

Australian Greens riven by factional conflicts

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Bitter factional infighting within the Australian Greens has publicly reemerged, with competing tendencies in the party hurling bitter recriminations at one another and apportioning blame for recent electoral defeats.

The conflicts, which threaten a split, or the implosion of the Greens, have erupted in the wake of a series of electoral defeats. They are one expression of a major crisis of the political establishment, stemming from widespread hostility toward all the official parliamentary parties.

The Greens failed to win the Melbourne federal House of Representatives seat of Batman in a by-election last month, despite being tipped as the likely victor by the media and pollsters. In the South Australian state election, also in March, the Greens' vote fell 2 points to 6.6 percent. If the result were replicated in federal elections, the party would lose its federal senate seat for the state. In Tasmania, the Greens' vote in last month's state election fell from 16 percent in 2010, to just 10 percent.

Underlying the fall in support for the Greens is the discrediting of the party's claims to represent an "alternative" to Labor and the Liberal-Nationals. The Greens have collaborated with state and federal governments headed by both parties, as they have slashed social spending and aligned Australia with US-led wars and military preparations. The Greens' constituency is concentrated among a layer of the affluent upper-middle class.

Competing factions within the Greens have responded to the defeats with legal actions, demands for the resignation of federal senators, and leaked denunciations of senior members of the party.

Following the Batman by-election, Greens federal leader Richard Di Natale threatened to expel party members who had leaked criticisms of the party's candidate Alex Bhathal to the press.

On April 11, the *Age* published an opinion piece by former Victorian Greens local councillor Lynette Keleher who declared that the party was "not doing politics any differently" to Labor or the Liberal-Nationals. Keleher

claimed that critics in the Victorian state branch were "terrified into silence, constrained by rules set down by the elite and muted by a cult-like fear of what will happen if they speak out."

The following day, the *Age* revealed that former Greens Victorian leader Greg Barber settled a sexual discrimination complaint by a staff member with an out of court settlement.

In South Australia, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young is facing a preselection challenge from five other members for the party's top state senate position, including her former running mate Robert Simms. Earlier this month, the *Australian* revealed that young Greens in the state had circulated an open letter denouncing Hanson-Young for failing to collaborate with them on higher education policy.

In a number of cases, the factional alignments and political issues surrounding the conflicts are opaque. They appear to be motivated in large part by a desperate jockeying for a dwindling number of parliamentary seats, full-time staffing positions and resources.

The political concerns motivating the conflicts, however, have been underscored by hostilities traded between a "left" grouping of the party, headed by Lee Rhiannon, a federal senator from New South Wales (NSW), and the Di Natale faction of the leadership.

Di Natale and his supporters, including former party leader Bob Brown, have previously issued bitter denunciations of Rhiannon, including demands for her resignation.

The conflict is entirely tactical. Di Natale's supporters have viewed Rhiannon's ties to the trade unions and various pseudo-left protest groups as a potential obstacle to their appeals to the corporate elite, and their attempts to position the Greens as a "responsible party of government."

The Rhiannon wing of the party, for its part, has been centrally involved in all the sordid parliamentary manoeuvres of the Greens. It supported the Greens' de facto coalition with the Labor government of Julia Gillard

from 2010 to 2013, as it cut healthcare, education and welfare, and aligned Australia with US plans for war against China. Its concern is that the open integration of the Greens into the political establishment will see the party bypassed by a developing political radicalisation of workers and young people.

Last Wednesday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that five Greens branches in NSW had issued a letter calling on Rhiannon to resign from parliament. The document allegedly demanded that Rhiannon make way for Mehreen Faruqi, who won preselection for the party's top senate seat in NSW last November, so that the latter can contest the next federal election as a sitting MP.

The following day, supporters of Rhiannon launched a public campaign for the party's leader to be elected in a ballot of the entire membership. The move, accompanied by statements decrying a lack of "grassroots democracy," was a thinly-veiled attack on Di Natale.

The Rhiannon faction likewise sought to block Cate Faehrmann, Di Natale's former chief of staff, from contesting the NSW state seat that Faruqi will vacate. Faehrmann took successful legal action in the NSW Supreme Court, establishing her eligibility for the position.

An article in the *Guardian* on April 5 voiced the concerns of the Rhiannon wing of the party. It cited one of her supporters, who denounced Di Natale this month for adopting some of her faction's populist rhetoric.

Referring to Di Natale, the anonymous individual stated: "Just months ago, he and others in the party leadership were rejecting the push to really strike out against capitalism. And now suddenly, we are back to progressive policies? Could losing Batman and Tasmania have anything to do with that?"

Di Natale this month announced that the Greens would campaign for a "universal basic income" and a state-owned "people's bank" that would operate in conjunction with the major corporate banks. At the time, Di Natale said the Greens' collaboration with the federal Liberal-National government on legislation had created "confusion," i.e., had discredited the party.

In reality, there is nothing "progressive" or "left-wing" about Di Natale's proposals, which are also backed by the Rhiannon faction. Sections of the corporate elite internationally have called for a "basic income" out of fear that rapidly declining wages will hit economic growth and provoke social struggles by workers. Such proposals are invariably accompanied by calls for further cuts to social spending, in exchange for meagre pay

increases.

Rhiannon's wing this month issued a manifesto calling for increases to corporate taxes, along with boosts to spending on healthcare, education and other social necessities. It provided no indication of how such measures would be achieved, amid bipartisan austerity policies that the Greens have facilitated.

The real motivation for the manifesto is to divert mounting discontent behind the increasingly discredited political establishment. It warned against a "growing tendency within the Greens to take a cautious approach, casting the party as part of the political mainstream seeking achievable reforms."

Significantly, the manifesto hailed British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, who contested the 2016 Democratic Party primary for the US presidential election. Both figures used left-wing rhetoric to channel young people and workers, seeking an alternative, behind parties of big business.

Corbyn has since facilitated British participation in the war in Syria, along with sweeping spending cuts enforced by Labour Party municipal councils. Sanders, who won mass support by calling for a "political revolution" against the "billionaire class," endorsed Hillary Clinton, the handpicked Democratic Party candidate of Wall Street and the intelligence agencies.

The invocation of Sanders and Corbyn is a warning that the Greens are seeking to play a similar role, amid a crisis of the entire political establishment and the emergence of social and political struggles of the working class.



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