

Australian Greens signal pro-business agenda in portfolio appointments

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The Australian Greens underlined their pro-business agenda by a portfolio reshuffle last month in the wake of the July 2 federal election. The demotion of prominent federal senators has exacerbated factional conflicts over how to position the Greens amid a deepening crisis of the two-party system.

Senator Sarah Hanson-Young was stripped of the immigration portfolio in favor of Nick McKim, a representative of the party's right-wing, who played a central role in attacks on public education in Tasmania.

Adam Bandt, the only Greens MP in the House of Representatives, was replaced as treasury spokesperson by Senator Peter Whish-Wilson, a former Wall Street banker and entrepreneur.

Greens leader Richard Di Natale's moves followed bitter recriminations within the party over its failure to extend its representation in either the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Di Natale and the party's national leadership claimed that a "left" grouping based in New South Wales (NSW) and led by Senator Lee Rhiannon is responsible for the election result. Rhiannon's faction responded by warning that the party is increasingly compromised by its open integration into the political establishment.

Throughout the election campaign, the Greens stated their willingness to form a coalition government with the Labor Party. They sought to promote themselves as the party of "parliamentary stability" amid mass hostility to Labor and the Liberals, and fears within the corporate elite that a hung parliament, or minority government, would be unable to implement the austerity program demanded by international finance.

Di Natale repeatedly invoked the Greens-backed Labor government from 2010 to 2013 as a model to be emulated. That government carried out a wholesale assault on welfare, healthcare and education, while

integrating Australia into the US preparations for war against China.

The Greens openly right-wing pitch only won significant support in a handful of the most affluent electorates in Sydney and Melbourne. Following the election, Di Natale listed four seats he said would "go Green" next time. Each was among the top-ten wealthiest electorates in the country, by home value.

The portfolio appointments were aimed at appealing to this constituency, and the financial elite itself. Whish-Wilson is a former vice-president at Merrill-Lynch, one of the world's largest brokerage firms, and at Deutsche Bank. His installation as a Greens federal senator in 2012 was welcomed by the financial press.

In 2013, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* published an article titled "Green on board with business," which favourably cited Whish-Wilson's calls for the abolition of weekend penalty rates for workers. The Greens senator denounced the Liberal-Nationals and the Labor Party for not heeding the calls of business, and declared that weekend entitlements were "outdated" and an "Anglo-Saxon cultural thing."

In his maiden speech as treasury spokesperson last week, Whish-Wilson declared that the government did not have an "economic vision" for "reform." He touted the Greens support for a tax cut to small businesses and called for "productive investments" aimed at protecting Australia's Triple A credit rating. His comments underscored the Greens' commitment to the demands of business for an intensified assault on the working class.

McKim, who has taken the prominent immigration portfolio, has a record of carrying out sweeping attacks on public spending. As education minister in the former Labor-Green state government in Tasmania, he spearheaded a plan to shut 20 schools as part of a

broader pro-business offensive, slashing healthcare and the public service. The government was forced to back down on the school closures after widespread hostility, but proceeded to cut spending by axing programs and other measures.

The promotion of such figures is not limited to the federal Greens. In August, with the backing of Di Natale, Justin Field was installed as a new Greens representative in the NSW upper house. Field's campaign promoted his credentials as a former military intelligence officer.

At the same time, the move against the Rhiannon wing of the party has intensified. After the federal election, Greens founder, Bob Brown issued a call for her resignation, and demanded a "clean out" of the NSW Greens. Public conflicts have broken out within the NSW Greens, with state MP Jeremy Buckingham this week denouncing the state's "unaccountable leadership" in comments directed against Rhiannon.

There are no principled political differences between the groupings. Brown and Di Natale, however, are fearful that the Rhiannon wing's ties to various protest groups will jeopardise their overtures to the corporate elite.

Hanson-Young, the party's only senator in South Australia, is not part of the Rhiannon grouping. However, the two campaigned together during the last federal election, and like Rhiannon, Hanson-Young has cultivated a host of ties to protest organisations in a bid to posture as a "progressive." She has repeatedly clashed with the Liberal-National government over immigration policy, and was blocked from visiting the Nauru detention centre days before her removal from the portfolio.

Hanson-Young said she had "fought hard" to keep the portfolio, and told the ABC, "I don't agree with it, I don't accept it."

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton welcomed Di Natale's move, declaring: "Richard Di Natale obviously had enough of her outrageous and over the top behaviour and her demotion has been a long time coming."

Prominent Labor Senator Stephen Conroy said the Greens party room was "divided" and Di Natale was seeking to "marginalise" Hanson-Young and Rhiannon. Hanson-Young has since threatened to cross the floor and vote for the government's proposal for a plebiscite

on gay marriage.

The reshuffle follows indications that the Greens may be shifting their position on refugees.

The party has always accepted the framework of border protection and immigration restrictions, which are the basis of the oppression of asylum seekers. However the Greens have sought to win support from young people by denouncing mandatory offshore detention, which consigns refugees to squalid detention camps in the South Pacific.

In late June, Di Natale declared that the party's position on offshore detention would only be a "starting point" in negotiations with a Labor government. After a public backlash, he stated that the issue was "non-negotiable."

During the election campaign, Greens representatives called for a "regional solution" which would inevitably entail dumping refugees in impoverished South East Asian nations. Greens candidates acknowledged similarities between their proposal, and the "Malaysian solution" put forward by the Labor government of Julia Gillard. That policy, which would have involved a "people swap" of asylum-seekers with the Malaysian government, was ruled illegal, partly because it flouted international law.

Rhiannon and Hanson-Young both played a key role in backing Gillard's government as it implemented war abroad, an assault on the working class and the persecution of asylum seekers, including the reopening of the detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. Now, however, they fear that amid a developing political radicalisation of workers and young people, the Greens are exposing themselves too explicitly as a capitalist party of the affluent upper middle class.



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