

Australian Greens pursue right-wing coalition government with Labor in Victoria

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The Australian Greens aims to hold the balance of power in both houses of Victoria's parliament and form a coalition government with the Labor Party after the November 24 state election. Its campaign underscores the party's rightward shift. Resting upon a wealthy, upper-middle class base, it is determined to extend its influence within the political establishment.

The Greens currently holds three of the 88 lower house seats in the state parliament—the inner-Melbourne electorates of Prahran, Northcote, and Melbourne. These areas are representative of the party's affluent base. The central Melbourne electorate is comprised of 56 percent professionals, more than double the national average, while it has the lowest proportion of any state electorate for residents with trade qualifications (6 percent). Prahran, a seat formerly held by the Liberal Party, incorporates part of the ultra-wealthy suburb of Toorak, and also has the third highest proportion of all areas for children attending private schools (63 percent).

The Greens aims to retain these three lower house seats and win another two, Richmond and Brunswick, from the Labor Party. These electorates are also inner-city suburbs that are now largely inhabited by more privileged sections of the middle class. Richmond, for example, has the second highest proportion of all electorates for residents who are managers and professionals (58 percent) and the sixth highest proportion of households with a weekly income higher than \$2,500 (28 percent).

It remains to be seen whether the Greens' electoral aspirations will eventuate. The Greens' ability to appeal to the hostility towards the distrusted and despised Labor and Liberal parties is hindered by their ever more open eagerness to work with them in government. The Greens lost a federal by-election last

March in the seat of Batman, which overlaps the state electorate of Northcote, despite investing significant resources in the campaign (see: "Australian by-election in Melbourne heightens Greens' crisis").

In the Batman by-election, the Greens sought to woo Liberal voters by opposing the Labor Party from the right, with party leader Richard Di Natale opposing a limited Labor proposal to abolish a tax break for high income retirees.

In the event, however, that neither the Labor party nor the Liberal-National coalition is able to win a parliamentary majority, the Greens will likely hold the balance of power and be in a position to either form a ruling coalition or strike a de-facto coalition deal to support a minority government.

The Greens serve as a vital prop for the increasingly crisis-stricken political setup. The Labor government holds the slimmest of parliamentary majorities, with 45 of the 88 lower house seats, and is responsible for deteriorating working class living standards, rapidly escalating social inequality, and a social infrastructure crisis afflicting public schools, hospitals, and other services (see: "Victorian Labor government makes election pitch to big business").

The opposition Liberal Party is in disarray. A protracted financial crisis previously threatened to prevent the party from mounting an effective state election campaign. Corporate funding has dried up in recent years, as the Labor Party has proven itself a more effective instrument for big business and finance capital. According to Australian Electoral Commission submissions, the Victorian Liberal Party had \$7.5 million in debts in 2015–2016. The opposition was forced to sell its six-storey central Melbourne headquarters, and pursue a Federal Court case for access to millions of dollars controlled by the Cormack

Foundation, its corporate fundraising arm, after foundation directors withheld money reportedly because of dissatisfaction with the party leadership.

The legal case revealed that Liberal Party paper membership in the state had declined to just 10,000. Thirty years ago, when Victoria had two million fewer people, membership was twice as high.

The Greens have downplayed the prospects of joining a Liberal-led coalition, while not ruling out the possibility. State leader Samantha Ratnam explained that it was “very hard to see us do a deal with the Liberals,” as has been seen previously in the neighbouring state of Tasmania. This, she explained, was due to the opposition’s hostility to renewable energy subsidies—an important issue for the “eco-business” lobby that forms part of the Greens base.

Ratnam gave short shrift to Labor Party statements that they would not form government with the Greens after the November 24 ballot, declaring this as “posturing.” She explained: “If the people of Victoria do vote us into the balance of power, I think it would be wise of Premier Andrews to talk to the Greens.”

Another Labor term in office would see the working class confront a government moving even further to the right, accelerating the offensive against living standards and democratic rights. In the event that the Greens directly install this government, their primary responsibility will be to provide it with a “left” gloss. At the Greens October 27 campaign launch state leader Samantha Ratnam declared that a Labor-Greens government would “usher in the most progressive era of politics that Victoria has ever seen.”

Federal party leader Richard Di Natale also spoke at the launch and enthused over the “historic opportunity” to have a “multi-party government.” He declared: “Here’s our chance to use the influence that we have through power sharing government—that’s what lies ahead for Victoria.”

To the cheers of the assembled Greens members, Di Natale invoked as a model the Greens’ support for the minority federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard between 2010 and 2013.

Far from ushering a new era of “progressive politics,” the Greens-backed Gillard government saw a further lurch to the right. In foreign policy, the government signed up to the US “pivot” to Asia, a provocative strategy based on militarily encircling China, including

through the new US marine base in Darwin, without a word of protest from the Greens. Gillard also fully backed the US vendetta against journalist and WikiLeaks' editor Julian Assange.

On domestic policy, Gillard’s most notable achievements included privatising disability services, undermining public education through NAPLAN standardised testing, and stripping tens of thousands of single mothers of parent payment benefits. The Greens remained loyal supporters of the minority Labor government throughout these attacks on the working class. The Greens-Labor administration opened the door for right-wing ideologue Tony Abbott to come to power in 2013 on the basis of populist demagoguery.

The historical experiences of workers and young people with the Greens demonstrate the fraud of its claim to represent an alternative to the two major capitalist parties.



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