

Australian Greens execute abrupt leadership change

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On Wednesday, the Australian Greens' 11 members of federal parliament suddenly replaced their leader of three years, Senator Christine Milne—less than a week before the Abbott Liberal-National government hands down next Tuesday's federal budget.

The timing of the backroom ballot points, in the first instance, to preparations by the Greens to assist the government to push through major cuts to social spending, including on pensions, in this budget. Key provisions in last year's budget were blocked in the Senate by Labor, the Greens and cross-bench senators, after the government's austerity offensive provoked popular outrage.

In what was reportedly a unanimous vote, Senator Richard Di Natale, 44, who has been in the Senate since 2010, was installed as party leader in a snap ballot conducted less than two hours after Milne, 61, announced her resignation.

Di Natale immediately announced his readiness to negotiate with Prime Minister Tony Abbott on the budget and other measures. He declared that he was not an "ideologue," but entered politics to "get stuff done." With 10 votes in the Senate, the Greens can ensure the passage of any piece of government legislation they support.

While paying tribute to Milne's "commitment and patriotism to offer to serve in the parliament," Abbott welcomed the leadership change. "Maybe the Greens will become the constructive negotiating partners that the public want the parliamentary cross bench to be," he said yesterday.

Likewise, today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial greeted Di Natale's comments as "a welcome sign that this key party on the Senate crossbenches has discovered a practical streak." Yesterday's *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial stated: "The elevation of

Richard Di Natale to replace Christine Milne as Australian Greens leader is a potential plus for federal politics."

Having become the "third party" of the Australian political establishment over the past two decades, the Greens are making a bid to play a more pivotal role in shoring up the parliamentary framework in the face of rising popular discontent. The new leader emphasised his wider determination to make the parliamentary system work better to produce "outcomes," because "people are sick of the sort of the nonsense that goes on in this place."

Di Natale stressed that he and Milne were "different people." Milne and her long-time predecessor Bob Brown, who founded the Greens in 1992, had a history of environmental protest politics, designed to attract younger voters disaffected with the two main ruling parties, Labor and Liberal.

By contrast, Di Natale, a former doctor, hardly mentioned the environment at his initial media conference. The new leader much more clearly represents the upper-middle class and business layers on which the Greens increasingly rest. He declared that the Greens were "the natural home of progressive, mainstream Australian voters" and "not just on the Labor side."

Di Natale's orientation reflects the Greens' membership, now the wealthiest of all the parliamentary parties, and their developing social constituency. In recent elections, such as the March 28 New South Wales (NSW) state poll, the vote for the Greens was generally highest in affluent electorates.

The *Australian* reported on April 11 that, based on census data, the Greens won an average of just 4.8 percent of the vote in electorates with the highest proportion of labourers. By contrast, the article noted,

that in the “top 10 electorates in NSW ranked by the proportion of households with income of \$3,000 a week or more, the Greens’ primary vote averaged 17 percent.” It reached 46.4 percent in inner-city middle-class Newtown and 37.2 percent in Balmain—the two Sydney seats where Green candidates were elected.

These better-off layers are entrenched in the upper echelons of the public service, the multi-billion dollar “green” business sector and the various government-funded institutions that promote identity politics agendas, such as feminism and multiculturalism. Di Natale, the son of Italian immigrants, focused on these issues in his media conference.

There has been a concentrated turn to this milieu by the Greens since the drubbing they received at the last federal election in 2013. After serving for six years as de facto coalition partners in the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, the Greens’ overall vote dropped by about a third. In the Senate, it dropped by 4.4 percent, to 8.6 percent—the party’s worst result in almost a decade.

Under Labor, the Greens lined up fully behind Canberra’s commitment to the Obama administration’s military and strategic “pivot” to Asia to encircle and confront China. They also backed the US-led military interventions into Libya and Syria, and have since called for a more aggressive confrontation with Russia.

In a bid to head off the emergence of public opposition to the new war in Iraq and Syria, Milne last year called for a parliamentary debate on Australian’s involvement. She did not oppose the war itself, but canvassed concerns about its likely success and the need for Australian troops to be retained in the Asia-Pacific region.

Significantly, Di Natale made no mention of the Middle East war, or rising US militarism, at his media conference—itsself an indication of the Greens’ continued alignment behind Washington and its allies.

In an effort to appeal to voters alienated by the ongoing attacks, by Labor and Liberal governments alike, on welfare and social services, Di Natale claimed that he would give voice to issues such as “decent health care, decent education, affordable housing, public transport.”

The Greens’ record demonstrates the fraud of this claim. Last year, they joined Labor in voting for the bulk of the cuts in the Abbott government’s budget,

including \$80 billion worth of cuts to education and health funding to the states over 10 years. They opposed calls to block the budget, precisely because they feared a political crisis that could have triggered a mass working-class movement against the entire austerity program.

The Greens’ deputy leader, Adam Bandt, was also ousted in Wednesday’s ballot, to be replaced by two co-deputies, Senators Larissa Waters, 38, a lawyer, and Scott Ludlam, 45, a former graphic designer.

Media reports indicated that Bandt and other Green MPs, notably former Moscow-line Socialist Party member Senator Lee Rhiannon, were kept in the dark about Milne’s planned departure, and the ballot was called swiftly in order to prevent any challenge to the new line-up. Rhiannon publicly called for membership ballots on the party’s leadership. In response, Di Natale bluntly rejected criticisms of the abrupt ballot, saying “that’s politics.”

Conscious of the deep disaffection among workers and youth toward the parliamentary elite, Rhiannon recently proposed that the Greens could help form a Syriza-style coalition of the “radical left,” as has taken office in Greece. Such a formation, backed by pseudo-left groups and possibly some trade unions, would seek to cobble together new political mechanisms to enforce the requirements of the corporate elite amid a rapid downturn in the Australian economy.

Milne is now expected to quit her senate seat before next year’s scheduled federal election. Among the frontrunners to fill the resulting casual vacancy is former Tasmanian state Greens leader Nick McKim. Like Di Natale, McKim epitomises the social milieu on which the Greens are based. As a senior minister in the 2010–14 Labor-Greens power-sharing state government, he spearheaded that government’s austerity measures by trying to shut 20 public schools, provoking widespread public resistance.



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