

Identity politics and the Greens

A member article



COLIN LONG

24 JUN 2023



29



1

Share



'Compass with Broken Face', by [Thayne Tuason](#), licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

Correction: This article was originally published attributing the wrong author. **Colin Long** wrote the article, not Colin Smith. My sincere apologies to both.

I participated in the Members' Forum on 18 June for around an hour. I had to leave to attend to pressing family matters. What I heard in that first hour reinforced deep concerns that I have about the direction of the Victorian Greens, and particularly about the malign influence of a faction within the Party that advocates a particular form of authoritarian identity politics.

Authoritarian identity politics is currently rampant in left-wing forums, although I argue that, in its effects, it is not a form of left-wing politics at all. In its emphasis on individual identity over collective needs and social processes, it reflects the unfortunate truth of the profound success of neoliberalism in transforming politics and ideology over the last several decades. Authoritarian identity politics exists at the intersection of neoliberalism's deeply anti-social project of depoliticization through the privileging of individual interests, and a middle-class post-material 'progressive' politics untethered from any materialist analysis, and which long ago forgot that a 'diverse' elite is still an elite.

This is a form of politics that wields slogans, epithets, accusations and victimhood as a means to exert power and to impose ideological conformity. In the process, it undermines the salience of left critiques of racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, and is presently driving a powerful backlash on the right, which is enticing many people who would otherwise have no truck with right-wing politics. It often manifests as a form of lateral violence, a reflection of broader political weakness, and an inability to land punches on real opponents, thus turning on easy victims: calling left-wing activists 'racists', or feminists 'transphobes'.

Two manifestations of this form of identity politics were on display at the Members' Forum, both initially voiced by Carrie Payne, then supported by a number of State Councillors. In the Forum, Carrie accused those calling for an open forum – rather than the agenda set by the State Council – of being racist. In relation to the accusations of transphobia against Linda Gale and Rohan Leppert, Carrie rejected the fact that a Sub-Panel of the Misconduct Panel had found that neither of them had a case to answer. Carrie's reason for this rejection was that the Sub-Panel consisted of 'cis-gendered people'.

In these two examples we have the essence of the problem within the Greens and why it has become a dysfunctional party. Accusations of racism and transphobia are thrown around to stifle debate, to enforce an ideological uniformity and to bully those with different views.

It was unfortunate that the host of the Message Stick session decided to cancel the event during the Members' Forum. But this was a decision taken by that member. It was not called for by anyone else. The assessment that there was insufficient goodwill to conduct the session was an assessment made by that member. That assessment was made because a majority of members overturned the State Council's proposed agenda, preferring, instead, to have an open members meeting. On the basis of this decision, Carrie accused those who wanted an open members meeting of being racist.

Calling for an open members meeting was not a racist act. Overturning the agenda of State Council was not a racist act. To portray it as such is to strip racism of any meaning, and cheapen the seriousness of racism as a problem within our society. In this case, the accusation of racism is employed when the argument is being lost, when someone is not getting their way.

Even more egregious is the way the accusation of transphobia has been weaponised to shut down debate, vilify people and enforce ideological conformity. Carrie seems to reject the findings of the Sub-Panel because they do not accord with her personal experience, and because the Panel did not have trans people on it. Here we have the essence of one of the great political and ideological divides of our time. The idea that a progressive politics of universal liberation can be based on an identity politics that privileges individual experience and identity is profoundly problematic. Political and ideological differences cannot be resolved or managed in any organisation when feelings and injured individual identities are the primary arbiter of disagreements. No system of justice, whether organisational or at the broader level of a society, can function if its principles and its outcomes are free to be challenged on the basis of individual feelings or identities.

For a long time, western systems of justice gave priority to certain individuals – the propertied and the titled – and it was ordinary people who were routinely victimised by this. Hard battles have been fought over many generations to create a legal system that does not operate on the basis of defending the interests of a particular class or of

men. The fact that the legal system is still far from perfect, that it still betrays many of its class- and sex-based discriminatory origins, does not mean that we should revert to a form of justice based on particular identities that says that justice can only be dispensed if it's dispensed by people sharing a particular identity or with lived experience of a particular identity. The latter approach would have us believe that the only way that justice could be done to a Greens member of Albanian extraction involved in a disciplinary process would be for the decision-making body to include people of Albanian extraction. Justice, at any level, must strive for objectivity, though of course we must also be cognisant of the ways that bias can be embedded in any system. But to abandon the striving for an objective form of justice, and a justice system that does not privilege the personal identities of accused or victim, would be a completely retrograde step.

