

## The Cunningham by-election 2002

### Background

The resignation on 16 August 2002 of Stephen Martin, Labor MP for Cunningham, caused a by-election held on 19 October. An MP since 1984,<sup>1</sup> Martin's decision came less than nine months after the 2001 general election.

### The candidates

Thirteen candidates nominated. Party nominations included the ALP, Australian Democrats, Greens, One Nation and the Christian Democratic Party (Fred Nile Group). Among the independents was the President of the South Coast Labor Council, Peter Wilson. The Liberals decided not to nominate a candidate, though David Moules, an independent, acknowledged his membership of the party. In 10 of the 18 Commonwealth by-elections held since 1990, the government of the day has chosen to avoid the contest.

### The result

Michael Organ won the Greens' first House of Representatives seat despite a first preference vote of just 23 per cent. This was the first House seat won by a minor party since Jack Lang won Reid as a Lang Labor candidate in 1946. Organ gained 75.2 per cent of later preferences, which enabled him to defeat Labor's Sharon Bird, who had received 38.1 per cent of first preferences. This was the first time Labor had lost the seat, created in 1949, and was only the fourth time that an Opposition had lost a by-election, the last occurring in 1921.<sup>2</sup> The Australian Democrat vote (2.3 %) almost disappeared.

### Explaining the result

Many factors have been pointed to in explaining the result, including the Labor leader's performance, the preselection of the Labor candidate, concerns over the issue of possible war with Iraq, and annoyance at Martin's failure to serve his full term.

Four other factors, however, appear to have been more significant.

### Changes in Cunningham

Although most commentary referred to Wollongong being Labor 'heartland',<sup>3</sup> in fact there is a significant difference between the seats of Cunningham in the north of the city and Throsby in the south. Throsby takes in the BHP factory and has a socio-economic profile more typical of a safe Labor seat.



The difference between the two electorates has widened with the 1999 redistribution, when Cunningham was stretched north-east to take in such well-to-do areas as Stanwell Park, Otford and Helensburgh, areas said to include many incomers from Sydney. This was quite evident in the 2001 election, with Cunningham's Labor first preference vote of 44.2 per cent being over 10 per cent less than the vote in Throsby. Stephen Martin's 2001 vote was in fact 8.1 per cent lower than his 1998 vote before the redistribution, one of the largest falls for any sitting member across the nation.

With Labor's vote falling a further 6.1 per cent in the by-election, it seems that ongoing demographic change combined with the effects of 1999 redistribution had much to do with the 2002 result.

### Wilson's candidature

Wilson's presence on the ballot paper gravely hurt Bird's chances. An organiser with the NSW Teachers' Union as well as an office holder with the local Labor council, Wilson attracted the support of a number of local unions. His candidacy became associated with local community criticism of different aspects of Labor's recent history in the Illawarra:

- stories of internal corruption, including accusations of branch-stacking
- general unhappiness over the treatment of the Illawarra by Labor's head office in Sydney
- resentment against head office intervention in the ALP Cunningham preselection which denied local party members a say in the choice of candidate
- a general belief that the Labor Party, and the State Labor Government, 'took Wollongong for granted'
- he claimed arrogance of the previous Labor-dominated city council.

Wilson summed up what he claimed was a widespread local feeling when he warned the ALP:

You are alienating your heartland and you had better do something about it because it is going to get worse.<sup>4</sup>

The *Illawarra Mercury* played on such resentment with 'Peoples Choice', a poll to find an attractive independent candidate.<sup>5</sup>

It is plausible to suggest that the great majority of Wilson's 7107 votes came from people who had supported the ALP in 2001. In fact, his and Bird's first preferences surpassed Martin's 2001 general election vote by over four per cent. Had Bird even been able

to equal Martin's first preferences, she would probably have won the seat.

### The Liberal choice to abstain

If the Liberals had contested the by-election they would probably have secured a vote at least as high as their 28 per cent in 2001. This would have put them well ahead of Organ, whose preferences would probably have pushed Bird over the line. At times a party can do a great deal of damage to opponents by avoiding a particular contest.

### The Greening of Cunningham

Environmental questions such as redevelopment, protection of the escarpment, and the degradation of the coastline have begun to have an impact on Wollongong politics. The Green vote in Cunningham in the 1996, 1998 and 2001 elections was among the highest in NSW.

The most visible issue has involved Sandon Point, located between Thirroul and Bulli, where a housing development has been strongly opposed by environmentalists. They have been supported by the local indigenous community, concerned

over the fate of an area said to be rich in indigenous artefacts. Anecdotal evidence speaks of opposition by many of the incomers, concerned with maintaining both the environment and their house values.<sup>6</sup>

The Sandon Point issue gained added political flavour from the fact that many described the deal between developer and city council as an example of the corrupt state of local council politics, so long dominated by the ALP.<sup>7</sup> It may have helped Labor lose the mayoral election in September 2002.

The strongest Green support has come in the north-eastern areas, including those added to Cunningham in the 1999 redistribution. In the 2002 mayoral election Michael Organ had already indicated the growth of Green support when he gained 13.8 per cent of the vote, winning 5 booths in the northernmost ward, with his highest vote being an impressive 37.2 per cent in Austinmer.

Senator Bob Brown claims that many Green votes have come from Liberal supporters.<sup>8</sup> Some Green votes

probably did come from such people worried about the future of re-development in the Illawarra. In 2001 the combined Liberal-Green vote topped the ALP vote in 13 booths. In 2002 five of these booths were among the 12 in which Organ topped the poll.

Organ thus entered the Cunningham contest with advantages not always enjoyed by Green candidates:

- he was a well-known local
- Cunningham had a far greener tinge than many other electorates, including neighbouring Throsby, and
- the fortuitous holding of the mayoral election, just five weeks before, gave him an electoral profile rare for Green candidates.

### In conclusion

The unusual circumstances of this by-election mean that the Greens may struggle to hold Cunningham. However, demographic change makes Labor's future in the seat far from certain.

### Cunningham votes

Candidate	Party	First Preference	Swing	Final Count
O. Nannelli	CDP	3.8		
P. Wilson	IND	10.5		
H. Johnson	CEC	0.2		
M. Organ	GRN	23.0	+16.4	52.2
S. Bird	ALP	38.1	-6.1	47.8
J. Flanagan	NCP	0.8		
G. Crocker	HAN	4.0	-0.6	
D. Hughes	AFI	1.3		
J. Keene	IND	0.7		
M. Sampson	IND	1.0		
D. Moulds	IND	13.6		
L. Chapman	DEM	2.3	-4.9	
C. Williams	SAL	0.6		

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### Endnotes

1. As Member for Macarthur 1984–93 and Cunningham 1993–2002.
2. The other cases were Riverina 1904, Kalgoorlie 1920 and Maranoa 1921.
3. M. Cazzulino, 'Heartland's sign of strife', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 2002.
4. T. Maguire, 'Squaring up to the ALP', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 October 2002.
5. 'You choose', *Illawarra Mercury*, 21–22, 26 September 2002.
6. B. Norington, 'Ballot boxing', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October 2002.
7. See for example, <http://www.sandon-point.org.au/splash.htm>.
8. G. Milne, 'Voters see a true representative in Green', *Australian*, 21 October 2002.