



The rise of the Australian Greens

Scott Bennett
Politics and Public Administration Section

Executive summary

The first Australian candidates to contest an election on a clearly-espoused environmental policy were members of the United Tasmania Group in the 1972 Tasmanian election.

Concerns for the environment saw the emergence in the 1980s of a number of environmental groups, some contested elections, with successes in Western Australia and Tasmania.

An important development was the emergence in the next decade of the Australian Greens as a unified political force, with Franklin Dam activist and Tasmanian MP, Bob Brown, as its nationally-recognised leader.

The 2004 and 2007 Commonwealth elections have resulted in five Australian Green Senators in the 42nd Parliament, the best return to date.

This paper discusses the electoral support that Australian Greens candidates have developed, including:

- the emergence of environmental politics is placed in its historical context
- the rise of voter support for environmental candidates
- an analysis of Australian Greens voters—who they are, where they live and the motivations they have for casting their votes for this party
- an analysis of the difficulties such a party has in winning lower house seats in Australia, which is especially related to the use of Preferential Voting for most elections
- the strategic problems that the Australian Greens—and any ‘third force’—have in the Australian political setting
- the decline of the Australian Democrats that has aided the Australian Greens upsurge and
- the question whether the Australian Greens will ever be more than an important ‘third force’ in Australian politics.

Contents

Executive summary	1
Party abbreviations	3
Introduction	1
The emergence of environmental politics	1
Stirrings in Tasmania—the United Tasmania Group	1
The Franklin Dam	2
Other environmental voices	3
Consolidation of the Greens as a significant force	4
An increasing focus on elections	4
The importance of preferences	5
Pushing aside the Australian Democrats	5
A single force	6
The importance of Proportional Representation	7
On to bigger things?	9
Are there limits to the Australian Greens’ electoral successes?	10
Preferential Voting	10
‘Everyone now is an environmentalist’	15
A branding problem	16
Voting behaviour	21
Conclusion—always on the fringe?	27

Party abbreviations

AG	Australian Greens
ALP	Australian Labor Party
Democrats	Australian Democrats
DLP	Democratic Labor Party
Lib	Liberal Party
Nat, Nationals	The Nationals
ON	One Nation
UTG	United Tasmania Group

Introduction

The first Australian parliamentary candidates to contest an election on a clearly-enunciated environmental policy were members of the United Tasmania Group who nominated for the 1972 Tasmanian election. For most of the years since there has been an environmental presence in Australian elections and a number of Commonwealth, state and territory parliamentary seats have been won by candidates espousing environmental policies. Despite this, environmental politics has been seen as positioned on the edge of the main political contest. The emerging environmental interest has, until quite recently, been unable to push past the Australian Democrats (Democrats), a party established in 1977 and popular enough to win Senate seats in every election between 1977 and 2001. Over the years the successes of the Democrats, together with the dominant Liberal, Labor and National parties, left little room for a party strongly identified with the environmental interest.

During the 1990s the political landscape began to change. On the one hand, the major parties' hold over their long-term supporters appeared to weaken. In 1998, for example, the major party House of Representatives vote, which had been slowly declining since the 1950s, fell below 80 per cent for the first time since the 1943 election. Meanwhile, support for the Democrats also fell. That there seemed to be an undercurrent of voter unhappiness with the political scene was highlighted by the emergence of two very different political movements. Very briefly, the Pauline Hanson/One Nation (ON) phenomenon flashed across the political landscape, winning seats in various legislatures, as well as securing a 1998 House of Representatives nationwide vote of 8.4 per cent. At the same time, the various state environmental parties began to see an opportunity to become part of a political force of greater permanence and significance, with their electoral returns becoming much more substantial as the decade progressed. It is this latter development that is the subject of this study.

The paper begins by putting into an historical context the emergence of the Australian Greens. It then looks at the voters who support the party—who they are, where they live and the motivations they have for casting their votes for this party. It discusses the difficulties such a party has in winning lower house seats in Australia and it refers to some of the strategic problems that they—and any 'third force'—have in the Australian political setting. It also discusses the decline of the Democrats that has aided the Australian Greens' advance.

The emergence of environmental politics

Stirrings in Tasmania—the United Tasmania Group

From the early 1960s it gradually became clear that Tasmania's Hydro-Electric Commission was developing plans for the flooding of Lake Pedder in the state's south-west. For decades the importance of hydro-electric power for Tasmania's future had been unchallenged in the island state and when conservationists attempted to persuade the state government not to flood the lake, they made little headway. Despite the activity of the locally-formed Lake

Pedder Action Committee, the lake was duly flooded. In response, the Committee called a public meeting that was held on 23 March 1972 in Hobart, less than four weeks before a Tasmanian House of Assembly election. The meeting agreed:

In order that there is maximum usage of a unique political opportunity to save Lake Pedder, now an issue of national and global concern, and to implement a national, well-researched conservation plan for the State of Tasmania, there be formed a single Independent Coalition of primarily conservation-oriented candidates and their supporters.¹

Thus was formed the United Tasmania Group (UTG), a body that is today regarded as the world's first Green party.

In the Tasmanian state election of that year the UTG nominated 12 candidates in four of Tasmania's five multi-member House of Assembly electorates. It probably surprised many observers by securing a vote of 4.9 per cent in the four electorates it contested, with its three Franklin candidates gaining a total of 8 per cent. Its statewide vote was 3.9 per cent. Although the UTG vote in Denison was only 6.9 per cent, it came close to winning a seat when one of its candidates was the last to be eliminated from the count. In an indication that the environmental issue could disturb long-term party loyalties, Ron Brown, former Labor MLC for Huon (1948–66), led the UTG Franklin ticket with a personal vote of 5.4 per cent.

