

Factional conflict wracks Australian Greens

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The Australian Greens lurched closer toward an open split when the majority of its parliamentary representatives voted on Wednesday to suspend New South Wales (NSW) “left” Senator Lee Rhiannon from its party-room discussions and decision-making.

Rhiannon’s suspension is unprecedented in the Greens’ history. It is the outcome of furious recriminations over her public vow to join with the Labor Party and vote against the Liberal-National Coalition government’s school funding legislation, which copied but substantially modified a 2016 Labor election promise. She made her statement despite the Greens being engaged in back-room negotiations with the government to support the measures.

The Coalition holds only 29 of the 76 seats in the Senate, the upper house of the Australian parliament. To pass legislation, it needs the support of at least 10 senators from other parties. The Greens have nine. Apart from Labor, other parties and independents have 12, so the government can bypass the Greens altogether.

Rhiannon’s opposition prevented the Greens from offering the Coalition a united front. Instead of continuing to talk with Greens’ leader Richard Di Natale and education spokesperson Sarah Hanson-Young, the government made a deal with the right-wing populist One Nation and Nick Xenophon parties and three other senators. The legislation passed in the early hours of June 23, without any kudos flowing the Greens’ way.

Eight Greens senators, as well as its single member in the lower house, Adam Bandt, filed a bitter letter of complaint against Rhiannon to the organisation’s National Council last weekend, accusing her of disloyalty and disruption. One of the factions immediately leaked the letter to the media. It provoked public denunciations of the Greens’ leadership by the NSW state branch, which said Rhiannon opposed the

legislation in line with state policy that she was bound to uphold.

With talk of a potential split, Di Natale and the others backed away from expelling Rhiannon. Instead, they said she will not be re-admitted to the party room until the NSW branch changes its constitution to remove clauses that bind members of parliament to support its program. Indicating that the conflict is far from resolved, Rhiannon and Bandt, who also identifies as a “left,” voted against the disciplinary action.

At stake is the Greens’ political orientation. While claiming to be an “alternative” to the big business parties—the Coalition and Labor—it has promoted the notion that Labor is the “lesser evil” of the two. It has built up a base of support in urban middle-class areas with the argument that Greens’ control of the Senate, known as the “balance of power,” can pressure Labor governments to enact more “progressive” and environmentally friendly measures, or help Labor block legislation proposed by conservative Coalition governments.

The Greens’ parliamentary highpoint thus far came between 2010 and 2013 when it served as the de facto partner of the minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. In return for access to the corridors of power, the Greens assisted Labor enact reactionary legislation such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which privatises disability services. The Greens-backed government also adopted a militarist anti-China foreign policy stance and signed new strategic agreements with the US, including expanded basing arrangements in Australia for American troops, aircraft and warships.

Since 2013, when Labor lost office, the Greens’ fortunes have declined. It has not benefited from the growing hostility to the major parties. Instead, its vote has fallen. In the 2016 election, the Greens openly stated it would form a coalition with Labor and take

ministries in the cabinet. The outcome, however, was a debacle. The Greens lost a senate seat, while other third parties increased the number of seats they hold, depriving the Greens of the “balance of power.”

For several years now, debate within the Greens has centred on how to demonstrate its parliamentary “relevance.” Di Natale—supported by former leader Bob Brown—has indicated a desire to repudiate its antagonistic stance toward the Coalition.

The education funding issue presented another opportunity for the Greens to prove it was prepared to defy Labor and conduct “pragmatic” negotiations with the government.

Labor’s school-funding model, known as “Gonski” after the businessman who proposed it in 2011, sought to justify pouring billions of dollars into the private school sector via a supposed “needs-based” criteria. Resources are allocated to schools regardless of whether they are publicly-run or private fee-charging institutions. The model was intended to dovetail with the gradual privatisation of education, which is seeing more private schools open in direct competition with the cash-starved public school system. “Needs” criteria notwithstanding, Gonski was crafted to ensure that elite private colleges continued to receive annual injections of millions of dollars.

The Gonski model was revived this year by the federal government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull but with some \$22 billion less funding over 10 years than Labor promised during the 2016 election. The Coalition and the Greens education spokesperson Sarah Hanson-Young responded to Labor’s agitation over the issue by accusing it of making promises it had no intention of meeting.

Labor nevertheless signaled that it intends to make the alleged “cut” to education funding a key issue in its campaign to regain office. The Australian Education Union (AEU) and other trade unions, which have collaborated in the running-down of public schools and slashing of teachers’ working conditions, are cynically using their resources to promote Labor as defenders of greater equality in education.

Rhiannon personifies a minority within the Greens who are firmly orientated to Labor and the trade unions, but try to present themselves as further to the “left” on most issues. Their greatest concern is that the entire political establishment—including the Greens—could be

by-passed by an eruption of the seething discontent in the working class over ever-widening social inequality and declining living standards.

The “Left Renewal” faction of the Greens, formed in NSW late last year, has proposed that the party adopt more explicitly “anti-capitalist” language, echoing the demagogic of figures such as Bernie Sanders in the US and British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. While Rhiannon is not formally a member of Left Renewal, its public representatives are close to her politically.

Such left posturing is viewed with hostility by Di Natale, Brown and others in the parliamentary and organisational hierarchy of the Greens. The membership and voter base of the Greens does not come from the working class, but privileged sections of the middle class. It receives much of its financial support from “green” business figures, in fields such as clean energy and transport, information technology and agriculture, who view the Greens as a pressure group on behalf of their corporate ambitions. They have no interest in the promotion of pseudo-socialist rhetoric that could generate expectations in the working class for genuine social change.

The antagonism between the two factions has only intensified since Rhiannon’s suspension. The NSW branch declared the actions of the parliamentary majority to be “unconstitutional” and an attack on the rights of Greens’ members. Bruce Knobloch, a NSW member of the national council, publicly called for Di Natale to resign as leader.



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