

Australian election: Murdoch paper excludes “minor parties” from candidates’ forum

Our reporters
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A candidates’ forum held by the Murdoch-owned *Inner West Courier* on Thursday evening was an anti-democratic event, at which the candidates of so-called “minor parties” were denied speaking rights. Nevertheless, audience members expressed their opposition to Labor and the Liberals and voiced concerns over a host of social issues.

The forum, which was held in the suburb of Five Dock and attracted some 150 people, was supposedly organised so voters could hear and question the candidates in the federal electorates of Grayndler and Reid in Sydney’s inner-west. Only the representatives of the Liberal Party, Labor and the Greens were permitted to make opening and closing remarks and answer questions. The representatives of the so-called “minor” parties—eight additional candidates in Grayndler and two in Reid—were told they could sit in the front row seats and only speak if directly questioned by a member of the audience.

This travesty of democracy organised by the *Inner West Courier* was challenged in advance by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for Grayndler, Oscar Grenfell. He issued an open letter to Grayndler’s Labor MP Anthony Albanese, and Greens candidate Jim Casey, calling on them to state their position on the arbitrary and anti-democratic ruling.

Grenfell’s letter noted that the decision was an abrogation of the right of the SEP and other parties to outline their program and perspective. It was an act of political censorship “directed against the right of the people of Grayndler to unfettered political discussion and informed choice in the forthcoming election,” the letter declared. The letter noted that polling has indicated that up to 25 percent of the voting population is expected to cast a ballot for a “minor party.” The SEP received no response from Albanese or Casey.

SEP campaigners distributed copies of the letter to audience members. They also raised the party’s objections with the editor of the *Inner West Courier*, Catherine Zuill, pointing out that the SEP had stood candidates in the electorate over many years and is well known in the working class. By excluding the SEP and other parties from the platform, the newspaper was maintaining the media blackout on the SEP’s campaign, and preventing workers and young people from hearing a political alternative.

Zuill replied that the large number of candidates made it

“impossible” for all of them to have full speaking rights. In fact, the organisers of another forum in Grayndler next week have invited all 11 candidates. In the electorate of Wills in Victoria, where the SEP is also standing, community forums have been held at which all 10 candidates have been invited and those who attended granted equal treatment.

The political motives behind the exclusion of opponents of the establishment political parties were made explicit by the chairperson. After introducing the candidates of Labor, the Liberals and the Greens, he asked each of the candidates of other parties to stand. Oscar Grenfell of the SEP was invited to stand first. When he began to make a brief statement to the forum protesting against the undemocratic proceedings, he was immediately silenced by the chair, who told the audience that only the parties placed on the platform were in a position “to make your wishes come true.”

The only other candidates of the 11 running in Grayndler to attend beside the SEP were those of the Animal Justice Party and the Australian Sex Party. From Reid three (Liberal, Labor and Greens) of the five candidates appeared.

The character of the “debate” again underlined the utterly fraudulent character of the official election campaign. Apart from deliberately vague references to “uncertain times,” the reality that the election is being conducted within a rapidly deteriorating economic situation in Australia and internationally, and a military build-up in the Asia-Pacific region threatening war, was suppressed.

The exposure of the Greens’ pretense to represent a “progressive” alternative to Labor and the Liberals was the most striking feature of the event. The Grayndler campaign had earlier been hyped by the media as a major battle between Albanese and Casey, who is the state secretary of the firefighters’ union, and was once a member of the now defunct pseudo-left group, the International Socialist Organisation. The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* last month denounced Casey as a “Greens’ extremist,” committed to the “overthrow of capitalism,” and called on people to “Save Our Albo” from losing his seat.

From Casey’s remarks, and his friendly demeanour towards Albanese in particular, this was shown to be nonsense. Casey described himself only as a “long-term political activist” in the

trade unions, and declared that Greens' policies were "common sense" and "not particularly radical." Papering over the immense class divide, poverty and social inequality in Australia, Casey asserted on several occasions that Australia "has never been wealthier" and could therefore afford to be more "compassionate." He also went out of his way to try and portray Labor as the "lesser evil" to the Liberals.

Casey and the Greens' candidate for Reid, Alice Mantel, both placed heavy emphasis on the issue of refugees. They condemned the current policy as inhumane and called for the closure of detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. Nevertheless, the Greens' policy fits entirely within the nostrums of Australia's current "border protection" regime. They advocate a system of "onshore processing" under which, according to Mantel, a quarter of all applicants for refugee status would continue to be refused admission.

Albanese, who was a minister in the Gillard government was responsible for setting up Australia's refugee gulag, declared the refugee issue was a "complex question." It could only be resolved on the basis of a "regional settlement"—in other words, continuing to illegally deny people their right to claim asylum in Australia and prevailing on other countries in the region to take them.

Answering the only question he was permitted to address, "why does the SEP oppose the Greens," Grenfell emphasised the issue of war, which he said was the "great unmentionable" in the election. Grenfell drew attention to the recent report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute that advised the next government will face the possibility that tensions in the South China Sea could draw Australia into a full-scale war with China.

Grenfell noted that Greens have repeatedly declared their willingness to take ministerial positions in a coalition government with Labor. Greens leader, Richard Di Natale had invoked the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government as one of the most "productive" periods of government and a model to be emulated.

Grenfell stressed that it had been the Gillard government that had aligned Australia with the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific. He reminded the audience that Labor, kept in power by the Greens, had carried out some of the deepest cuts to education, healthcare, welfare and the other social rights of the working class. Grenfell emphasised that the Greens, who are "preparing to enter a coalition with Labor," had "proven that they are a pro-capitalist party."

Grenfell concluded: "The Socialist Equality Party is standing to provide the working class with a genuine socialist alternative."

Questions from the audience covered a range of concerns over social questions, including refugees, education, forced council amalgamations, housing costs, jobs and Sydney's infrastructure issues, including the controversial multi-billion dollar WestConnex urban motorway project.

Generally, the questions were met with a mixture of lies, arrogance and indifference from the speakers on the platform. Albanese falsely claimed that Labor was opposed to government funding cuts, blatantly ignoring a series of recent policy releases by Labor leader Bill Shorten promising up to \$71 billion in "savings" required to "repair the budget."

Addressing the critical social issue of Sydney's soaring house prices, Liberal Party member for Reid Craig Laundy coldly declared that a young family trying to buy their first home should purchase an "affordable" \$600,000 apartment or a house for a similar price in Marsden Park, one of the city's outer north-western suburbs.

An immigrant from Russia, who pointed out that education had been free when she studied in the former Soviet Union, asked a question to "all the candidates" about spiralling technical and university education fees. She was answered with evasions from Liberal and Labor. When the SEP's Grenfell rose and indicated he wanted to advance the socialist policies of free education at all levels, he was again denied the right to speak, with no objections from Casey or Alice Mantel from the Greens.

One audience member directed a question to Albanese, which contrasted the bipartisan commitment to spend \$495 billion on the military over the coming decade with the spending cuts of healthcare, education and other social services. Albanese side-stepped the question—once again with the silent complicity of the two Green representatives.

In their closing statements, the Greens' candidate Mantel declared that the Greens are a "real party in its own right," with its "own ideas." "We aren't aiming for a coalition" with Labor, she declared, only to immediately state that a Labor-Greens coalition government "wouldn't be an entirely bad thing."

Her remark summed up the entire pro-capitalist, electoral perspective of the Greens, which have no fundamental differences with the agenda of war and austerity of Labor and the Liberals.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.

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