

Australian Greens in spiralling crisis

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In the space of just three weeks, a crisis has erupted in the Australian Greens that threatens to tear the party apart. Its federal parliamentary party of eleven MPs is riven by overlapping factional conflicts, extensive leaking to the media, public recriminations and scandal.

In such an environment, there is inevitably much that remains murky. It is clear though that the deepest crisis in the party's 33 year history is not the result of personality conflicts. It is an expression of a broader breakdown of the official parliamentary setup, and particularly the failure of the Greens, which postures as an alternative, to increase its support amid massive popular hostility to Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

The latest flashpoint is an extraordinary public conflict between Senator David Shoebridge, who was elected Greens leader only on September 30, and his colleague Jordon Steele-John. Last week, Shoebridge announced that Steele-John had agreed to take leave after receiving a letter from seven Greens members alleging inappropriate conduct towards women. None of the signatories claimed firsthand knowledge of the alleged incidents, and the letter contained no specific allegations.

In a social media statement on Sunday evening, Steele-John declared that he had not agreed to take leave and that Shoebridge lacked the authority to impose it on him. He claimed that the letter was part of a factional manoeuvre within the Western Australian Greens, aimed at influencing an upcoming preselection contest for a Senate position currently held by former Greens senator Dorinda Cox, who defected to Labor last year.

Shoebridge responded yesterday by directly contradicting Steele-John, insisting that he had agreed to take leave pending an independent investigation into the allegations, and calling for its findings to be made public.

Steele-John's social media post contained what he described as a detailed refutation of false allegations against him. The controversy is not of recent origin. A lengthy internal Greens dossier, compiled in 2016 and outlining how allegations concerning Steele-John should be handled, was leaked to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The veracity of the competing claims remains unclear. What is striking, however, is that a longstanding controversy involving Steele-John has suddenly erupted into the open amid intense factional conflicts within the Greens.

On September 28, Larissa Waters suddenly announced her resignation as Greens leader, citing the worsening of a chronic kidney condition. Previously, the Greens have selected new leaders based on a "consensus process," which they present as a point of distinction between their party and the brutal factional

conflicts in Labor and the Coalition.

The ensuing leadership selection, however, very much resembled the backroom knife fights that characterise internal life in the major parties. Three of the Greens' most prominent parliamentarians—Shoebridge and Senators Sarah Hanson-Young and Mehreen Faruqi—contested the leadership.

The ballot went to two rounds, with Hanson-Young eliminated in the first after receiving just two votes. Shoebridge then defeated Faruqi by seven votes to four.

The divisions did not end there. Faruqi publicly expressed her dissatisfaction with the outcome, called for the party leadership to be elected by the membership and subsequently withdrew from the Greens' frontbench. Hanson-Young posted a video in which she declared: "God, politics can be brutal."

In a party-room as small as the Greens, personal ambition and rancor undoubtedly plays a role, and factional alignments are often less clear-cut than in Labor and the Coalition.

The political differences between Shoebridge and Faruqi are unclear. Both are from a purportedly more "radical" layer of the Greens in New South Wales, which has been prominent in protests against the Israeli genocide in Gaza, which has close ties to layers of the union bureaucracy and presents itself as "left-wing."

A number of Faruqi's supporters online have nevertheless bemoaned her defeat on the grounds that she is a "woman of colour" and Shoebridge is a white man, pointing to the influence of middle-class identity politics within the organisation.

Hanson-Young, on the other hand, is widely presented as a more "moderate" figure who openly promotes the need for a "pragmatic" approach in collaborating with the major parties.

Whatever the secondary conflicts, the Greens' relationship with Labor and the other major parties is at the centre of their political crisis. The Greens are a parliamentary outfit whose entire perspective is based on collaboration with the major parties, above all Labor. The divisions are not over fundamental principles, but over tactics—how to maintain this parliamentary perspective amid mounting popular hostility to the entire political establishment.

That longstanding question became an existential one following the Greens' debacle in the May, 2025 federal election.

During the campaign, the Greens' largely dropped their oppositional posturing, shelving the issue of the Gaza genocide and unveiling their first costed military policy, including for the production of Australian drones and missiles.

The Greens' entire pitch was that the election would likely result in a hung parliament, with neither of the major parties holding a majority. The Greens could then demonstrate that they are a "responsible" party of government, by forming a coalition with

Labor.