The Franklin Dam

While the Lake Pedder issue was important for bringing environmental issues to the fore in Tasmania, it was a political battle which probably made little impact north of Bass Strait. The Franklin Dam issue, which became an important factor in the 1983 Commonwealth election, was different. The policy of opposing the Tasmanian Liberal Government's plans for the construction of a hydro-electric power scheme on the Gordon or Franklin Rivers in south-west Tasmania was adopted by the national Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 1982. The ALP then sought to persuade Coalition voters to switch parties on this issue. Although Labor's vote fell markedly in Tasmania (-5.8 per cent), the Tasmanian Wilderness Society's campaign in 13 mainland marginal Liberal seats was believed by some in the Coalition parties to have helped Labor's return to power.²

National Party Leader, Doug Anthony, was quite certain about the importance of the Franklin Dam issue: 'Clearly the [Fraser] Government has suffered—particularly in Victoria—from the campaign against the dam on the Franklin River in Tasmania.' Like many other politicians—including some in the ALP—Anthony was concerned about what this

-
1. Keith McKenry, 'A history and critical analysis of the controversy concerning the Gordon River power scheme', in *Pedder Papers. Anatomy of a Decision*, Melbourne, Australian Conservation Foundation, n.d., pp. 12–25; Christine Dann, "From Earth's last islands"; The development of the first two Green parties New Zealand and Tasmania', Global Greens, <http://www.globalgreens.info/literature/dann/chapterfive.html>, accessed on 14 May 2008.
 2. 'Environment vote "up"', *Courier-Mail*, 7 March 1983.

development meant for the future of Australian politics: 'I am still convinced, despite my own opposition to the dam, that the approach by the Labor Party is doomed to bring enormous divisions to this country.'³ One defeated Liberal MP probably expressed the views of many politicians uncomfortable with the idea of single-issue politics: 'It seems extraordinary that a group of people with one thing on their minds should try to turn out a democratically elected government.'⁴

Since 1983 most Australian elections have included discussion of environmental questions and controversies and, increasingly, activity by the environmental interest has been important in the analysis of final election results.

Other environmental voices

Early environmental activism was complicated by the fact that in 1984 the anti-nuclear networks of the environmental movement created the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP). Western Australian NDP Senator, Jo Vallentine, elected in 1984, spoke of her party possibly developing into a 'Greens type' of party.⁵ Although the NDP soon foundered, its emergence indicated the presence of a progressive, environmentally-aware third force in Australian politics. The UTG might have been the first *state* Australian environmental party, but the NDP was the first *national* party, winning 7.2 per cent of Senate votes in the 1984 election.⁶

The Democrats were also part of these early environmental political developments. The emergence of what was labelled 'new politics' in the 1970s and 1980s included the creation of the Democrats. In its early years, there was a marked degree of cooperation between the party and environmental interests—the Democrats have been described as by Nick Economou of Monash University as 'a willing ally' of environmental groups at that time. For their part, environmental groups supported the Democrats, especially in the Commonwealth elections of 1983, 1987 and 1990—the 'vote for the environment'.⁷ After the 1990 Commonwealth election, Tasmanian Greens MHA Bob Brown (1983–93) claimed that the combined UTG and Democrats result in Tasmania showed a marked swing to the green movement in that State: 'Our vote is up 5 per cent if you include the Democrats ... This

3. 'Anthony blames dam issue', *Canberra Times*, 7 March 1983.

4. Jack Birney, MP for Phillip (1975–83), quoted in Malcolm Brown, 'Birney blames the greenies', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 March 1983.

5. Marian Quigley, 'The rise and fall (?) of the Nuclear Disarmament Party', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 11, April 1986, p. 15; Timothy Doyle, *Green Power. The environment movement in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 136.

6. Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 224–5.

7. Nicholas Economou, 'Cooperation and competition: The two faces of Democrat-environmental movement relations', in John Warhurst (ed.), *Keeping the Bastards Honest: The Australian Democrats' first twenty years*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p. 257.

represents the continued growth of the Green vote in Tasmania.’⁸ His view was echoed by the Tasmanian President of the Democrats and newly-elected Senator, Robert Bell.

Consolidation of the Greens as a significant force

An increasing focus on elections

The UTG was gradually followed by similar ‘environmental’, ‘conservation’ or ‘green’ groups in other states, though by the end of the 1980s there were still only a relatively small number nominating for elections outside Tasmania. This changed as the different state environmental groups began to see the propaganda benefits of contesting parliamentary elections. The winning of a few Tasmanian House of Assembly and Western Australian Senate seats in the early 1980s probably gave an added incentive to do so. Encouragement also came from the overseas example of the German Greens, who first gained members of the Bundestag in 1983 and whose 1987 vote reached 8.3 per cent of the German national vote.

The number of environmental parties and their candidates gradually increased. Among the early electoral contestants were Victorian Environment (Senate, Vic., 1974), People’s Environmental Action Co-operative Enterprise (NSW, 1981), The Independents (Tas., 1989), Western Australia Green Party (HR, Senate, WA, 1990), Illawarra Greens (HR, NSW, 1990), the ACT Greens (HR, ACT, 1996) and liberals for forests (WA, 2001).

The following table gives an indication of the increase in environmental candidates for lower house seats over the last 20 years (Table 1):

Table 1: The increase in environmental candidates 1997–2007 (lower houses)

Election	Year	Seats	Green candidates	Year	Seats	Environmental candidates
Commonwealth	1987	148	4	2007	150	150
NSW	1991	99	8	2007	93	93
Vic.	1992	88	1	2006	88	84
Qld	1989	89	6	2006	89	75
WA	1989	57	2	2005	57	57
SA	1993	47	3	2006	47	47
Tas.	1986	35	4	2006	25	25
NT	1987	25	0	2005	25	11
ACT	1989	17	0*	2004	17	7

* A number of candidates from different groups focussed their campaigning on environmental matters, though no single group was regarded as ‘green’.

