

Recriminations in Australian Greens threaten split

Oscar Grenfell
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Ongoing tensions within the Greens erupted last week, with prominent representatives of rival groupings issuing bitter recriminations against one another. The conflict centres on how the Greens, an increasingly discredited party of the political establishment, can reverse its declining support amid mounting hostility toward the entire parliamentary set-up. This threatens to provoke a split.

On Friday, former party leader Bob Brown accused Lee Rhiannon, a federal senator from New South Wales (NSW), of destabilising the party. Brown stated: “When it comes to political white-anting, Lee is the Greens version of Tony Abbott.” He was referring to former Liberal-National Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who was ousted by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in a factional coup in 2015, and has since been accused of undermining the current government.

Brown also claimed: “NSW voters have often told me they won’t vote Green until Lee goes. That’s why Labor loves her.” Rhiannon responded by declaring that the Greens were at a “crossroads” and needed to make a populist appeal.

On Sunday, the Greens national council sent a letter to all members, warning that “the formation of formal factions is incompatible with our party structure and rules.” The edict follows the establishment of “Left Renewal,” a grouping within the Greens whose supporters include close associates of Rhiannon.

The public flare-up is the latest in a series of conflicts which have escalated since the federal election of July 2.

Amid a collapse in support for Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, the Greens’ national Senate vote was down almost 5 percent compared with 2010. Their highest votes were in the most affluent inner-city electorates of Sydney and Melbourne, underscoring that the party’s base is overwhelmingly among privileged sections of the upper middle-class.

Party leader Richard Di Natale, Brown and national officials blamed the poor result on Rhiannon and other figures in the NSW Greens, who were denounced by Labor MPs and the Murdoch press as “lunatic lefties” during the campaign.

In reality, the fall in support for the Greens was a result of its open integration into the political establishment, which has eroded illusions that the party represents an alternative to Labor and the Liberal-Nationals.

The Greens’ 2016 election campaign centred on assurances that it was a “responsible party” and overtures to Labor for the establishment of a coalition government committed to the austerity dictates of the corporate elite.

This followed the Greens’ participation in a de facto coalition with the former federal Labor government of Julia Gillard. While propped up by the Greens between 2010 and 2013, the minority Gillard government dramatically escalated the assault on healthcare, education and welfare, and aligned Australia with the US “pivot to Asia,” a massive military build-up in preparation for war against China.

The Greens at the state level have replicated this model. Most recently, from 2010 to 2014, the Tasmanian Greens played a leading role in a Labor-led coalition government that moved to close public schools and dramatically reduce public spending at the behest of the financial elite.

Since the 2016 election, Di Natale has elevated figures associated with the right-wing of the party to positions of greater prominence and demoted others with ties to Rhiannon. For instance, last September, former Wall Street banker Peter Whish-Wilson, who has advocated the abolition of weekend penalty rates, among other openly pro-business policies, was appointed the Greens’ treasury spokesperson.

The tensions within the Greens have escalated in response to polling indicating a further decline in the party’s support. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, internal figures show a drop from 11.2 percent at the beginning of 2016 to around 10 percent at the end of the year.

The Rhiannon wing, which has close ties to various trade unions, protest groups and the pseudo-left organisations, has responded by warning that the party risks being bypassed by a developing movement of workers and young people against the major establishment parties. Their concerns are entirely tactical. Like Di Natale, Rhiannon has been a

leading figure in the Greens for decades, and has enthusiastically supported all its parliamentary manoeuvres, including its participation in the Gillard government.

In her comments last week, Rhiannon called on the Greens to adopt populist and anti-capitalist rhetoric and seek to reverse the party's declining support by appealing to the broad hostility to social inequality, the assault on public spending and the destruction of jobs, wages and working conditions.

Rhiannon declared: "We need to be able to inspire people and demonstrate that the Greens can challenge ruling elites and end the obscene and growing inequality both at home and abroad. The Bernie Sanders experience in the US shows that people with radical and anti-establishment policies can win mass support. How the Greens inspire people to join with us and vote for us is our challenge in 2017."

Bernie Sanders won some 13 million votes in last year's US Democratic Party primaries by posturing as a socialist and opponent of the "billionaire class." Proving that his rhetoric was aimed at shoring up the right-wing Democratic Party, he then endorsed Hillary Clinton and called on his supporters to vote for her—the favoured candidate of the banks and the military-intelligence apparatus. Since the election, Sanders has declared that he would be "delighted" to work with US President Donald Trump in implementing protectionist measures, such as tariffs on Chinese and Mexican goods and tearing up trade agreements.

In a significant comment last week, hinting at how she believes the Greens can win back support, Rhiannon declared: "The Greens are at a crossroads, with Labor appearing to move left on some issues and minor parties also pulling our votes away."

What Rhiannon means by Labor moving "left" is in fact its adoption of demagogic "Australia First" rhetoric, which has only intensified in the wake of Trump's election. Labor leader Bill Shorten has called for limits on overseas workers entering Australia on temporary "457" work visas, and for subsidies and other protectionist measures to shore up the market share and profits of Australian-based corporations. The "minor parties" to which Rhiannon referred include One Nation and other xenophobic organisations, which have won a degree of support by blaming immigration and "foreign competition" for the social distress affecting working class and regional communities.

Rhiannon is advocating that the Greens compete with the populist right-wing. The Greens' senator has a long history of advocating economic nationalist measures. In late 2015, for instance, she denounced the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership, a trade bloc directed against China, on the grounds that it would "constrain our sovereignty over critically important issues." She has prominently called for

the protection of Australian steel companies by the introduction of procurement policies that mandate the use of Australian-produced steel in public construction. Rhiannon has also previously called for government subsidies to the car industry and other sections of manufacturing, on the pretext of defending "Australian jobs."

Each of these campaigns has been carried out in alliance with the unions, which use protectionist rhetoric against "foreign competition" to divert attention from their collaboration with the major employers in the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions. At the same time, the unions and the Greens seek to divide Australian workers from their counterparts around the world, who face similar attacks on their living standards, working conditions and social rights, as a result of the ever-escalating race for "international competitiveness" on the part of the ruling elites of all countries.

Rhiannon's orientation has been supported within "Left Renewal." While the federal senator has stated she is not a member of the faction, its political line is indistinguishable from hers.

At a Left Renewal public meeting in Sydney last week, young representatives of the faction warned that the Greens would be "left in the dust" if the party did not change its approach. Like Rhiannon, speakers repeatedly invoked Sanders as the model to follow.

Representatives of the pseudo-left groups Solidarity and Socialist Alliance hailed the emergence of the new faction as a step forward for the "left." In reality, the entire axis of the Left Renewal project within the Greens is aimed at confining political discontent and alienation in the working class and youth within the existing parliamentary set-up.



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