

Australian Greens leaders air recriminations on TV

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Factional opponents within the Australian Greens, including among the party's senior federal members of parliament, used a "Four Corners" program aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Monday night to hurl accusations against one another.

Billed as an "inside look" at conflicts within the Greens, the program described it as a "party in turmoil." The segment was filmed following an unprecedented decision by the Greens national leadership to suspend Lee Rhiannon, a New South Wales (NSW) senator, from the federal party room in June.

That suspension, spearheaded by federal Greens leader, Senator Richard Di Natale, was provoked by Rhiannon's public opposition to the Liberal-National government's regressive school funding bill. Rhiannon's denunciations of the legislation stymied attempts by the Greens leadership to form a common front with the government to push the bill through the Senate.

Rhiannon's actions had nothing to do with defending public education. She effectively blocked with the Labor Party, one of the central architects of the creeping privatisation of education, and hailed its original "Gonski" education funding model, which has been used to reallocate millions of dollars from public to private schools.

Rather, the dispute brought to a head longstanding divisions over how to position the Greens amid a deep-going crisis of the whole political establishment, which confronts mounting hostility and anger over deteriorating living standards and widening social inequality.

Rhiannon, speaking for sections of the Greens centred in NSW, is fearful that the attempts by Di Natale and the national leadership to consolidate the Greens as a "party of government" committed to "fiscal responsibility," i.e. to the austerity dictates of the corporate elite, will see it bypassed by a developing political radicalisation of workers and young people.

The Rhiannon faction, which has close ties to the corporatised trade unions and various protest groups, favours the use of pseudo-left and even socialist rhetoric to channel

popular opposition behind the Greens and the official political set-up.

"Four Corners" provided no explanation or political analysis of the conflict. However, the extraordinary level of rancour on display indicated that the divisions within the party could be heading to an open split, or moves toward expulsions.

The program began by noting the marked decline in the Greens' support, especially among young people, documented in internal polling recently leaked to the media.

The Greens' posture as an alternative to the major parties was discredited by its crucial support for the 2010-2013 minority Labor government of Julia Gillard, which slashed social spending and deepened Australia's alignment with US-led wars and military preparations. Recent election results, including in 2016, have shown that the Greens' primary voter base is among the most affluent sections of the upper middle-class.

The program quickly turned to senior Greens leaders issuing bitter denunciations of one another.

Former party leader Bob Brown said Rhiannon "pulled the rug out from under" moves by the Greens to strike an agreement with the government over education funding. His comment summed up the fears within the Greens leadership that Rhiannon's fraudulent "left" posturing threatens to disrupt their attempts to forge backroom deals with the government of the day. Brown denounced Rhiannon as a "team wrecker" and declared "it's the end of Lee's reign."

Richard Di Natale, responding to Rhiannon's comments that she was "disappointed" in his leadership, likewise stated: "It's not a surprise... I don't think she believes in leaders at the state or federal level at all."

Rhiannon and her supporters were no less vitriolic. Referring to her Greens colleagues, Rhiannon stated: "Everybody in Parliament doesn't deserve to be there. That's something you learn pretty quickly when you sit in Parliament." One of her supporters, Aesha Hussain, a Greens staffer, was shown at a "comedy debate" declaring that "Bob Brown should f*** off because he's over 50."

The origins of these bitter divisions lie in the way the Greens was founded. It was established as a national organisation through the federation of disparate state-based protest groups in 1992. While all were based on a nationalist and pro-capitalist program, they had divergent focuses, reflecting the aspirations of different sections of the middle class.

The Greens in Tasmania and Victoria were founded by conservative environmental groups that rarely even paid lip-service to broader social questions, such as inequality and poverty.

The NSW Greens, however, were dominated by former members of the Stalinist Socialist Party of Australia, including Rhiannon, and figures such as Hall Greenland, associated with fake-left organisations. Ever since, they have used “left” rhetoric to win support among layers of radical students, and to cover over their own right-wing policies, which have aligned, for the past two and a half decades, with the Greens national leadership.

Amid a fracturing of the political establishment, and unprecedented social discontent, however, the coexistence of these groupings is increasingly fraught.

The national party leadership has demanded that the NSW Greens change their constitution, which currently mandates that representatives, including federal MPs, adhere to the decisions of the state-based party. The leadership is seeking to forge a centralised national organisation, along the lines of Labor or the Liberal-Nationals, as part of its bid to enter government.

The posturing of Rhiannon and her supporters as a “left” alternative within the Greens is a fraud. Rhiannon’s entire political career has been dedicated to channeling social opposition behind the official political establishment.

While claiming to foster “grass roots democracy”, Rhiannon and her supporters have used their control of leading committees to ensure their domination of the NSW branch. They have invoked “consensus” decision-making processes to stymie any challenge to their policies, even when they are opposed by the bulk of Greens members in NSW.

Rhiannon, no less than Di Natale and other Greens senators, played a central role in propping up the Gillard Labor government as it cut funding for welfare, healthcare and education, and removed hundreds of thousands of single-parents from their benefits, forcing them onto poverty-level unemployment payments.

Like all her colleagues, Rhiannon supported the Gillard government’s alignment with the vast American military build-up directed against China, and has maintained the official conspiracy of silence surrounding Australia’s central role in US war plans against Beijing.

On “Four Corners”, Rhiannon again hailed British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, underscoring the real purpose of her phony “left” rhetoric. She noted he had won widespread support, especially among young people, by “campaigning on free higher education, re-nationalising the railways, democratising the workplace, speaking about socialism.”

Hall Greenland, a close associate of Rhiannon, was asked whether “Lee Rhiannon is the Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders of the New South Wales party?” He responded in the affirmative.

Corbyn, however, has repeatedly betrayed his various pledges, including by tacitly backing the imposition of austerity by local councils, Britain’s predatory bombing campaign against Syria and the maintenance of its nuclear weapons program. His role has been to divert a developing political radicalisation of the working class behind Labour, one of the main parties of the British ruling elite.

Bernie Sanders has played a similar role in the United States. Sanders won mass support in the Democratic Party primaries for the 2016 US presidential elections by claiming to be a socialist, before backing Hillary Clinton, the handpicked candidate of the banks and the intelligence agencies. Since then, he has sought to confine opposition to the administration of Donald Trump to the worm-eaten institutions of American capitalism, above all the Democratic Party.

The invocations of Sanders and Corbyn by Rhiannon and her supporters are a warning. Amid a deepening social and political crisis in Australia that will propel workers and young people into major struggles, they are preparing to create a new political trap, aimed at preventing the emergence of a mass movement of the working class based on a genuine socialist and internationalist program.



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