Sources: Australian Electoral Commission, NSW Electoral Commission, Victorian Electoral Commission, Queensland Electoral Commission, Western Australian Electoral Commission, Electoral Office of South Australia, Tasmanian Electoral Office, Northern Territory Electoral Commission, Elections ACT.

8. Michael Lester, ‘Brown claims Green success’, *Sunday Tasmanian*, 25 March 1990.

The importance of preferences

Since the early 1980s some of the political importance that environmental candidates have enjoyed has been a consequence of the increasing importance of how their voters allocate their preferences at election time. One of the first significant occasions was the 1990 Commonwealth election when it was later established that the Labor Party gained many more environmental voter preferences than did the Coalition.⁹ This has continued in the elections since.

In the 2004 Commonwealth election, for example, Australian Greens preferences helped elect ALP MPs in at least 21 electorates, including the New South Wales electorates of Banks and Lowe, the Victorian electorates of Ballarat, Bendigo, Isaacs and Melbourne Ports, and the Western Australian electorates of Cowan and Swan. The Coalition lost four electorates in which the net preference flows from the Australian Greens to the ALP was greater than the two-party preferred winning margin. These were the New South Wales electorates of Parramatta and Richmond and the South Australian electorates of Adelaide and Hindmarsh.

Although the Australian Greens 2007 House of Representatives vote was lower than the party had hoped for, it played a significant role due to the relatively low vote achieved by Labor (43.4 per cent). Across the nation, 79.7 per cent of Australian Greens preferences went to Labor (the highest being 82.9 per cent in Victoria). These votes were important in pushing the ALP national two-party preferred vote to 52.7 per cent, its highest figure since 1993. In electorates such as Richmond (NSW), Leichhardt (Qld) and Franklin (Tas.), it was the final parcel of preferences from the Australian Greens that confirmed the Labor candidate's first preference lead enjoyed from the first count. In other electorates, however, the Labor candidate was trailing the Coalition candidate after the penultimate count, and it was Australian Greens preferences that finally secured these electorates for Labor. Such electorates included Prime Minister Howard's Bennelong, as well as Page and Robertson (all NSW), Corangamite and Deakin (Vic.), Hasluck (WA) and Bass and Braddon (both Tas.). In Bass, Labor's Jodie Campbell saw her party's first preference share fall by 2 per cent to 37.2 per cent, and she was still 6 per cent behind the sitting member with only the Australian Greens preferences to be distributed. Ultimately, 74.1 per cent of these preferences pushed her to 51 per cent of the two-party preferred vote. Although the ALP would have won the national election without such a generous allocation of preferences, the fact that they received them made their final seat tally healthier than it probably would otherwise have been.

Pushing aside the Australian Democrats

As mentioned earlier, for some years the Democrats tended to be regarded (and regarded themselves) as the parliamentary standard-bearers for the environmental interest. At its peak,

9. Colin A. Hughes, 'The Rules of the Game', in Clive Bean, Ian McAllister and John Warhurst (ed), *The Greening of Australian Politics. The 1990 Federal Election*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1990, p. 144.

the party was able to win 11.3 per cent of the national House of Representatives vote in 1990 and occupy nine of the 76 Senate seats between 1999 and 2002. During the second half of the 1990s, however, the relative importance of the Democrats and the environmental parties shifted, for a number of reasons.

On the one hand, the Democrats' electoral support began to weaken, with two factors particularly significant. As environmental candidates became more common in elections across the country, voters concerned about such matters began to abandon the Democrats, apparently due to a belief that they were not 'green' enough. One important event may well have been the replacement of Janet Powell as Australian Democrats Leader. Tasmanian Greens MPs had been speaking with Powell about forming a 'Green Democrats' party, but neither of her successors, John Coulter or Cheryl Kernot, showed any interest in continuing the discussions, to the frustration of the environmental parties.¹⁰ As more such candidates stepped forward at election time, so those Australian Democrats voters who put environmental issues at the top of their issue list had somewhere else they could place their vote. Many would probably have seen the new parties as purer on environmental issues than the Democrats. One might also speculate that Kernot's replacement as Australian Democrats Leader, Meg Lees, may well have antagonised environmental/Democrats voters with her eventual support for the Howard Government's goods and services tax (GST) legislation. Certainly this was the view of many in the media.¹¹

While this was occurring, support for the general environmental movement seemed to be on the rise. In the Senate, the Greens (WA) had won Western Australian seats in 1990 and 1993, occupying a strategic position from July 1993. Elsewhere, environmental politicians had held the balance of power in Tasmania, most notably in the Labor-Green Accord of 1989–92; and two were elected to the ACT Legislative Assembly in February 1995. The Greens had performed creditably in the 1995 New South Wales election, Queensland Greens preferences played an important role in the Queensland Labor Government's near-defeat in 1995, and the 12.9 per cent ACT Green vote in the House of Representatives Canberra by-election of March 1995 helped produce a surprise Labor defeat. The future looked promising for the environmental forces.

