

Conflicts in Australian Greens driven by decline in support

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Internal polling, leaked to the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper last week, has shown that underlying the eruption of open conflicts within the Australian Greens is a sharp decline in the party's support, especially among young people.

Bitter tensions between rival groupings within the Greens emerged publicly last month. The national leadership, headed by Richard Di Natale, voted to exclude Lee Rhiannon, a federal senator, from the party room. They also demanded an overhaul of the New South Wales (NSW) Greens' constitution, which mandates that its federal representatives adhere to state-based policy decisions.

The unprecedented move was a response to the public opposition of Rhiannon and the NSW Greens to the regressive school funding legislation of the federal Liberal-National government, under conditions in which the Greens national leadership were in backroom negotiations to push the policy through the parliament. Rhiannon's stance prevented the Greens from making a deal with the government to support the legislation, which was passed with the support of other "third party" senators.

The party leadership sought to dampen down the internal conflicts earlier this month by readmitting Rhiannon into the party room, though she could still be excluded when "contentious" matters are discussed.

The compromise was prompted by the fact that, unlike in previous conflicts, Rhiannon responded to her suspension by declaring that she was "disappointed" in Di Natale. The NSW Greens publicly denounced the national leadership.

Rhiannon has given a series of interviews in which she has hailed the examples of British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and Bernie Sanders, the self-styled "socialist" candidate in the Democratic Party primaries

for US president last year. Both Corbyn and Sanders won widespread support, especially among young people, by falsely posturing as opponents of the austerity agenda of the ruling elite. Their aim in both instances was to confine mounting opposition to the gutting of social spending and the dramatic growth of social inequality to the existing parliamentary set-up.

The faction around Rhiannon, which has close ties to the pseudo-left and the corporatised trade unions, is concerned that the Greens will be unable to play a similar role. They recognise that its open transformation into an establishment party, seeking to make deals with the government of the day in the interests of its corporate backers, has increasingly discredited it.

The leaks to the *Australian* included worried commentary over the party's declining support. According to the newspaper, one internal analysis stated that the Greens' are "losing the younger vote," despite "priority" efforts directed at that constituency.

The *Australian* claimed the analysis stated that the party was "not on track to save" its federal senators and risked losing positions in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. "Distressingly, analysis of data for the full year since the July 2016 election suggests that outside of NSW, our vote has likely fallen since the election, leaving key states exposed," it stated.

According to the polling cited by the Greens' analysis, the party's national vote has decreased from 11.2 percent prior to the July 2 federal election last year, to 9.7 percent this year.

The analysis underscores that the Greens are no longer able to capitalise on widespread hostility towards Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, by posturing as a "progressive" alternative, as they did between

2000 and 2010.

A key turning point was the Greens' participation in a de-facto coalition with the minority federal Labor government of Julia Gillard between 2010 and 2013. That government, with the key support of all Greens' federal representatives, including Rhiannon, imposed sweeping attacks to healthcare, welfare and social spending, and aligned Australia with the US "pivot to Asia," a military build-up in preparation for war with China.

In the 2013 federal election, the Greens national vote declined in both the upper and lower house. Its open collaboration with Labor alienated layers of its supporters, especially among young people.

This trend accelerated in the 2016 federal election, with the party failing to win any new seats in the House of Representatives and losing a seat in the Senate. The Greens' vote was highest in the some of the most affluent inner-city electorates of Sydney and Melbourne, underscoring the party's voting base is primarily upper middle-class.

In the course of the party's 2016 campaign, senior figures, including Di Natale, repeatedly stressed their willingness to work with either of the major parties, and called for a Labor-Greens coalition government—in an election marked by the repudiation of all of the major parties. In the aftermath, the faction associated with Rhiannon and the national leadership traded mutual recriminations over who was responsible for the party's poor electoral performance.

Sections of the corporate media, especially its ostensibly "liberal" wing, have since voiced concerns that the discrediting of the Greens, and the prospect of further conflicts within the party, deprives the official parliamentary set-up of a much-needed safety valve for mounting popular discontent.

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These fears have been compounded by the increasing crisis of the party following the resignation this month of its two deputy leaders, prominent senators Scott Ludlam and Lisa Waters, over revelations that they are dual citizens and therefore unable to sit in parliament under anti-democratic electoral laws.

An article in the *Guardian* last week by Katherine Murphy, a former senior writer for Fairfax Media, commented that "the Greens are not gaining ground in

an atmosphere that should benefit them—an atmosphere of disenchantment with the major parties and with politics as usual."

Echoing the concerns of Rhiannon and her supporters, the article noted the orientation of the Greens leadership towards becoming a "party of government." Murphy wrote: "But Di Natale has come to the party leadership at a time when public antipathy towards establishment political systems is high, and there is an appetite on both the left and the right for radicalism."

She warned that the party "perversely managed to pick a leader of the sensible centre just at the time when radicalism was coming back heavily into vogue." She promoted Rhiannon, declaring that her so-called left posturing had created a "mini-movement."

The *Guardian*, like Rhiannon, is fearful that the political establishment is unprepared to respond to the coming social and political struggles of workers and young people. Their favourable references to Corbyn and Sanders are a warning that, like those two figures, the Rhiannon wing of the Greens and its supporters are seeking to create a new political trap for the working class.

The Australian pseudo-left tendencies, including Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, have signalled they will play a key role in these efforts. Socialist Alliance has published a series of articles hailing Rhiannon and fraudulently presenting her as a "principled and progressive" political leader.

Socialist Alternative has published articles bemoaning the emphasis of the Rhiannon faction on issues of party procedure and supposed "grassroots democracy." But, like Socialist Alliance, they have held up the Rhiannon wing as a "left" tendency in a bid to bolster its credentials and divert young people back behind the Greens and the official parliamentary set-up.



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