

Post-election rifts intensify in Australian Greens

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Public recriminations broke out in the Australian Greens last weekend, worsening an ongoing faction fight that has been intensified by the party's losses in the July 2 election. Founding party leader Bob Brown bluntly intervened, calling for the removal of the Greens' executive in the state of New South Wales.

The federal election marked a further disintegration of support for the major parties of the political establishment, including the Greens. There is deep-rooted hostility to the pro-business and austerity program pursued by successive governments, including the current Liberal-National Coalition and the previous Greens-backed Labor administration. This was most evident in the Senate, the upper house, where a record 26 percent of the vote went to parties other than Labor, the Coalition and the Greens.

For the Greens, the election was a particular disaster. The results confirmed the damage done to the party's credibility, especially among young people, by its partnership in the 2010–2013 Labor government. The Greens propped up that government as it began the dismantling of welfare entitlements (victimising sole parents and disabled workers in particular), consigned refugees to indefinite detention on remote islands and lined up behind the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" to confront and prepare for war against China.

Not only did the Greens fail to increase their representation of one seat in the House of Representatives. In the Senate, their vote dropped to 8.5 percent, well below the peak of 13.1 percent recorded in 2010. While the Senate counting is still continuing, the Greens have lost at least one of their ten seats, and may end up losing three.

Anxious to paper over their crisis, the Greens have maintained that their election campaign was an achievement—a July 24 national council resolution

called it an "overall success." Nevertheless, party leader Senator Richard Di Natale told the *Australian* on July 14 that the party's result in the Senate might have suffered because "voters now perceive us as a major party."

Interviewed by the *Guardian* on July 23, Brown threw his weight behind Di Natale. Installed a year ago, Di Natale has taken the party explicitly in the direction of seeking to enter a government with Labor, or the Coalition, touting his party's ability to stabilise the parliamentary system in the face of the rising disaffection.

Di Natale spearheaded an election campaign that devoted most of the Greens' financial resources and manpower to seats in wealthy and upper middle-class areas, especially in inner Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria.

This direction was clearly endorsed by Brown, a Tasmanian conservationist who led the Greens' national formation in 1992. Brown blamed the party's NSW branch executive for the party's poor election performance. He told the *Guardian*: "They need to give way to modern young people, including young people in professions like business and law who are keen on changing society for the better."

Brown was speaking for the well-off layers of professionals, business owners and "clean energy" entrepreneurs who increasingly constitute the Greens' social base. He added: "The world view in NSW from the Greens has been far too negative. The feeling there is that we're fighting off something rather than fighting our way into achieving."

These words were directed against a so-called "left" grouping within the Greens, centred in NSW, personified by Senator Lee Rhiannon, a former member of the Socialist Party of Australia, which was aligned

with the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

In particular, Brown said, the NSW Greens needed to take “a good, hard look at what went wrong” in Grayndler, an inner-Sydney seat. There the Greens candidate was Jim Casey, a trade union bureaucrat and former member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation. Labor’s incumbent in the seat, former deputy prime minister Anthony Albanese, redbaited Casey as a “Trotskyite.” According to a “Greens’ strategist,” cited by the *Guardian*, Casey did not do enough to distance himself from his “socialist history.”

Neither side in this conflict has any fundamental difference with the Greens’ orientation to operating as a linchpin of the parliamentary set-up, based on a program that defends corporate profit and supports US militarism against China.

Both Brown and Rhiannon were enthusiastic participants in the 2010–13 partnership with the Labor government, which was struck under Brown’s leadership. That government agreed to the stationing of US Marines in Australia, stepped-up use of Australian naval and air bases by US forces and closer integration of the Australian military into the American war machine.

What is preoccupying the “left” faction of the Greens, however, is how to prevent the party’s right-wing and pro-war trajectory from cutting across their efforts to present the Greens as a “progressive alternative” to head off a political radicalisation among workers and young people.

Responding to Brown’s attack, Rhiannon told the *Guardian*: “Candidates right across Greens NSW are involved in extra-parliamentary protests, campaigns and movements. It is the foundation of our party and we make no apology for that.”

Likewise, Casey told the *Guardian* the Greens needed to “push a narrative” about “economic justice,” declaring: “I do think the future for the Greens lies in nailing that. We have good policies on economic issues but we don’t lead with them.”

By “good policies,” the Greens mean limited measures, such as clampdowns on foreign corporate tax evasion, to provide an appearance of moderating the ever-more glaring inequality of income and wealth, while defending the underlying profit system that is driving the stark social divide.

The Greens’ pre-selection of Casey was a deliberate move to utilise the services of the pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, with whom layers of the Greens leadership maintain close ties. Along with sections of the trade unions, these groups promote the Greens, a capitalist party, as a supposedly progressive formation.

During the election campaign, Rhiannon and Casey maintained a political division of labour with the national party leadership. While Di Natale signalled the Greens’ pro-business program to the ruling elite, supporters of the Rhiannon wing sought to exploit widespread concern, especially among young people, with the prevailing program of austerity, militarism, abuse of refugees and attacks on basic democratic rights.

That division of labour is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. While the most immediate beneficiaries on July 2 of the disaffection with the traditional parties of the ruling elite were primarily right-wing populists, the layers around Rhiannon and Casey are conscious of the developments throughout Europe and the United States, which have seen the rise of left-populist politicians, including the self-proclaimed “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders in the US and the supposed “socialist” Jeremy Corbyn in Britain.

Last year, at a meeting jointly sponsored by Socialist Alliance, Rhiannon spoke of the Greens providing a focus for a Syriza-style regroupment. The Greek working class was utterly betrayed by Syriza’s “radical left” government, which has imposed all the austerity measures dictated by the financial markets.

Despite this bitter experience undercutting any credibility of such a formation, Rhiannon and her supporters are desperate to maintain their own pretensions to be “activists” committed to “social and economic justice.” They are seeking to play a similar role as Syriza in blocking a conscious challenge to capitalism by workers and youth based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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