A single force

Despite preaching a common message, for some time the environmental parties were essentially independent state organisations with no national focus. Although the Western Australian Senators, Jo Vallentine (1985–82), Dee Margetts (1993–99) and Christabel Chamarette (1992–96), were positioned to give the movement a national voice, none seemed to gain much recognition as a national leader. In fact, Margetts and Chamarette earned a great

10. Amanda Lohrey, 'Groundswell: The rise of the Greens', *Quarterly Essay*, 8, 2002, p. 33.

11. 'The Greens: a matter of preference', editorial, *Courier-Mail*, 20 March 2001.

deal of ridicule as the ‘gumnut twins’, with the clear implication that their views were only marginal to the national interest.¹²

In 1992 an important development was the organisation of the different state-based parties as a reasonably unified force. Representatives from different states met in Sydney, where the New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmanian Greens agreed to the formation of the ‘Australian Greens’, with support from Victorian, Western Australian and ACT representatives. It was later noted, ruefully, that no member of the media attended the press conference announcing this important union, due to its clashing with the opening of the Sydney Harbour Tunnel.¹³ The Greens (WA) were the hold-out branch of the new party, reflecting their NDP origins which gave the party of the west a far stronger anti-war orientation than its eastern Australian colleagues with their strong conservation mind-set. Although the Greens (WA) maintained a separate status for some time, henceforth there was greater uniformity in the message and policies being pushed at different elections by Greens candidates. In addition, Bob Brown’s move to the Senate in 1996 gave the new arrangement a recognisable leadership focus.

The last decade has seen Australian Greens (AG) win seats in many Australian legislative bodies. The 2002 Cunningham by-election produced the first Greens MHR, while Bob Brown has been joined in the Senate by Kerry Nettle (NSW 2002–8), Rachel Siewert (WA 2005), Christine Milne (Tas 2005), Sarah Hanson-Young (SA 2008) and Scott Ludlam (WA 2008). Members of state Legislative Councils have been elected in New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria. Three ACT Legislative Assembly members have been elected. In Tasmania, AG candidates have achieved election in every House of Assembly election since 1986, with four of the 25 House of Assembly seats won in the 2002 and 2006 elections.

The importance of Proportional Representation

Like other minor party candidates, AG flag-bearers have been both helped and hindered by the voting methods in use in Australian parliamentary elections.¹⁴ Proportional Representation (PR) is used in elections for the Senate, all mainland Legislative Councils, the Tasmanian House of Assembly, and the ACT Legislative Assembly. As the name implies, PR was devised in the hope that it would produce results in which candidates gained parliamentary seats in proportion to the number of votes they received. Today, the use of this voting system means that a minor party with a reasonable following has a fair chance of winning a seat. The vote needed depends on the number of seats being contested. A vote of just 4.5 per cent (of first and later preferences) will win one of 21 New South Wales

12. ‘We appropriated the term and wore it proudly’, Senator Margetts, Senate, *Debates*, 27 June 1996, p. 2458.

13. Bob Brown and Peter Singer, *The Greens*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 84–6.

14. Scott Bennett and Rob Lundie, ‘Australian Electoral Systems’, *Research Paper*, no. 5, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2007–08, pp. 6–7, 19.

Legislative Council seats, 14.3 per cent will secure one of the six seats contested in a half-Senate election in one of the States, while 16.7 per cent will win a seat in a five-member Tasmanian House of Assembly electorate. Parliamentary seats are far easier to win in a PR election than in a Preferential Voting election where 50 per cent (plus a single vote) is required (for a discussion of Preferential Voting, see below pp. 10–16). Since 1990, minor parties and independents have won enough seats in PR elections to have been politically significant, a development that has presumably encouraged voters to further support them. Not surprisingly, therefore, minor parties often put more effort into winning seats in PR elections than in those where Preferential Voting is the voting method.¹⁵

As a measure of the impact of voting methods on AG candidates' efforts it is informative to study the electoral battles of Bob Brown, currently a Senator for Tasmania, but an MHA in the Tasmanian Parliament between 1983 and 1993. Between 1982 and 1992 Brown contested four Tasmanian House of Assembly elections, winning a seat on three occasions and defeated on the other when he came fourth on first preferences, but was denied a seat by an insufficient number of preferences. He then contested Denison in the 1993 House of Representatives election, where Preferential Voting was the electoral system, but his impressive vote of 14.2 per cent was still well behind the Labor (51.3 per cent) and Liberal (31.4 per cent) tallies—as was to be expected. Since then Brown has contested three Senate elections, winning a seat on each occasion with state-wide AG votes of 8.7 per cent (1996), 13.8 per cent (2001) and 18.1 per cent (2007), the latter of which gave him a seat on the first count. A major factor in Brown's electoral record has clearly been the voting method in use in each election.

The use of PR for some elections is therefore an important factor in the winning of seats in Australian legislatures. There is an important rider to this, however. The more seats being contested in the single PR electorate, the lower the quota of votes needed and the greater the chance of a significant minor party winning a seat. The fewer the seats being contested, however, the larger the quota of votes needed to win a seat and the more difficult it is for a minor party to win seats. In four ACT Legislative Assembly elections (1995–2004) the AG have returned an MLA in the seven-member electorate of Molonglo in each election. By contrast it has returned only one in five-member Ginninderra and has yet to return an MLA in the five-member Brindabella electorate.

This also can be seen in ACT and Northern Territory Senate elections. In such contests where two seats only are being contested the quota is 33.3 per cent, much larger than the half-Senate election quota of 14.3 per cent needed to win a State Senate seat. To date, the two seats in each territory have been shared by the Coalition and Labor in every election since 1975, the first such election. The impact of this could be seen in 2004 and 2007 when the AG ticket for the ACT Senate contest was headed by former popular three-term Legislative Assembly

15. Damien Cahill and Stephen Brown, 'The Rise and Fall of the Australian Greens: The 2002 Cunningham By-election and its Implications', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, no. 2, June 2008, p. 273.

member Kerrie Tucker (1995–2004). Despite returning a 2004 vote of 16.4 per cent—which was over three per cent higher than the party’s Senate vote in Tasmania—Tucker fell well short of winning a seat. The ALP (41.1 per cent) and the Liberal Party (37.9 per cent) comfortably retained their seats on first preferences. Three years later the ‘Save Our Senate’ campaign in the ACT was effectively a call for voters to support Tucker again, but despite her party lifting its vote to 21.5 per cent—still three per cent better than the AG in Tasmania—both seats again were won by the major parties on the first count.¹⁶

On to bigger things?

