

Australia: Gillard imposes Aboriginal celebrity as Senate candidate

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31 January 2013

In one of her first political decisions for 2013, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced last week that she was selecting indigenous sportswoman Nova Peris, 41, to head Labor's Senate ticket for the Northern Territory (NT) in this year's federal election, now set for September 14.

Gillard's directive resulted in the dumping of Trish Crossin, Labor's current NT senator and overrode the ALP's usual pre-selection process by local party members.

Peris is an Olympic and Commonwealth games gold medal winner—in 1996 and in 1998 for hockey and athletics respectively—and was named Young Australian of the Year in 1997. Apart from being a “treaty ambassador” for the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, she had no previous public political profile and was not even a member of the Labor Party.

The final rubber stamping of Peris's appointment was carried out on Tuesday by the ALP's national executive, which admitted her as a member and waived various rules that might have precluded her Senate candidacy. Peris's position at the top of Labor's NT Senate ticket guarantees that she will become Australia's first female indigenous federal parliamentarian after the next election.

Gillard's pre-selection intervention—or “captain's pick” as she described it—is part of an orchestrated attempt to give her government a political facelift in the lead-up to the federal election, posturing as a “progressive” alternative to the Liberal-National coalition, while maintaining Labor's corporate business program and social austerity attacks on the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

Gillard is hoping to replicate US President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign, which combined

militarism, big business policies and social austerity with the promotion of feminism, black and Hispanic nationalism, gay rights and other forms of identity politics pitched to affluent layers of the upper middle class. ALP officials travelled to the US last year to meet with leading figures in Obama's re-election team and plan to emulate its techniques. This was underlined in a comment earlier this month entitled “What Labor Can Learn From Obama In 2013” by Alex White, a national marketing advisor to the Labor Party and the unions.

White, who spent two-and-a-half months working for the “Obama for America” team last year, declared that the ALP “simply cannot rely on ‘more of the same’ tactics that have led the party to its election-losing position.” Labor, he continued, had to invest large amounts of money in “field organising” and “develop a radically simple message. And stick to it.”

Gillard has already set the stage with her denunciation last year of Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott as a “misogynist” and her cultivation of a group of well-heeled feminist commentators, or so-called “mummy bloggers,” who are now actively promoting the prime minister in their publications.

Peris's promotion as the first female indigenous federal parliamentarian is another part of this scheme. It will undoubtedly be hailed by the same upper middle class milieu, and the various pseudo-left organisations, like Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, that represent its interests. The latter specialise in falsely presenting Labor as the “lesser evil” compared to the Liberal-National coalition.

Peris's appointment is specifically aimed at shoring up Labor's support in the NT, where it was thrown out of government last year in swings of up to 15 percent against the former Territory Labor government, in

predominantly indigenous “safe” Labor seats.

Broad layers of NT Aborigines are deeply hostile towards Labor because of the party’s continuation of the “Northern Territory intervention”, a series of anti-democratic political and social attacks on indigenous communities first initiated by the former Howard Liberal-National coalition government in 2007.

These policies, which include “quarantining” welfare payments to indigenous recipients for use only on selected items, and the imposition of alcohol and other bans on communities, have been expanded under both federal and Territory Labor governments, causing job cuts and drastically worsening the decades of poverty afflicting Aboriginal communities. In 2011, the official unemployment rate among Aborigines across the country was over 20 percent, or almost four times higher than for the rest of the population. More than 29 percent of young indigenous people are neither working nor attending school.

Peris’s appointment brought angry responses from Crossin, Marion Scrymgour, an indigenous former deputy NT chief minister and some other sections of the Labor bureaucracy. Scrymgour made the obvious point that Labor had refused for decades to pre-select indigenous party members for safe federal parliamentary seats. In 2012 Gillard rejected indigenous ALP president Warren Mundine as a possible NSW Senator, selecting Bob Carr instead and appointing him foreign minister.

Scrymgour had publicly announced two weeks ago that she planned to challenge Crossin for the NT Senate position, but was brushed aside by Gillard and her political advisors as unreliable because of previous limited protests about Labor’s indigenous policies in the NT and her decision to temporarily quit the party in 2009.

Scrymgour and other indigenous Labor officials protesting Peris’s appointment, however, have no fundamental differences with Gillard’s political agenda. If chosen, they would loyally implement Labor’s big business policies and social attacks on the working class. Peris was selected, however, precisely because she had no previous political record, fully endorses Labor’s right-wing program, and will be entirely dependent on those in the Labor apparatus who have elevated her into the Senate.

Peris and Scrymgour are representatives of a small

but increasingly well-off middle-class layer of Aboriginal bureaucrats, businesspeople and celebrities who have benefitted either directly or indirectly from “identity politics.” They include those who have themselves implemented regressive government policies or engaged in multi-million dollar deals with mining corporations or agri-businesses that have perpetuated the social misery in Aboriginal communities.

While she criticised the Northern Territory intervention, Scrymgour endorsed its extension under Labor. Labor has rebadged the “NT intervention” model, renaming it “Stronger Futures” and is now imposing welfare quarantining in targeted working-class communities in urban Australia.

Straight after she was officially endorsed by the national executive as Labor’s NT Senate candidate, Peris released a media statement declaring that the Howard government’s NT intervention had failed because indigenous people had not been “consulted”. She then made clear that she “fully supported” Labor’s “Stronger Futures.”

Gillard’s cynical elevation of Peris to the federal senate will change nothing for the thousands of ordinary Aborigines living in third-world conditions in the NT and many other parts of the country.



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