

Australian by-election in Melbourne heightens Greens' crisis

By Patrick O'Connor
20 March 2018

The Greens failed to win a second federal seat in the House of Representatives in a by-election held on Saturday in the inner-Melbourne electorate of Batman. The result has served to underscore the enormous crisis wracking the parliamentary establishment in Australia.

Greens' candidate Alex Bhathal won 39.7 percent of the primary vote, against Labor's Ged Kearney—the former Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president—who won 43.1 percent. Under Australia's preferential voting system, where voters must rank all of the candidates in order, the remaining eight candidates, from a range of extreme right-wing, libertarian, and “deep green” political formations, had their voters' preferences distributed to either Labor or the Greens. As result, on a two-party basis, the Greens lost the vote by 45.75 percent to Labor's 54.25 percent—despite being heavily favoured beforehand by the media and pollsters to win the seat.

The Greens' defeat is a significant blow to their hopes of enlarging their influence within the parliamentary apparatus. Upon becoming party leader in 2015, Senator Richard Di Natale declared that his goal was to prepare the Greens to be “part of government,” with their parliamentarians “open to cabinet posts.” He stressed that “we have done that already in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).”

The Greens failure to win Batman, one of the seats long targeted as among the most likely to be won by the party, has triggered bitter recriminations. Di Natale's leadership is under question. While saying he was “safe,” South Australian Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young added: “We need him to step up and make sure the party is pulled together tightly.” Grahame Bowland, a leading figure in the Western Australian Greens, has already taken to Facebook with

an open call for Di Natale's resignation.

Di Natale has declared he will not step down and is blaming the loss, in part, on internal divisions. He has signalled he will purge Greens' members in Batman who opposed Bhathal's nomination as candidate and who were accused of leaking previously issued complaints against her for alleged “bullying” and “branch stacking.”

The leaks, which appear to have been intended to discredit Bhathal and ensure she lost, received widespread media publicity during the campaign. A prominent article in the *Age* newspaper in the days before the by-election detailed a Greens staffer's profanity-laden threats of retribution against a journalist if he pursued the story.

The New South Wales branch of the Greens, centred in Australia's largest city of Sydney, is also embroiled into bitter factional conflicts. Beyond these sordid machinations—which are largely motivated by the pursuit of the spoils of office rather than basic policy differences—the Batman by-election points to more significant political shifts underway.

The Greens served as the critical parliamentary prop for the minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard between 2010 and 2013. It helped Labor implement numerous right-wing initiatives, including the further privatisation of public services, such as education and disability support, austerity measures targeting single mothers and other layers of the working class, and, most significantly, the militarist alignment of Australia with US imperialism's “pivot to Asia” and confrontation with China.

At the same time, at the state and territory level, the Greens have been governing coalition partners in Tasmania and the ACT while also working in close partnership with other Labor governments through the

parliamentary upper house in several states, including Victoria.

This record has greatly undermined the Greens' standing and its ability to falsely posture as a principled, progressive opposition to the major parties.

The party's base of support centres on a high income, upper-middle class constituency, living in the privileged areas of Australia's major cities, and mostly working in academia, the public service, and layers of business associated with the "green" corporate sector. In Batman, the Greens proved unable to convince ordinary working people and youth to vote for their candidate.

The by-election itself was triggered on anti-democratic grounds that were nevertheless welcomed by the Greens and the Labor Party for their own opportunist ends.

The previous representative, Labor's David Feeney, resigned earlier this year after facing a High Court challenge on the grounds that he could not find the paperwork to back up his plausible, sworn statements that he had earlier renounced both his Irish and British dual citizenship rights on the basis of his father's birth in Belfast in 1942.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously stated our opposition to a by-election in Batman on the nationalist grounds of Section 44 (i) of the constitution, which proscribes anyone from standing for parliament who has "allegiance, obedience, or adherence to a foreign power" or is "entitled" to the "rights and privileges of a foreign power" (see: "Australian Labor Party parliamentarian resigns over dual citizenship furore").

We noted: "The Labor Party threw him [Feeney] to the wolves because it hopes that its quickly handpicked candidate Ged Kearney will prove a stronger campaigner against the Greens, who are vying to win the Batman seat for the first time."

Whereas Feeney was a self-declared "machine man" of the Labor right, Kearney boasts that she is a "left" and a "feminist." She is in fact a hardened union bureaucrat responsible for the betrayal of numerous workers' struggles.

In the by-election, Labor gained a significant swing in the formerly Greens-dominated, gentrified southern suburbs of Batman, including up to 10 percent in Clifton Hill, Northcote, and Thornbury. Many of these

votes appear to have come from conservative Liberal supporters. In the 2016 election, the Liberal Party won nearly 20 percent of the primary vote, but they did not stand this time. The Labor Party increased their primary vote by 7.8 percent, against an increase of 3.5 percent by the Greens. It appears that some former Greens' voters in Melbourne's affluent inner-north, in addition to Liberal voters, also switched their support to Kearney.

The Batman by-election is another expression of the growing hostility of workers and youth towards the entire political establishment—a hostility that finds no expression within parliament. The task remains for workers and youth to break with Labor, the Greens, and all their accomplices, and turn instead to the one party that fights for a socialist perspective, the Socialist Equality Party.

The author recommends:

Liberals take office in South Australia with a minority vote

[19 March 2018]

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