Writing in 2002, Shaun Wilson of the Australian National University described AG voters as representing a constituency that was concerned with more than environmental questions. He claimed that many were Labor supporters, disillusioned with their party’s diminished commitment to full employment and economic redistribution. Many saw Labor as following the economic agenda set by the political right, with the consequence that the long-standing and traditional gap between the major parties had ‘necessarily disappeared’. By squeezing out the Democrats who were mortally wounded by internal division and, Wilson argues, through their ill-advised support for the GST, the AG appeared: ‘to have opened up the political space to the left of Labor, and proven themselves to be attractive to a more diverse constituency than might be anticipated for green politics.’¹⁷

Since then the AG have determinedly painted a picture of a party on the rise with a momentum that will not be stopped. Bob Brown has long claimed the inevitability of the party’s (and the movement’s) rise in popularity with voters: ‘We’re destined to grow because the problems we have, of deforestation, of global warming, are not going away.’¹⁸ With a claim that up to 40 per cent of voters were available to add their support to the smaller parties and to independent candidates, he has asserted:

I just think it is inevitable that we are seeing the demise of the two-party system ... We are in a pluralist world. People are better informed, better educated and they want choice. The party system has to yield to that new democracy.¹⁹

Shortly after the 2007 Commonwealth election result was known, Brown used the AG website to describe the party as: ‘gradually, inexorably, unrelentingly, bit by bit, solidly, indefatigably and reasonably going up in the polls’.²⁰

16. Scott Bennett and Stephen Barber, ‘Commonwealth Election 2007, *Research Paper*, no. 30, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2007–08, pp. 33–4.

17. Shaun Wilson, ‘The emergence of the green electorate in Australia’, *AQ*, vol. 74, issue 6, November–December 2002, pp. 18–19.

18. ‘Lunch with Maxine McKew: Bob Brown’, *Bulletin*, 1 October 2002.

19. Quoted in Mike Stekete, ‘Jolly Green giant killers’, *Weekend Australian*, 26–27 October 2002; see also Jack Humphrys, ‘Greens are on a roll’, *Australian Options*, Summer 2002, p. 11.

Are there limits to the Australian Greens' electoral successes?

Not all observers are as certain as Bob Brown that the AG will become a major part of the Australian political landscape. In defence of their view, they make several points about probable limits that might bring AG growth to a halt, sooner rather than later.

Preferential Voting

The problem

Preferential Voting is used in House of Representatives elections, as well as lower house elections in each mainland state and the Northern Territory. The requirement for a candidate to achieve one vote more than half of all preferences is integral to what has been described as 'the anti-minor party bias in the preferential voting system'.²¹ To have any chance of winning, a candidate probably should have at least 35 per cent of the first preference vote, though most candidates with votes in the 35–39 per cent range will not win the contest. For AG House of Representatives candidates this hurdle has proved to be difficult to clear. So far, on only six occasions have the party's candidates managed 20 per cent in a House of Representatives contest: Cunningham 23.0 per cent (2002 by-election), Melbourne 22.8 per cent (2007), Sydney 21.6 per cent (2004), Mayo 21.3 per cent (2008 by-election), Sydney 20.7 per cent (2007), Cunningham 20.1 per cent (2004). Of these six, the earlier Cunningham and the Mayo contests were atypical, for the AG vote was undoubtedly pushed over the 20 per cent mark by the fact that the party had only one major party rival. The Liberal Party did not contest Cunningham in 2002, nor did Labor contest Mayo in 2008. In the other contests, the AG candidate was unable to achieve second place on first preferences, finishing behind both major party candidates. To put this in some historical perspective, since the introduction of Preferential Voting for House of Representatives elections, only 49 of 4069 contested elections and by-elections (1.2 per cent) have been won with a first preference vote below 30 per cent.

Limited successes

To date, there have been only three occasions when environmental candidates have won contests where Preferential Voting has been in use. All three cases were unusual and unlikely to be often repeated and, in two cases the winning candidate's opponents have included a candidate from a registered environmental party. Two electorates have been involved.

In the 2001 Western Australian state election the controversial Liberal Minister for Fair Trading, Doug Shave, had strong opposition from various candidates in his south

20. Bob Brown, Australian Greens Website, <http://greens.org.au/message/>, accessed on 16 June 2008.

21. Nick Economou and Margaret Reynolds, 'Who voted Green? A review of the Green vote in the 2002 Victorian state election', *People and Place*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2003, p. 66.

metropolitan seat of Alfred Cove. Janet Woollard represented the ‘liberals for forests’, though she was listed as an independent on the ballot paper. Crucially, the Labor Party did not nominate a candidate. Shave’s vote fell to less than one-third of first preferences, with Woollard 12 per cent behind on the first count. However, by gaining well over half of other candidates’ preferences she won comfortably.²² It is arguable that had Labor nominated a candidate in this general election in which it won office, it might have won the seat.

Four years later, the Alfred Cove line-up of candidates included an ALP candidate. Woollard gained 24 per cent of first preferences, 13.9 per cent behind the Liberal candidate. Crucially, she was narrowly ahead of Labor on the penultimate count. Labor and Greens (WA) preferences saw her re-elected.