The result upended those ambitions. Labor won a majority, not on the basis of positive support, but because of a massive repudiation of the Coalition and its association with the fascistic US President Donald Trump. The Greens own vote was stagnant. It did not pick up any new seats and its then leader Adam Bandt lost his own.

Waters, favourably described as a “centrist” in the corporate media, assumed the leadership and deepened the orientation of open collaboration with Labor that had been the feature of the election campaign.

Over the ensuing months, support fell further for the Coalition, reflecting the collapse of its erstwhile base in a relatively large middle-class. The reality that this is a crisis of the two-party system was underscored by ever greater hostility to Labor as well as the rapid rise of the far-right populist One Nation, which combines a phony populist pitch to social discontent with frothing pro-business and anti-immigrant policies.

Under these conditions of political upheaval and shifting allegiance, support levels for the Greens have remained stagnant. They are correctly viewed by broad sections of the population, not as the “alternative” that they claim, but as an appendage of the two-party system and of Labor.

Upon his election to leadership, Shoebridge immediately signalled a shift in rhetoric, aimed at appealing to the discontent. “This is an extraordinary moment in politics and we can all feel it,” he declared. “We can feel that politics as usual is not providing the answers that people are desperately calling for now.”

“We know the Greens need to seize this moment because politics demands it of us... Labor has created the circumstances for One Nation, and Labor is not the answer. The Greens, the progressive alternative, we’re here to beat down One Nation, and we’re here to replace Labor and return hope and faith to politics.”

Shoebridge’s ascension, in other words, is an attempt to differentiate the Greens rhetorically from Labor and the other parliamentary parties. He has combined that with declarations that the Greens will focus more on the social and cost-of-living crisis that is the most immediate driver of mass anger.

What Shoebridge is putting forward is a form of left-populism, similar to that of UK Greens leader Zack Polanski and figures associated with the Democratic Socialists of America such as New York mayor Zohran Mamdani, both of whom he has favourably invoked. Like them, Shoebridge remains completely committed to the parliamentary order and the capitalist system that it defends. He has not disavowed the Greens or his own lengthy record of collaborating with Labor or indicated a change on that front other than in rhetoric.

The fact that Hanson-Young, the “moderate” candidate, received only two votes, and that the run-off was between Faruqi and Shoebridge indicates that most of the “moderates” themselves favoured such a shift. Shoebridge ran on a joint ticket with Senator Steph Hodgins-May, herself a “moderate” from Victoria.

Even since becoming leader, Shoebridge has spoken out of both sides of his mouth, denouncing Labor and declaring the Greens ambition to “replace” it, while promoting collaboration with it.

Asked by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation after such

denunciations whether he had worked with Labor to pass legislation, Shoebridge replied “I had a very collaborative relationship with Labor in the [New South Wales] state parliament. We worked closely together when we could.” Whether he had done the same in the federal parliament, Shoebridge declared: “Absolutely.”

In fact, Shoebridge, like all of his Greens colleagues, including his factional rivals, passed multiple pieces of regressive Labor legislation in the past two federal parliaments, including environmental laws benefiting fossil fuel corporations and housing policies aiding the property developers.

Beyond the significance of those specific pieces of legislation, the Greens have signalled their willingness to “work with” a government that is participating in a US-led global war, including through the transformation of Australia into a staging ground for conflict with China; that has viciously attacked opposition to the Gaza genocide and democratic rights, and that is imposing austerity and social misery on working people in the interests of the banks and the corporations.

It was Shoebridge who during the May, 2025 election campaign devised and unveiled the Greens’ program for missiles and drones, in a clear signal to the ruling elite and the military-intelligence establishment that his own participation in protest politics, appealing to Labor to end its support for the genocide, and his criticisms of elements of the military build-up, did not signify any genuine opposition to war.

The shift in rhetoric is attempt to revamp the Greens as a trap for discontent, including by allying it more closely with layers of the corporatised trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which seek to subordinate workers and young people to the Greens, to parliament and to Labor.

The Greens’ record of collaborating with big business Labor governments is not an aberration or a policy that can be altered, but is baked into the DNA of the party as one that explicitly defends capitalism and its parliamentary order, and opposed the fight to build a socialist movement of the working class.



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