

Australia's "teal independent" candidates backed by major corporate interests

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Several Australian government parliamentarians, most prominently Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, face defeat at the May 21 federal election at the hands of a group of candidates known as "teal independents."

These so-called independent candidates, known by the common colour of their campaign paraphernalia, are seeking to capitalise on growing hostility to both the Labor and Liberal parties, including within affluent electorates, especially over the climate change emergency.

Bankrolled by various "green" corporate interests, the candidates are seeking to promote the illusion that the necessary action on greenhouse gas emissions can be secured within the capitalist system by pressuring the major parties, and, in the event of a hung parliament, by demanding concessions from a minority government.

The threat posed to Liberal parliamentarians has heightened the atmosphere of crisis around Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Former Liberal prime minister John Howard earlier this month warned that if any of the "teal independent" challengers win on May 21, "we're not going to form the next government, that's the truth of the matter and that's the reality."

The "teal independents" are being financially supported by the Climate 200 political funding group, established by prominent corporate figure Simon Holmes à Court. The son of Australia's first billionaire, corporate raider Robert Holmes à Court, Simon Holmes à Court was before 2019 a close associate and financial donor of Treasurer Josh Frydenberg.

The two figures fell out over Holmes à Court's public opposition to proposed new coal mines in Australia. The Climate 200 group was established before the 2019 federal election and helped finance independent candidate Zali Steggall's successful campaign in the seat of Warringah against former Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

The Climate 200 campaign in 2022 is on a larger scale,

with a \$10 million campaign fund established with the support of several other ultra-wealthy figures including tech CEO billionaire Mike Cannon-Brookes.

The campaign reflects rival sectional interests within Australia's corporate elite on the climate change issue. For decades, under successive Labor and Liberal governments, government policy has been effectively dictated by the fossil fuel sector—the mining giants and the oil and gas corporations. Australian capitalism has few rivals on the world stage for the brazenness with which it rejects even minor reductions in greenhouse emissions.

At the same time, however, another wing of big business has developed investments in various "green" technologies, including solar and renewable energies, as well as carbon credits and trading mechanisms developed through international treaties on climate change. These corporate interests stand to directly gain enormous profits from more ambitious emissions reductions targets, which would see greater public subsidies and tax breaks for the "green" business sector. This sector has also warned of the threat of carbon tariffs being imposed on Australian exports by European Union countries if climate targets are not strengthened.

Holmes à Court personally embodies this wing of the Australian capitalist class. In an address to the National Press Club last February, he emphasised, "We're missing in action on the biggest economic and business opportunity of this century. Climate action means huge new industries. And this transformation definitely is a race, because we're not the only country that's endowed with abundant, cheap, clean energy and the minerals needed for the 21st century."

According to a report in the *Australian* on April 26, the executive "has a big portfolio of family and other businesses focused on making money out of a potential boom in clean-energy technology." This includes one renewable energy company, Decarb Ventures, that has

significant international investments but is postponing anticipated “huge” Australian investment opportunities because of alleged lack of support from the Morrison government. Holmes à Court told the newspaper that he anticipated a “once-in-a-century opportunity” with a potential boom in renewable energy and mining of critical minerals, cobalt, lithium, nickel and silicon.

The “teal independents” themselves have the closest connections with the corporate and political establishment, and are contesting many of the most affluent electorates in the country.

In Western Australia, for example, the “teal” candidate in the seat of Curtin is Kate Chaney, niece of former Liberal Party Senator and deputy party leader Fred Chaney. Kate Chaney is a corporate lawyer, previously with the retail and agri-business giant Wesfarmers. She is contesting the seat of Curtin, previously held by former foreign minister Julie Bishop. The electorate includes the exclusive suburb of Peppermint Grove, where the average house price approaches \$4 million.

Other “teal” candidates include medical expert Monique Ryan, standing against Treasurer Josh Frydenberg in the wealthy eastern Melbourne electorate of Kooyong; in neighbouring Goldstein, former ABC journalist Zoe Daniel is challenging government MP Tim Wilson; and in the affluent eastern Sydney seat of Wentworth, corporate executive Allegra Spender is seeking to oust government MP Dave Sharma.

The “teal independents” campaign is a reactionary fraud. The candidates, mostly women who are challenging mostly male incumbents, have promoted feminist identity politics. Shifting the gender balance in parliament will do nothing to alter the rightwing, pro-business consensus within the political establishment. The “teals” have likewise called for an end to corruption in politics, while saying nothing on the root cause of this corruption—the inescapable nexus under the profit system between corporate and political interests.

Nowhere is the independents’ pitch more bogus than it is on the issue of climate change.

Global warming represents an existential threat to humanity—for decades, governments around the world have ignored scientists’ warnings and failed to take the measures necessary to prevent dangerous and potentially irreversible temperature rises. This failure reflects the fact that the climate change catastrophe is the product of contradictions within the capitalist system.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its election statement: “None of the other parties, including the

Greens, has a solution. Their policies are limited to what is possible within the framework of the profit system and the national state, and are therefore piecemeal, parochial and based on the market. But capitalism and its division of the world into rival nation states are the essential barrier to the only real solution: a scientifically-based and internationally coordinated plan to halt and reverse climate change.”

The “teal independents” aspiration of forming an alliance with one of the major parties after May 21 in the event of a hung parliament poses no threat whatsoever to the political establishment. Sections of business and the media have nevertheless waged a vitriolic campaign against them, labelling them “fake independents” and allies of the Labor Party or Greens.

This reflects concerns that in the event that neither Labor nor Liberal-National can form a majority government in their own right, parliamentary instability may undermine the implementation of the agenda that has been worked out behind the backs of the Australian population—at home, austerity spending cuts targeting the wages and living standards of the working class, and overseas, the involvement in further US-led wars of aggression, including against China.

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