

Australian Greens join government in ramming through Senate voting changes

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Amid a deepening crisis of the government and the parliamentary system as a whole, the Greens have repeatedly voted with the ruling Liberal-National Coalition in the Senate over the past three days. Together, they are bulldozing through changes to the electoral laws that seek to shore up support for the major establishment parties, including the Greens, in the face of widespread public disaffection.

The Greens have voted with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government to block every bid by various minor party and independent senators—the “crossbench”—to delay the passage of the Senate voting laws. Backed by the Greens and independent senator Nick Xenophon, the government is so intent on passing the laws this week that parliament could sit through the night and even into the weekend.

By ramming through the laws, the Greens are helping clear the way for Turnbull to call a “double dissolution” election on July 2. Such an election—for the entire Senate as well as the House of Representatives—would be a bid to purge the Senate of “crossbenchers” who have become an obstacle to the austerity agenda demanded by the corporate elite, driven by a worsening economic situation.

The last federal election in 2013 saw more than a quarter of the votes for the Senate go to candidates other than the three main establishment parties—Liberal-National, Labor and the Greens. This result gave a very distorted expression to the popular hostility toward the major parties. A number of “crossbenchers”—mostly right-wing populists posing as anti-elite candidates—secured seats by exchanging voting preferences with each other.

In efforts to secure their own political survival, the smaller parties and independents have opposed some of the government's moves to slash social spending and

cut workers' conditions, compounding the growing frustration of big business.

Cynically posturing as champions of electoral transparency and voters' rights, the Greens and the Coalition are pushing through laws to make it more difficult for such parties and independents to win Senate seats. The changed electoral laws are designed to get voters to select only one party, or allocate preferences to no more than six parties or groups, in the hope of exhausting their preference votes or channelling them back into the hands of the main parties.

As part of their deal with the government, the Greens agreed to start the Senate changes on July 1, so the new system would be in place in time for a July 2 double dissolution election.

After this week, parliament is due to go into recess before reconvening for the government's annual budget on May 10. The Coalition and the Greens have blocked debate in the Senate on a series of bills, in order to ensure the passage of the electoral laws. This has included the main measure that the government intends to use as the constitutional trigger for a double dissolution election—a bill to reestablish the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), a specialised agency to persecute building workers.

This could instigate a constitutional crisis because, in order to call a double dissolution, the government has to show Governor-General Peter Cosgrove, the formal head of state, that the Senate has twice refused to pass the bill. The government is reportedly considering recalling parliament on May 3, a week ahead of schedule, to deliver the budget so the ABCC bill can be put to the Senate again. But the Senate majority could try to stymie the plan by refusing to reconvene until the scheduled date of May 10, just a day before the Senate

would need to reject the bill again in time for a double dissolution.

These tortured manoeuvres reflect a deeper political crisis. Six months after ousting Tony Abbott as prime minister, Turnbull has proven no more successful than Abbott in imposing brutal cuts to the living standards and social conditions of the working class, despite the collapse of the mining boom intensifying the corporate austerity demands. Instead, having to call an election before the end of the year, the government has backed away from earlier vows to cut spending and corporate taxes.

Divisions on foreign policy have also beset the government. So far, Turnbull has failed to meet escalating demands by Washington to join its provocative “freedom of navigation” operations inside Chinese-claimed territorial waters in the South China Sea. These demands have been echoed by both Abbott and the Labor Party. Turnbull has made clear his commitment to Australia’s longstanding military ally, the United States, but fears a backlash by China, the country’s largest trading partner.

Under these conditions, the Greens, who once presented themselves as anti-war pacifists and defenders of social justice, are openly seeking to enter government, declaring their readiness to join a coalition with the Liberals. From 2010 to 2013, the Greens already formed a de facto coalition with the minority Labor government of Julia Gillard, supporting its unconditional alignment behind Washington’s “pivot” to Asia to confront China, and helping Labor inflict cuts to education and other social spending.

In the past, the Greens have also formed coalitions, formal and informal, with both Labor and Liberal administrations in the state of Tasmania. Increasingly, they have offered themselves as the force needed to stabilise the parliamentary order. In July 2014, Christine Milne, then the Greens leader, joined Labor in passing the main provisions in the Abbott government’s first brutal budget, warning of “instability and uncertainty” if the budget were blocked.

Milne’s replacement as party leader by Richard Di Natale last May represented a further shift to the right. In a recent interview with *GQ*, a men’s magazine, Di Natale said his party rejected the view that “we should never do anything with the Liberal Party.” He told the

magazine: “‘Never say never’ is the quote I’d use about everything in politics.”

Prominent Liberal Party powerbroker and businessman Michael Kroger declared that the Liberals would be prepared to exchange preferences with the Greens for the next election, because the Greens were “not the nutters they used to be.” Speaking of Di Natale, Kroger said: “You’ve got a doctor who owns a farm who doesn’t come from this mad environmental background.”

Australia’s political elite is being increasingly riven by the combined pressures of the deepening impact of the post-2008 global economic breakdown, Washington’s insistence on Australia taking a front line position in war preparations against China, and widespread opposition to austerity and militarism. Turnbull’s inner-party coup to depose Abbott last September was the sixth change of prime minister in Australia since the landslide defeat of the Howard Coalition government in 2007.

In the machinations over the Senate voting changes, the Greens have stepped forward, not just to assist the Coalition government, but to try to shore up the parliamentary system itself. Given the blatantly anti-democratic content of the plan to shut out other parties, however, the plan could well backfire, fuelling the public antagonism toward the major parties, including the Greens.



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