stated: “When I took over the leadership, one thing I wanted to do was to build a constituency in progressive business.” Milne also emphasised that the Greens needed to be a party of government, rather than a “third party.”

Welcoming the new platform, a December 31 *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial concluded: “Green should be in the centre of the Australian political spectrum, not at the red to orange end.”

Other media interests, notably the Murdoch outlets, have so far remained silent. Last year, Murdoch’s newspapers campaigned against any coalition that included the Greens, depicting them as “left wing” and “extreme.” They sought the formation of a “strong” majority government, with a so-called “mandate” to rapidly impose the program of labor market “reform”, accelerated privatisation, and welfare elimination being demanded by the banks and major corporations.

The Greens have responded to that campaign by rewriting their platform. At the same time, both they and the corporate media are well aware that the party’s accelerating shift to the right will completely discredit it among all those, particularly students and youth, who retain illusions that the Greens represent some kind of progressive alternative. This is precisely

what happened to the last Australian “third party,” the Australian Democrats, whose electoral support collapsed a decade ago after it helped the Howard Liberal government impose the highly regressive Goods and Services Tax.

In the last election, held in the wake of the anti-democratic political coup against former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the Greens were able to capitalise on mass opposition to both his replacement, Julia Gillard, and to Liberal leader Tony Abbott, winning nearly 13 percent of the vote, including nine Senate places and, for the first time, one House of Representatives seat. Since then, support for the Greens has fallen sharply, reflected in a significant drop in their vote in several state elections.

Writing in the *Melbourne Age* on December 28, leading Greens member, James Norman, insisted that the Greens were determined to pursue their new course, even if it led to a split. “It’s not altogether different from the trajectory of the German Greens in the 1980s, which ultimately led to the party splitting into the ‘Realos’ (the more pragmatic wing led by Joschka Fischer) and the ‘Fundis’ (the more hardline faction formerly led by the late Petra Kelly),” he commented. “History shows it was the pragmatic wing of the Greens that survived in Germany and Fischer went on to become foreign minister.”

The German Greens joined the Social Democrats in office between 1998 and 2005, and helped rehabilitate German militarism by agitating for German participation in the 1999 NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia. Since then, they have entered various state governments, including those led by openly right-wing parties committed to drastic cuts in public expenditure.

Elements within the Australian Greens, led by figures such as Senator Lee Rhiannon, a former member of what was the Stalinist Socialist Party of Australia, are anxious to retain the party’s appeal to disillusioned voters, especially youth, largely on the basis of concerns about the environment and war. Like its counterpart in Germany, the aim of any breakaway from the Milne leadership would be to act as a lightning rod to corral political discontent back within the parliamentary framework, and to block any challenge by the working class to the profit system.



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