

Australian Greens riven by factional conflicts as MP resigns

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Jeremy Buckingham, a prominent state Greens MP in the New South Wales (NSW) Upper House, announced his resignation from the party at a press conference on Thursday last week. He denounced the NSW Greens as “toxic” and declared that he would contest the March 2019 state election as an independent.

Buckingham’s move follows increasingly vicious public brawling between rival factions within the Greens, especially in NSW. The party is wracked by crisis amid a collapse of its support and widespread disaffection with the entire political establishment. Broad layers of the population view the Greens as a party of the affluent upper middle-class and reject its claim to represent an alternative to Labor and the Liberal-Nationals.

A key turning point was the party’s participation in the 2010-2013 federal Labor government of Julia Gillard, which slashed social spending, aligned Australia ever more closely with US wars and military preparations, and intensified the assault on democratic rights. Since then, state and federal elections, including the Victorian state election last month, have registered a substantial decline in the party’s vote.

Under these conditions, rival groupings have repeatedly clashed over how to position the party to reverse its decline.

Buckingham was a leading figure in the “right” faction of the NSW Greens. This wing has advocated ever more open appeals for coalition governments with Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, along with an exclusive focus on environmental issues, particularly pitched to disaffected supporters of the Nationals in regional and rural areas.

The Buckingham grouping has repeatedly clashed with a self-styled “progressive” faction of the NSW party, previously headed by former federal senator Lee

Rhiannon. This grouping has advocated a focus on identity and lifestyle politics, condemnations of the persecution of refugees, and populist demagoguery, aimed at winning support among students and layers of the inner-city middle-class.

Buckingham and his supporters have, over the past several years, repeatedly denounced the Rhiannon wing as “left-wing” and even “communist.” They have warned that its “extremist rhetoric” undermines the party’s attempts to present itself to the corporate elite as a “responsible party of government” and could disrupt the backroom horse-trading between the Greens and the major parties.

For their part, the “progressives” have voiced fears that the openly right-wing politics of Buckingham and his colleagues will further discredit the Greens. The Rhiannon wing is concerned that the Greens are being bypassed by a developing political radicalisation of workers and young people and will be unable to channel oppositional sentiments back behind the official political establishment.

The conflict has intensified this year, amid internal pre-selection contests for next year’s NSW state election. It erupted publicly on November 13, when Jenny Leong, a “progressive” Greens MP, made a speech in the NSW parliament calling for Buckingham to resign and to remove himself from the party’s list for the state election.

Leong used parliamentary privilege to brand Buckingham as a “perpetrator” of sexual misconduct. The basis of the accusation was a claim by a former Greens staffer that the MP groped and attempted to kiss her during a drunken night out in 2011. Buckingham was cleared by an independent investigation carried out by consultancy firm “Workdynamic Australia.”

Leong also made vague claims that others had

accused Buckingham of wrongdoing. She absurdly cited two instances of Buckingham raising his voice at her as evidence of his “aggressive and intimidating” behaviour towards women.

The speech underscored that there are no principled political differences separating the rival groupings.

Instead, Leong and the “progressive” grouping have used the deeply anti-democratic method of unsubstantiated sex allegations to take down their factional opponents. This is in line with the reactionary character of the “#MeToo” movement, which advances the interests of affluent layers of the upper middle-class and has sought to do away with the presumption of innocence, on the basis of hysterical claims of an all-pervasive “rape culture.”

Leong’s cynical speech was immediately backed by the majority of Greens MPs. It compelled federal Greens leader Richard Di Natale, who had previously been supportive of Buckingham, to call for his resignation. On December 8, the NSW Greens delegates’ council passed a motion demanding that Buckingham, who polled second in state pre-selections for the Upper House, withdraw his candidacy for the March election.

Buckingham and his two closest parliamentary colleagues, Justin Fields and Cate Faehrmann, denounced the move as a rejection of “grassroots democracy.”

Faehrmann and Fields issued a letter to the Greens executive, threatening to resign from the party if “Left Renewal,” a small faction in the NSW Greens, was not expelled.

They wrote that the party had been “undermined” by a “small group of members motivated by extreme left ideology” and accused some of Left Renewal members of being “from the entryist ‘revolutionary socialist’ organisation Solidarity.”

The comments were a pitch to Di Natale and others in the Greens’ national leadership to intervene against Buckingham’s rivals. Di Natale and former party leader Bob Brown have previously made similar right-wing, anti-communist denunciations of members of the NSW Greens.

In reality, Left Renewal is a small grouping that appears to be primarily composed of university students and junior Greens staffers. It was established in 2016, amid factional warfare within the party. The grouping

explicitly supported Rhiannon and her closest colleagues against Di Natale.

The claims that Left Renewal is “extreme left” or even “revolutionary socialist” are absurd. It does not advocate anything resembling socialist policies and has never criticised the Greens’ de facto coalition with the former federal Labor government, in which Rhiannon played a key role.

To the extent that Left Renewal has invoked “socialism”, it has been to call for the Greens to attempt to emulate the demagoguery of figures such as Bernie Sanders, and parties like Greece’s Syriza.

Sanders won mass support in the 2016 presidential election by posturing as a “democratic socialist”. His role was to try and trap a leftward shift among American workers and youth within the Democratic Party, which nominated Hillary Clinton as its presidential candidate, a war criminal and open representative of the Wall Street banks.

Syriza formed government in Greece in 2015 after winning mass support by posturing as an opponent of crippling austerity measures. The party immediately betrayed its promises, and has implemented the deepest social cuts in Europe, along with a vicious campaign against refugees.

Since Buckingham’s resignation, Fields and Faehrmann have stated that they will not leave the Greens. In a bid to appease them and avert a broader split, the party’s national leadership announced a review into the “processes” of the NSW Greens. This is unlikely, however, to resolve the deep divisions revealed over the past weeks.



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