In the 2002 Commonwealth by-election in Cunningham (NSW) referred to above, the AG candidate Michael Organ won, despite finishing 15.1 per cent behind the Labor candidate on first preferences. In managing to pick up 75.2 per cent of all preferences distributed, Organ gained a comfortable victory by 2996 votes (4.4 per cent). In a reminder of the 2001 Alfred Cove contest, Organ was helped immeasurably by the decision of a major party (the Liberals) not to nominate a candidate. Had the Liberal Party nominated, this would have almost certainly seen the party winning sufficient votes to keep its candidate ahead of Organ—whose preferences would have given the seat to the Labor Party.²³

Despite these three successes, the current level of popular support for environmental candidates remains well below the level needed for the AG to have much chance of winning many electorates where Preferential Voting is used. In the 2007 Commonwealth election, for instance, in only 12 electorates did the AG candidate manage to reach 14 per cent of first preferences, and only in Melbourne and Sydney was 20 per cent reached. In no seat did the AG candidate lead either major party opponent after the count of first preferences (Table 2).

Table 2: Highest Australian Greens House of Representatives votes, 2007 election (%)

Rank	Electorate	AG vote	ALP vote	Coalition vote
1	Melbourne	22.8	49.5	23.5
2	Sydney	20.7	49.0	26.7
3	Grayndler	18.7	55.5	20.9
4	Denison	18.6	48.5	29.7
5	Batman	17.2	57.2	20.6
6	Bass	15.3	37.2	43.5
7	Melbourne Ports	15.0	42.5	39.7
8	Wentworth	15.0	30.5	50.4

-
22. Claire Miller, ‘Greens in suits—out of the fringe, in for the forests’, *Sunday Age*, 1 April 2001; Glenn Worthington, ‘Western Australian election 2001’, *Current Issues Brief*, no. 10, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2000–01.
23. Scott Bennett, ‘The Cunningham by-election 2002’, Parliamentary Library, *Research Note*, No. 18, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2002–03.

Rank	Electorate	AG vote	ALP vote	Coalition vote
9	Richmond	14.9	43.8	37.0
10	Cunningham	14.6	53.2	26.6
11	Fremantle	14.6	45.2	35.1
12	Franklin	14.4	41.4	41.0

Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

Winning a House of Representatives seat. A mirage? A distraction?

In the last three Commonwealth elections the AG have contested every House of Representatives seat, no doubt motivated by the need to maximise their Senate vote. There is, however, a subtext which describes the party as moving to join the major players at the top of the party league table. Illustrating this claimed change in status after the 2007 election, the AG pointed to the marginalisation of the seat of Melbourne, where the Liberals were pushed back to third place in the distribution of preferences. In the Senate, the AG were said to have shown their dominance over the Nationals by the size of their vote and their largest-ever haul of Senate seats. Even the local government elections in the Northern Territory in April 2008, where AG candidates won three seats, were cited as more evidence of the inevitable achievement of major party status.²⁴ The logic of this suggests that the AG will, inevitably, win House of Representatives seats. How likely is this?

Former Labor senator, John Black, now of Australian Development Strategies, believes this scenario to be quite likely. He sees the seats of Melbourne, Sydney, Grayndler, Batman, Denison and Wentworth as all possible victories for the AG. He describes these seats as 'intellectually dominated' by well-to-do professionals who are concerned about global warming as well as other environmental problems. They are intellectually liberated; the gays among them are resentful of the failure of governments to legislate for full marriage rights for this urban subgroup. Black sees these seats as effectively marginal, with the AG at the next House of Representatives election needing only to gain about one per cent from the Liberal Party and about five per cent from Labor to win any of them.²⁵ Such a view lends support to Bob Brown's claim concerning the inevitable growth of his party.

Not all would agree with Black's analysis. The excitement may well be genuine and the achievement of winning a House of Representatives seat in a general election would be the occasion of party celebration. However, others believe that the reality is that Preferential Voting will make it very unlikely that the AG will achieve such an outcome. To illustrate this view, the electorates listed in Table 2 are examined.

First of all, it is of obvious importance that no major party candidate should gain more than half of the vote in any electorate because this would make the size of any other candidate's tally irrelevant. In 2007, Labor won Batman (57.2 per cent), Grayndler (55.5 per cent) and

24. Australian Greens website, http://greens.org.au/media/releases/release.php?release_id=929, accessed on 21 May 2008.

25. John Black, 'Rudd's tactics hollow out doughnut cities', *Australian*, 4 June 2008.

Cunningham (53.2 per cent) on first preferences, as did the Liberal Party in Wentworth (50.4 per cent). Of course, it is not just a rival party's achievement of half the vote on first preferences that would stop an AG candidate. It is inconceivable that if either the Labor or Liberal parties were to secure the level of vote, such as that achieved by Labor in Melbourne (49.5 per cent), Sydney (49 per cent) or Denison (48.5 per cent), they would fail to reach 50 per cent on preferences. Seats such as these are virtually impossible for a rival major party to win on preferences, let alone a minor party such as the AG.

Most obviously, there must be a reasonably healthy AG vote, with a first preference total of 20 per cent seemingly the bare minimum for success. Since 1918, only two House of Representatives contests have been won with less than 20 per cent of first preferences and only seven more with votes in the range of 20–25 per cent.²⁶ It is also crucial that the AG candidate finishes ahead of the Coalition candidate because, if the Green is behind, it is quite unlikely that the candidate will pass the Coalition candidate before being eliminated from the count.

The ideal position for the AG would be for some electorates to have relatively low Labor and Coalition support, with the AG vote well in excess of 20 per cent. Based on the 2007 figures, the closest to the ideal appear to be Melbourne Ports, Fremantle and the two Tasmanian electorates of Bass and Franklin. To say that they offer a path for AG success, however, would be an overstatement. In all four, the Greens vote is only moderate and quite a deal below the type of level that might push a Greens candidate into second place on the second-last count.

