

Australian Greens posturing on war and refugees exposed at public meeting

Max Newman
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There were some revealing scenes at a public meeting called in Newcastle, north of Sydney, last week by the Refugee Action Network Newcastle (RANN), an alliance of the Greens and various pseudo-left groups.

The evident purpose of the meeting, titled “Refugees in Detention: Australia’s Heart of Darkness,” was to present the Greens as defenders of asylum seekers’ rights. Federal Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young and her New South Wales state parliamentary colleague David Shoebridge were the main speakers.

Called to discuss “Australia’s shame” of refugees in detention, the primary focus of the discussion was a new contract between the University of Newcastle and Broadspectrum (formerly Transfield Services) to run the security services on campus. Transfield Services operates the notorious Australian-run asylum seeker detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island.

Addressing just over 100 people, mainly members and supporters of the Greens and the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance, Hanson-Young spoke at length about the shocking conditions facing the Manus and Nauru detainees, but was silent on the role of the Greens in propping up the previous Labor government that reopened the camps in 2012.

While criticising the abusive treatment of detainees, Hanson-Young made plain her party’s support for the underlying framework of national borders. She proposed “assessment” stations in Indonesia—in effect an alternative form of “offshore processing”—to determine whether asylum seekers were “genuine” refugees according to the narrow official definition.

None of the speakers, who included University of Newcastle National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) president Tom Griffiths and student representative Brianna Farnham, mentioned the direct connection

between the refugee crisis and the war drive by the US and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East and internationally, which has sent millions of people fleeing their homes.

This silence was upset when a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter raised the question of war. He cited Greens Senator Scott Ludlam who, as acting party leader, said in July: “I don’t think we should be preparing for a war with China.” The SEP supporter asked: “What information does your party have about the preparations by the Australian government and the military for war against China?... And why have you not made this information public?”

The chair, Therese Doyle, a Greens member of Newcastle City Council, immediately attempted to block any discussion of the question, claiming that it had “nothing to do with what we are discussing.” She was joined by Socialist Alliance members who booed and jeered in a bid to stifle any debate on one of the causes of the refugee crisis.

Hanson-Young pleaded ignorance, claiming not to be aware of Ludlam’s statement. Shoebridge sought to deflect the question declaring: “The concern is that Australia, with the United States, the United States allies, is engaged in a containment policy of China which is isolating and separating China and going down a path which divides the Asia-Pacific region into two camps. We think that is very dangerous.”

This general expression of concern, however, is completely at odds with the record of the Greens. When Obama formally announced his administration’s “pivot to Asia” against China in the Australian parliament in 2011, the Greens senators fawned over the US president and applauded his speech. As on the treatment of refugees, Greens continued to support the minority Labor government as it integrated Australia

into US war plans against China and further opened up Australian bases to the American military (see: “Australian Greens senator talks of war with China”).

Another SEP supporter challenged the Greens about their role in keeping the minority Labor government in office from 2010 to 2013 as it enacted vicious anti-refugee policies, including the reopening of the offshore detention camps and a plan to dump asylum seekers in Malaysia. Hanson-Young declared that the Greens voted against these measures, but offered absolutely no explanation for continuing to back the Labor government.

A further SEP supporter asked the Greens representatives why they continued to defend both the parliamentary order and nation-state borders.

Shoebridge responded by stating that people already saw the Greens’ policies as “excessively utopian.” If the Greens put forward a position of removing the national borders, he said, they would be “laughed out of town.” In other words, Greens’ orientation is not determined by principles and the defence of basic democratic rights, but rather what is immediately expedient in electoral terms and acceptable to rest of the political and corporate establishment.

Shoebridge peddled the illusion that parliaments could make “positive change” if “the community forces it upon them.” Shoebridge declared: “I think this is our job as the Greens MPs, to get out into the community, drag the community into parliament and force change on parliament.”

This was a bald statement of the role of the Greens in seeking to channel widespread political disenchantment back into the dead-end of the parliamentary system. Shoebridge, in effect, also spelt out the function assigned to the pseudo-lefts, who satellite around the Greens, aiding their efforts to “drag the community into parliament.”

In recent months, under new leader Senator Richard Di Natale, the Greens have reiterated their readiness to enter coalition governments with either the Labor Party or the Liberal-National Coalition, emphasising the need to somehow restore “public confidence” in the parliamentary framework.

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