The peril of identity-based politics has been starkly revealed by the recent case of an all-Muslim town council in the US banning pride flags. Efforts to make the council more reflective of the town's racial and religious diversity were strongly supported by progressive organisations, including LGBT+ groups. This was a good thing. But now that the Council has come under the full control of socially conservative Muslims, the rights of minorities of whom they don't approve are under threat. Part of the identity of some Muslims, it seems, is intolerance to non-heterosexual practices. We should fight against this religiously-based intolerance, which is, not surprisingly, roundly applauded by right-wing Christians and the MAGA-right. But on what basis can we fight it? From an identity politics perspective, conservative Muslims are entitled to their identity, which does not allow tolerance of non-heterosexual sexual identities. Identity politics has no ability to criticise such an identity. On what basis could it do so? A critique could only proceed from a politics that has a basis in something other than personal identity – a politics based in a respect for tolerance (which requires the ability to say that intolerant identities should be rejected), or human rights, or class solidarity, for instance.

It is a great tragedy, in my view, that the contemporary left has sunk into a stifling intellectual conformity that leads to the parroting of concepts in a way that strips them of meaning and of political salience. Concepts such as 'decolonisation' are wielded as bludgeons against opponents by people who often have little understanding of what they might mean, and certainly no understanding of the problematic way in which they are being used. In the contemporary Greens, the loss of a political debate or a motion by a member of the BlakGreens is *prima facie*

evidence of racism and the need for the 'decolonisation' of the party. The loss of an argument or a motion by a trans member is *prima facie* evidence of transphobia. Any argument in opposition to particular views on sex and gender is taken to be a form of 'hate speech'. Differences of ideological, policy and political position in relation to sex and gender, which should be normal in any political party, are treated as evidence of bad faith or abuse requiring disciplinary action. This is bad enough within the Party, but becomes extremely problematic when exposed to the outside world. It leads to a tendency to treat ordinary Australians who do not share certain views on sex and gender, or who may just wish to ask clarifying questions, as enemies, 'transphobes', fools, bigots who must be shouted down rather than engaged with. This is nothing if not the other side of the one Trumpist coin. Even if the purveyors of identity politics are right, this is no way to go about building a movement for mass political change, or of even increasing the Greens' vote beyond where it seems to be stuck.

For any long-term leftist with a regard for history, the contemporary moment raises dreadful parallels. The demand for adherence to a particular ideological line with no room for dissent, and an emphasis on the importance of a specific form of identity to be privileged above others, characterised the descent of the Bolshevik revolution into Stalinism, destroying the socialist project. It is no coincidence that the identitarian left seeks to manage political and ideological contention through misconduct processes – all authoritarian political tendencies, from Stalinism to the identitarian left, find ideological nonconformity threatening and seek to stifle it through repression. This is why the Party is currently swamped with misconduct allegations, and why many State Councillors resort to complaints or threats of complaints, or challenge those members who complain about their behaviour to 'make a complaint'.

Is it any wonder that the Party has degenerated into seething resentment and anger?

Politics is a tough game. Expecting to always have a 'safe space' when this is defined as a place where no individual is made to feel uncomfortable, where ideological contention is eradicated, or where individual emotions are given priority over collective interests, or even over objective facts, is a recipe for political failure. How can someone always expecting to be in a 'safe space' expect to have any influence over the broader political world? Our opponents will not create safe spaces for us to engage with them. The stakes of political contest are higher today than they have been for decades. We are facing actual fascists, and fossil fuel companies that must

be stopped from the path of destruction upon which they are embarked. Safe spaces and feelings are not the basis of a movement capable of challenging these opponents. And a reminder – these are our opponents, not the left activists who have been struggling for decades to advance the rights of women, who are now contemptuously dismissed as ‘TERFS’. The language and strategies that are used by the identitarian left may be useful for imposing power and inflicting lateral violence on left-wing people (especially of older generations), but they are useless for engaging with ordinary people. Instead, they reinforce the view that is now widely shared in the broader population that the left is arrogant, elitist and doesn’t care about the issues of ordinary people. I have yet to see a successful political movement that employs as its primary communication strategy the rampant use of negative epithets – transphobe, racist – as a way to engage with those it needs to convince and draw into its ranks. Which raises the possibility that the identitarian left actually isn’t interested in building a broad-based movement, but only in reinforcing its own sense of self-worth and superiority.

29 Likes · 1 Restack



A guest post by

Colin Long

Greens member since the late-1990s. Former Greens candidate at local, state and federal level. Unionist.

[Subscribe to Colin](#)

© 2023 Andrew Conley · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great writing