A key aim for the AG is to reduce the size of the Labor vote, so it would help the party if the Rudd Government were to lose some support by the time of the next election. At the same time, the party does not want too great a surge in the Liberal vote, for it is crucial for an AG candidate to be ahead of the Liberal tally by the last count. If such a candidate can achieve this, he or she would benefit more from Liberal preferences than would the Labor candidate—always assuming that the AG candidates are put ahead of Labor candidates on Liberal how-to-vote cards. Black has noted that in Melbourne in 2007, 82.6 per cent of Liberal preferences flowed to the AG candidate.²⁷

A problem for the AG is that the major parties remain popular, with voters who shift from one overwhelmingly likely to vote for the other (see below, p. 23). In the 21 elections since the emergence of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in 1955, the combined first preferences of the major parties have averaged 89.0 per cent of the House of Representatives vote. In 1955 the figure was 92.2 per cent and in 2007 it was still as high as 85.5 per cent. The

26. The seats were McMillan (16.6 per cent 1972), Denison (19.3 per cent 1934), Perth (21.3 per cent 1922), Riverina (21.7 per cent 1940), Blair (21.7 per cent 1998), Batman (22.5 per cent 1966), Wilmot (22.7 per cent 1922), Richmond (24.1 per cent 1937), McMillan (24.8 per cent 1974).

27. Brown, *op. cit.*

consequence is that the vote of minor party candidates rarely reaches 20 per cent in any electorate. The Australian Democrats achieved this on just three occasions (in 1990 and 1998) and the AG have done so on only five occasions to date. All of which is a reminder of how well the DLP performed in the party's heyday. In the five elections between 1955 and 1966, DLP candidates topped 20 per cent on 20 occasions, with a high of 30.7 per cent in Scullin in 1955. Only in Tasmania did it fail to achieve this level of vote in any electorate. Despite this, the DLP never won a House of Representatives seat. Although Bob Brown talks of their vote rising 'gradually, inexorably, unrelentingly', their three best Commonwealth elections have not yet matched the best three DLP efforts (Table 3).²⁸ In fact, their best-ever result of 7.8 per cent, gained in 2007, did not match the 11.3 per cent achieved by the Democrats in 1990 or One Nation's 8.4 per cent in 1998.

Table 3: National DLP and AG House of Representatives highest votes (%)

Democratic Labor Party		Australian Greens	
Election	Vote	Election	Vote
1958	9.4	2007	7.8
1961	8.7	2004	7.2
1963	7.4	2001	5.0

Sources: Gerard Newman, 'Federal election results 1949–2004', *Research Brief*, no. 11, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2004–05; Australian Electoral Commission <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rb/2004-05/05rb11.htm>, accessed 4 August 2008.

The AG failure so far to achieve the results of either the DLP or the Democrats is very clear. The best result for each party in each state illustrates this. Only in Tasmania has the best AG vote topped the highest DLP and Democrats' votes (Table 4):

Table 4: State-level DLP, Democrats and AG House of Representatives highest votes (%)

State	DLP	Democrats	AG
NSW	5.6 (1958)	10.2 (1990)	7.9 (2007)
Vic.	15.8 (1955)	12.4 (1990)	8.2 (2007)
Qld	11.1 (1958)	11.6 (1990)	5.6 (2007)
WA	10.5 (1958)	11.2 (1977)	8.9 (2007)
SA	9.1 (1963)	15.2 (1990)	7.0 (2007)
Tas.	7.9 (1958)	8.6 (1990)	13.5 (2007)

Sources: Gerard Newman, 'Federal election results 1949–2004', *Research Brief*, no. 11, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2004–05, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rb/2004-05/05rb11.htm>, accessed 4 August 2008; Australian Electoral Commission

It would seem that for an AG (or any other) candidate to succeed in a House of Representatives election, the candidate should gain at least 20 per cent of first preferences—25 per cent would be preferable and 30 per cent almost essential. However, the candidate

28. The DLP topped 10 per cent in Victoria on six occasions 1958–69, achieving a range of 15.8–10.8 per cent.

should also note that Jim Cremean (ALP Anti-Communist²⁹) in Scullin in 1955 (30.7 per cent), Janine Haines (Democrats) in Kingston in 1990 (26.4 per cent) and Pauline Hanson (ON) in Blair in 1998 (36 per cent), all failed to gain enough preferences from other candidates to win their contests.

'Everyone now is an environmentalist'

Although the major parties have long addressed environmental issues, there is no doubt that for many years these were not the major foci of their policies—nor were they completely convincing in their efforts to bring environmental voters onside. However, in recent years the major parties have been pushing much harder on environmental questions at both the national and regional level, in a manner suggesting that they have begun to realise the urgent need for them to do so. As early as 2001 the Western Australian Liberal Leader, frustrated by the growth of the Greens (WA) and the emergence of the liberals for forests, was warning Prime Minister Howard of the need to make his support for environmental questions more obvious.³⁰ In the following year the AG hope of winning at least one Victorian Legislative Assembly seat in the state election was said to have been blocked by Labor's possession of a popular leader and enough pro-environment policies to win all inner-city seats.³¹ Recent examples of important major party environmental issues are many: the desalination promise by the Labor Party in the 2007 Commonwealth election, the Howard Government's concern to push through a long-term resolution of the Murray-Darling water issue, the Western Australian Liberal Party's proposal to pipe water south from the Kimberley and the Beattie Government's water pipeline proposal made in the 2007 Queensland election. The impact of global warming, the future of the Great Barrier Reef or, what the Nationals have called a national plan for water security, are now fully appreciated by all parties.

As a consequence, there is evidence to suggest that voters concerned about the environment are more prepared to accept that the major parties—those which can actually achieve change—may be worth supporting on their approach to environmental issues. In 2006, in regard to the issue of the environment, people were asked by Newspoll: who did they see as 'best able' to handle this policy area. Their options were the Coalition, the ALP and 'Someone else'. Remarkably, the three options achieved a near triple dead-heat in support (Table 5). If it is assumed that for most respondents the 'Someone else' was probably Bob Brown and the AG, the striking feature of this finding was the relative enthusiasm of respondents to what the party was saying on environmental matters. Their 26 per cent poll result was well behind the combined major party figure, but it was still impressive. However, two months after the accession of Kevin Rudd to the Labor leadership, the Coalition vote had moved little, but the ALP figure had jumped to 41 per cent. Much of this extra support

29. Later renamed the Democratic Labor Party.

30. Cathy Bolt, 'Greens show strength as Liberals claim Nedlands', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 June 2001.

