

Partial exclusion for Lee Rhiannon after marathon special Greens meeting

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra



The federal parliamentary Greens are taking on the power of the party's hard left NSW branch. Mick Tsikas/AAP

The Greens have imposed a partial exclusion from their partyroom on radical New South Wales senator Lee Rhiannon, after her behaviour over the schools legislation.

Her colleagues were angry that she authorised a leaflet urging people to lobby senators to vote against the bill, on which the Greens were negotiating with the government. The nine other Green MPs wrote to the party's national council about her conduct.

While the letter cited the leaflet, the concern about Rhiannon went further. Party sources said they had not been informed that she had been bound by the party's NSW branch to oppose the legislation. Eventually all Green senators voted against the bill, after the government did a deal with ten other crossbenchers.

The issues with Rhiannon involved trust in her and the ability of the hardline NSW branch to bind MPs – a power it is accorded under the party's federal constitution.

At a marathon meeting of more than four hours in Melbourne on Wednesday, it was decided that the structural problem needed to be resolved.

The partyroom asked the national council to work with Greens NSW “to end the practice of NSW MPs being bound to vote against the decision of the Australian Greens partyroom”.

This was supported by all MPs except Rhiannon.

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The partyroom also passed a motion “that NSW senators be excluded from partyroom discussions and decisions on contentious government legislation, including within their portfolio responsibilities, until these issues are resolved”. At present Rhiannon is the only NSW senator.

Rhiannon and Adam Bandt, the Greens’ only lower house member, voted against the motion.

In a statement after the meeting, acting whip Nick McKim said: “To function as a national partyroom, and to be a genuine alternative to politics as usual, we need to have faith and trust in our processes.”

There is some uncertainty about how a battle with the NSW branch – controlled by the “watermelon” faction, a description reflecting its hard left position – will play out. Some in the party fear the situation could be inflamed, while others will welcome the branch being finally taken on.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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