

Melbourne election triggers federal Labor government infighting

Patrick O'Connor and SEP candidate for Melbourne
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Predictions that the Greens will win the Melbourne by-election on July 21 have sparked ructions within the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Right-wing powerbrokers within the Labor Party, led by its New South Wales general secretary, Sam Dastyari, and the head of the Australian Workers Union, Paul Howes, have called for an anti-Greens campaign. They have accused the Greens of being “extremists, not unlike [racist right-wing party] One Nation” and “threatening our democracy.”

The Labor Party’s “left” faction has joined in, with its convenor, Senator Doug Cameron, denouncing the Greens as “intransigent and immature.” Several influential Labor figures have demanded that the Greens be placed last on ballot paper preferences, below the opposition Liberal Party and other right-wing parties, a move that would likely see these parties increase their numbers in federal and state upper houses of parliament.

At the same time, supporters of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd appear to be using Labor’s poor standing in the Melbourne by-election campaign to prepare for another possible leadership challenge against Julia Gillard.

The media and the major parties in Australia typically restrict state election campaigns to the narrowest and most parochial framework. That wider political issues have emerged in the Melbourne campaign reflects the enormous crisis wracking the Labor Party and the entire political establishment.

The election in Melbourne, a state seat that Labor has held for more than 100 years, was triggered by the resignation of Bronwyn Pike last May. She entered parliament in 1999, when Labor was returned to office after spending the previous seven years in opposition, and served as a cabinet minister throughout the 11-year government. Pike quit after Labor lost office in late 2010, no doubt preferring to follow former premiers Steve

Bracks and John Brumby into lucrative corporate positions than remain on the opposition benches in parliament.

The *Australian* yesterday reported on internal Labor polling in Melbourne: “Julia Gillard and federal Labor are toxic in the prime minister’s home state of Victoria, and the party is on track for a disastrous loss to the Greens in a looming state by-election ... three times as many people cited the performance of the federal government rather than the performance of the state government as the reason they would not vote for Labor.”

The Murdoch newspaper reported the comments of an anonymous source close to Labor’s by-election campaign who noted that its job would be much easier “if Gillard wasn’t there.” The article also anticipated that a Greens election win would “increase pressure on Ms Gillard’s leadership and increase despair in Labor ranks.”

The prime minister has been forced to deny any wider significance to the Melbourne election outcome, declaring yesterday that “it’s a state government by-election, and of course the voters of Melbourne understand that they are voting for a seat in the state parliament.”

The Labor Party’s crisis is the culmination of its evolution in the past three decades into the most ruthless representative of the interests of big business and finance capital. The globalisation of capitalist production methods has shattered the old program of national economic regulation and limited social reform that the Labor Party and its social democratic counterparts internationally previously advanced. As a result, Labor no longer has any positive support in the working class. It has been reduced to a rump in the state parliaments of Queensland, where it holds 7 of the 89 seats, and New South Wales, where it has 20 of the 93 seats. Similar electoral disasters loom with upcoming state and federal polls.

Labor powerbrokers are now attempting to attack the Greens, despite the minority Gillard government’s

continued dependence on their support in parliament. This appears at least partly aimed at ensuring that the party is not completely wiped out in the next federal election.

The media is laying down the benchmarks, including more economic restructuring measures and austerity spending cuts, that the Gillard government must meet to retain the confidence of corporate circles. The *Australian* declared in an editorial yesterday that it “applauded the belated realisation by some in the ALP that the Greens are their enemy, not their friends.” It urged the Gillard government to heed a public call by former BHP chairman Don Argus for “more debate about how we can get the cost side of our public finances down,” slashing public spending and targeting a so-called “entrenched welfare mentality.”

The Greens have responded by declaring their utmost loyalty to the Gillard government. Greens leader Christine Milne accused the Labor powerbrokers of “undermining confidence in the prime minister.” Former leader Bob Brown, campaigning for the Greens in the Melbourne by-election, declared that Paul Howes and Sam Dastyari “want Labor to commit hari kari.” He accused the two factional leaders of being “disrespectful” in not consulting the prime minister before they spoke out.

The Greens are no alternative to the Labor and Liberal parties. They advance the interests of a privileged section of the middle class. The Greens appeal to widespread popular hostility toward the two major parties only in order to channel people back behind the parliamentary setup. The Greens are in a de facto coalition with Labor at the federal level, and in a fully fledged ruling coalition in the state of Tasmania. The Greens hope to win Melbourne in order to work out a similar arrangement in Victoria in the future, either with Labor or the Liberal-National coalition. The party’s candidate for Melbourne, Cathy Oke, and state leader Greg Barber have repeatedly refused to rule out supporting a minority Liberal government. This is a real prospect, as Premier Ted Baillieu has only a one-seat majority in parliament and one of his backbenchers is currently facing allegations that he misused official travel perks.

The Greens are receiving the tacit backing of the various pseudo-left organisations, each of which declined to field a candidate in the by-election. They all support Labor and the Greens as some sort of “lesser evil” to the Liberal Party, when in reality Labor, Liberal and the Greens share the same agenda of making the working class pay for the worsening economic crisis. (See: “The Liberal-Labor-Greens austerity consensus”)

A large number of other candidates are running in the by-election. They range from several right-wing independents seeking to capitalise on the decision of the Liberal Party not to stand a candidate, to representatives of the Democratic Labor Party, Sex Party, Australian Democrats, Secular Party, Australian Christians and Family First. Several single-issue independents, focussing on climate change and public housing for example, are standing with the stated goal of influencing the major parties’ policies. Prominent ex-journalist and former political staffer with the previous Victorian Liberal government, Steven Mayne, is running to raise his profile in the area ahead of Melbourne council elections, for which he plans to nominate.

Only the Socialist Equality Party is representing the independent interests of the working class in the by-election. My campaign is oriented to advancing the socialist alternative to the crisis-ridden capitalist system that is marked by escalating wars, attacks on democratic rights, rising social inequality and declining living standards. The SEP fights for a workers’ government that will reorganise society from top to bottom, instituting a democratically planned economy geared toward meeting the social needs of the population, instead of the accumulation of profit and personal wealth by a tiny minority at the top. I urge the widest participation in the SEP’s campaign and attendance at our final election meeting this Sunday, July 15.

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To contact the WSWs and the
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