

Australian Greens back government's Senate voting 'reforms'

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As a result of a deal struck last week, the Greens with the Liberal-National Coalition government are jointly rushing legislation through parliament to overhaul voting laws for the Senate.

Both parties, and the media, are falsely presenting the changes as a bid to remove “backroom deals” and allow voters to truly express their political choices. In reality, the reforms” seek to shore up the increasingly discredited parties of the political establishment—Coalition, Labor and the Greens—and create the conditions for the government to push sweeping austerity measures through the Senate.

Working together, the Greens and the Coalition have fast-tracked the measures, staging a perfunctory one-day parliamentary committee inquiry yesterday, so the laws can take effect by mid-March. That would be in time for a “double-dissolution election”—an election for all the seats in both houses of parliament—which is now being increasingly mooted after the government hands down the federal budget on May 10.

These moves are clearly intended to result in the ouster of most of the eight current various “crossbench” senators—either from small parties or so-called independents. This is in line with demands from the corporate and financial elite for a Senate dominated by the Coalition, the Greens and Labor to expedite pro-business measures, including sweeping cuts to social spending, which have been stalled in the Senate since 2014.

The move is a direct response to mounting frustration within business circles over the inability of the Liberal-National government, whether headed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull or his predecessor Tony Abbott, to force through a stepped-up assault on healthcare, education and a pro-business restructuring of labour relations. Such is the popular hostility to austerity that these measures have been stymied by various combinations of opposition parties and independents, who fear a voter backlash.

The financial press has welcomed the electoral changes. A typical opinion piece in the *Australian Financial Review* headlined, “Goodbye to the oddballs of the Senate” declared: “At last ... Some sensible reform that can be delivered relatively quickly and will have a huge impact on the Government’s ability to manage its policy agenda.” The article claimed the “reforms” would “make it impossible for so many perverse and oddball outcomes—relying on complicated formulas to gather preferences despite having no voter support.”

The truth is that there is no voter support for the austerity measures demanded by big business and widespread hostility to the parties—Coalition, Labor and Greens—that have imposed savage cutbacks. That anger and alienation finds very limited and often perverse expression in the Senate via Australia’s anti-democratic compulsory preferential voting system. The new legislation, however, is intended to ensure that votes are channelled back into the three main establishment parties.

The push to overhaul Senate voting procedures is a response to the protracted decline in support for the major parties, which resulted in successive federal elections in 2010 and 2013 producing governments lacking a parliamentary majority.

The outcome of the 2010 election was the first hung parliament since 1940, with Labor only eventually able to form a minority government with the support of the Greens and two Independents. The result reflected widespread opposition to the pro-business program implemented by the previous Labor government, along with anger over the anti-democratic backroom coup that had installed Julia Gillard as prime minister in mid-2010.

In 2013, the Liberal-National Coalition won a large majority in the lower house but the popular discontent saw nearly a quarter of the Senate vote go to an array of parties and independents who postured as alternatives to the political establishment. Some senators who won small

first preference votes were elected via complex preferential voting swaps with other candidates. While the Coalition was able to form government, it confronted eight “crossbench” senators wielding the balance of power in the upper house.

The Coalition-Greens legislation seeks to prevent such outcomes by introducing optional preferential voting, and by barring parties from using “group voting tickets” to allocate preferences to each other. Voters will be able to vote for one party list of candidates, or allocate their own preferences, for up to six parties. The measure is designed to ensure that votes for minor parties will either be exhausted, with their preferences not flowing on to other candidates outside the major parties, or be channeled back behind Labor, the Liberals and the Greens.

Previously voters who wished to allocate their preferences completely had to vote “below the line” which required them to number the boxes for every candidate, who could number well over 100. The government initially retained this method of voting with minor changes, but today agreed to apply optional preferential voting “below the line” as well, allowing voters to number just six boxes to cast a valid vote.

The claims of enhancing “democracy” and “voters’ choice” are just as cynical as they were when the current voting system was introduced by the Hawke Labor government in 1984, supposedly to reduce the level of invalid votes produced by the previous requirement to fill in all the boxes “below the line.” In reality, the purpose was to permit the major parties to submit group voting tickets that facilitated back-room preference deals among them. This system has now broken down, however, because of the level of political discontent, which has enabled smaller parties to benefit from that vote-swapping mechanism.

Following the 2013 election, parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters issued a report in 2014, calling for the “reform” of Senate voting rules. The report was endorsed unanimously by Labor, the Liberals and the Greens, but Labor has opposed the current legislation, fearing that it could lose Senate seats as a result.

That report also unanimously recommended new laws to make it even more difficult for new or smaller parties to register for elections. The current anti-democratic laws, also introduced by Labor in 1984, require parties to submit to the authorities the names and details of more than 500 members in order to exercise the fundamental democratic right to contest elections with their party name

appearing on ballot papers. The report called for this membership list to be trebled to 1,500.

Cynically, the Greens, who backed this proposal, are now claiming to have ruled it out as part of their deal with the government, presenting this as evidence of their democratic credentials. The truth is that both the Greens and the government calculate that the changes to the Senate voting system will achieve the same end of clearing out small parties from the Senate.

The true position of the Greens was displayed in New South Wales following the 1999 state election. The Greens were instrumental in pushing through laws requiring new parties to submit lists of 750 members, up from the previous 200, and imposing other anti-democratic measures.

The Greens’ partnership with the government on the Senate changes has a broader significance. Amid a collapse of support for the two traditional parties of the Australian ruling elite, Labor and the Liberals, the Greens are advancing themselves as a “responsible” party of government, capable of forming government and implementing the dictates of big business.

When he was installed as new party leader in May 2015, Senator Richard Di Natale hastened to reassure the corporate elite that he was “no ideologue” and had entered into politics to “get things done.” A month later, the party signed a deal supporting the Liberal-National government’s sweeping cuts to the aged pension, predicted to “save” \$2.4 billion over four years.

Last November, Di Natale declared that the Greens must prepare to become “a party of government.” He said it was necessary to “explore what the Greens’ role in a multi-party government looks like ... and how to get there.” It was a clear message that the Greens are prepared to form a government of “stability” with Labor, or the Coalition, now further confirmed by its support for the government’s electoral legislation.



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