

Greens in crisis after Australian federal election losses

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The parliamentary representatives of the Greens convened in Melbourne last Thursday to select a new party leader following the May 3 Australian federal election. The circumstances of the meeting underscored a crisis of the Greens, whose attempts to win popular support on the basis of appeals to environmental and social concerns are increasingly discredited.

The election was a calamity for the party. It lost three of its four seats in the House of Representatives, including that of Adam Bandt, who had been the Greens leader since 2020.

Under conditions of widespread political disaffection, including towards the incumbent Labor government, the Greens vote was either static or declined. In lower house seats across the country, it lost 0.1 percent of its vote. That decline was marginal, but it is striking in the context of a further growth in the vote for third parties and independents, whose share of the total primary increased to a record 33 percent of the voting population.

The Greens unanimously selected Queensland Senator Larissa Waters to be their new leader. Waters declared in multiple media interviews that while the Greens would continue to have “heart,” they would work “constructively” with the Labor government. Waters, like Bandt a former lawyer, has been favourably described by multiple corporate outlets as a “centrist” figure within the Greens.

Her ascension, and the immediate pledge to collaborate with Labor, consolidates the shift to the right by the Greens which was the defining characteristic of their election campaign.

Multiple reasons have been advanced for the failure of the party’s campaign. Figures from the Labor Party have crowed over the Greens’ losses, falsely claiming the outcome represents a popular endorsement of Labor’s position on the Gaza genocide, which has been to fully support Israel’s historic war crimes while presiding over a major crackdown on popular opposition.

The Murdoch media has similarly presented the failure of the Greens campaign as a public repudiation of left-wing politics.

For his part, Bandt asserted that the defeats, including in his own seat of Melbourne, were primarily the outcome of preferencing arrangements, involving Labor, the Liberals and far-right parties. To the extent that there is any truth to that claim, it underscores the fact that the Greens’ previous

parliamentary advances have been dependent on the same backroom and unprincipled preferencing deals engaged in by all the official parties.

But more fundamental factors were at play. That is underscored by the extent to which the result defied the expectations of the Greens leaders themselves. The party had repeatedly declared it was confident that it would not only retain its four lower house seats, but was in a position to gain another four.

Such was the hubris that according to reports, the Greens did not take any substantial measures to fortify Bandt’s own seat of Melbourne, because they had no expectation that it was in jeopardy.

Bandt himself, now out of parliament, was in the last stages of the campaign expressing great confidence that the Greens would be parachuted into a de facto coalition government with the Labor Party. Weeks before the ballot, he even wrote to the Treasury Department, insisting that it urgently undertake costings of policies the Greens would propose that Labor adopt when such a coalition came to fruition.

At a superficial level, the Greens campaign was based almost completely on opinion polls, underscoring its utterly opportunist approach to politics. Those polls had consistently indicated that the election would result in a hung parliament and a likely minority government. The Greens insisted that the only task was to elect a few more of its MPs, who would then hold the balance of power and could compel Labor to enter into a coalition.

The expectations of the polls, and of the Greens, however, were defied by the result.

The actual outcome was characterised by a mass repudiation of the opposition Liberal-National Coalition, which received its lowest-ever vote and whose leader Peter Dutton lost his own seat. This was above all because of its association with the fascistic US administration of President Donald Trump, whose program of economic war, militarism and authoritarianism provoked substantial public concern and opposition.

Labor, despite recording its second-lowest winning primary vote, was returned to majority government. That meant that far from being compelled to negotiate with the Greens, Labor MPs were free to venomously attack the Greens and gloat over their

losses.

The failure of the Greens to take into account the “Trump factor” underscored the utterly nationalist character of their electoral calculations. While proclaiming during the election that the main task was to “keep Dutton out,” the Greens had clearly been hoping for a higher Liberal vote to ensure that a hung parliament materialised.

The fundamental reason for the failure of the Greens to win substantial support was their further lurch to the right. Under conditions of the popular repudiation of the Coalition and of Trumpism, voters inclined to “keep Dutton out” had little reason to vote for the Greens, rather than directly for Labor.

To the extent that there were popular illusions in Labor, moreover, the Greens helped to promote them. In attempting to justify their plans for a coalition, the Greens presented Labor as a party receptive to popular pressure. Bandt, for instance, claimed that, provided a sufficient number of Greens MPs were elected, Labor would be compelled to usher in a “golden era” of “progressive reforms.”

That was an even more bald-faced lie than any of Labor’s own campaigning. Bandt put forward that claim, under conditions where Labor had spent the previous three years inflicting the deepest cuts to workers’ living standards in decades, while supporting the genocide in Gaza and completing Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for war with China.

In reality, there was never any prospect of Labor, the preeminent party of imperialism and the corporate elite, shifting to the left. What occurred was a further shift to the right by the Greens.

That began before the election, in the final stages of the last parliament in late 2024. The Greens shelved their opposition to Labor’s housing policies, which provided a further bonanza to property developers, and ensured their passage through parliament. The Greens also backed elements of Labor’s environmental legislation, under conditions where Labor had openly governed in the interests of the coal and fossil fuel companies.

On the very eve of the election, the Greens dropped even nominal opposition to militarism and war. They unveiled their first-ever costed military policy, featuring the acquisition of medium-range missiles and other offensive weaponry such as drones. This was a clear signal to Labor and the military-intelligence establishment that the Greens, if they were to enter a coalition with Labor, would support the US-led preparations for conflict with China.

In the course of their campaign, the Greens sent out another signal. At the national level, they largely dropped their references to Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Bandt, who had repeatedly condemned Labor’s complicity in the historic war crimes last year, did not independently raise the atrocities in his major public addresses. When asked by reporters, he refused to restate Labor’s complicity or to condemn it.

Their open shift to the right meant that the Greens’ campaign was bereft of policies. While vaguely raising that they would advance the interests of “renters,” the Greens avoided advocating their formal platform of a massive increase to public housing, rental caps and other measures opposed by Labor. They raised issues of healthcare and education, but also in vague terms.

In their desire to curry favour with Labor, the Greens gave little reason for broad sections of the population to vote for them. The Greens vote was again minimal in working-class areas. The party has always had a thoroughly middle-class base, which, according to some studies, is the wealthiest of any political party in the country.

The Greens turn to the right is not an aberration or the product of a failed election strategy. It expresses the character of this party, as a pro-capitalist outfit dedicated to the dictatorship of the banks and the corporations and the defence of Australian imperialism. The lurch to the right by the Greens is one expression of the shift in the official political establishment in Australia and globally to war, austerity and authoritarianism amid a breakdown of capitalism.

In the case of the Greens, that shift has been prefigured at earlier points of the party’s history, where it dropped its phoney alternative credentials and jumped into right-wing governments when given the opportunity.

The most notable example was the Greens formal alliance with the minority Labor government of Julia Gillard between 2010 and 2013. Hailed during the recent election campaign as a model to be emulated, the Gillard government presided over Australian participation in the murderous US troop surge in Afghanistan and signed the country up to Washington’s 2011 “pivot to Asia,” the first stage of the war drive against China. Domestically, the Gillard administration presided over a sweeping assault on single parents, welfare recipients, health and education.

The open shift to the right by the Greens must be the occasion for young people, attracted by its fake anti-establishment posturing, to draw the necessary conclusions. That is a rejection of the Greens, a pro-war, pro-capitalist party, and a turn to a socialist perspective that is required to halt capitalism’s descent into barbarism.



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