31. Graham Richardson, 'Correspondence', *Quarterly Essay*, 9, 2003, p. 78.

presumably came from the ‘Someone else’ (AG?) tally which had tumbled to only 15 per cent. By the time of the November 2007 election the figures were little changed. On the issue of water planning, the February and October 2007 Newspoll figures indicated that the AG rated even less favourably than on the environment question.

Table 5: Party best able to handle environmental policies (%)

Policy area	Party	June 2006	February 2007	Oct 2007
Environment	Coalition	28	24	25
	ALP	28	41	39
	Someone else	26	15	19
Water planning	Coalition	Not asked	33	31
	ALP	Not asked	34	35
	Someone else	Not asked	9	10

Source: Newspoll, <http://www.newspoll.com.au/>, accessed 4 August 2008.

The environment findings from these polls probably reflected, in part, the resurgence of Labor, combined with the decline in support for the Howard Government. What must have given the AG much disappointment, however, was the disappearance of much of their earlier support and the fact that nearly two-thirds of respondents believed that a major party ‘would best handle’ an area of policy that is central to the AG very existence. In addition, they might have expected more support in relation to water planning than the poll suggested they had. Lohrey has noted that the problem for the AG may well be that increasingly every aspect of politics is filtered through what she has called a ‘green prism’—by the major parties as well as by the AG.³² As a former Howard Government environment minister has noted: ‘Everyone now is an environmentalist’.³³

Having established in a June 2007 Newspoll that water planning (75 per cent) and the environment (66 per cent) were the second and fourth issues in regard to the respondent’s vote in a Commonwealth election, to have the AG scoring so poorly in the election would have been a comfort to the major parties. Environment writer for the *Australian*, Matthew Warren, has noted the irony: ‘Twenty years ago, the environment movement was flat-out trying to get anyone to come to the party. Today it’s hard for it to get a word in.’³⁴

A branding problem

In addition to these two policy areas, the AG have developed a range of policies on such important issues as the provision of social services, the treatment of asylum seekers, the

32. Lohrey, op. cit, p. 6.

33. Senator Robert Hill, quoted in Lohrey, op. cit., p. 2.

34. Matthew Warren, ‘Success endangers greens’, *Weekend Australian*, 16-17 December 2006.

protection of the nation, education and health care.³⁵ Despite this, it seems clear that most of these other AG policies are barely on the radar of most voters, with an academic claiming that such policies are ‘mostly unknown to the national electorate’.³⁶ In noting this, Bob Brown has expressed his frustration with journalists, complaining that they typically ignore the fact that his party’s platform is not limited to environmental questions.³⁷ The Newspoll research cited above in relation to ‘green-friendly’ policies, indicated this lack of public awareness quite clearly in relation to specific non-environmental policy areas. In this poll, the ‘Someone else’ category invariably received a level of support well behind the major parties (Table 6).

Table 6: Party best able to handle selected non-environmental policies (%)

Policy area	Party	June 2006	February 2007	Oct 2007
Health & Medicare	Coalition	34	33	33
	ALP	41	45	47
	Someone else	6	3	3
Education	Coalition	35	27	30
	ALP	39	49	50
	Someone else	7	3	3
The economy	Coalition	61	51	53
	ALP	20	29	29
	Someone else	4	3	2
Welfare/social issues	Coalition	34	28	28
	ALP	45	51	51
	Someone else	6	4	5
National security	Coalition	56	44	49
	ALP	21	31	26
	Someone else	5	4	4
Industrial relations	Coalition	29	27	34
	ALP	48	51	47
	Someone else	6	4	3

Source: Newspoll, <http://www.newspoll.com.au/>, accessed August 2008.

The combined impact of the figures in Tables 5 and 6 suggest that the AG are seen overwhelmingly as a one-interest party, and hence are judged by voters not to be in the running for government. The AG nomination of candidates in every House of

35. See, for example, the party’s list of consolidated national policies issued in March 2007, <http://www.greens.org.au/library/policies/allpolicies.pdf>, accessed on 15 August 2007. See also Katrina Willis, ‘The Australian Greens’, in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: The 2004 Australian Election*, API Network, Perth, 2005, pp. 163, 164.

36. Peter McMahon, ‘Global Crisis & Australian Politics: Time for the Greens to make their move’, *AQ*, vol. 78, no. 3, May-June 2006, p. 26.

37. For an early example of Brown’s frustration see Claire Miller, ‘Greens no longer lost in the political wilderness’, *Age*, 12 November 2001.

Representatives electorate makes sense in terms of ensuring their how-to-vote cards are handed out to prospective Senate voters, but it is essentially irrelevant to AGs' hopes in winning House of Representatives seats.

Painted with the 'extremist' brush

Since their earliest days, when they infuriated Tasmanian politicians with their opposition to the activities of the Hydro-Electric Commission, the AG have long been painted as out of step with Australian life and politics. Their 'danger' to Australian society has been illustrated by many opponents, primarily, but not exclusively, from the political right. Over 20 years ago the Liberals' Alexander Downer warned during the 1987 election that environmentalists were 'uncompromising zealots', who had been 'hijacked by left-wing political activists'.³⁸ Cheryl Kernot (Democrats) spoke of 'feral obstructionists' who were more concerned to wreck than to attempt to build.³⁹ More recently, during the 2004 campaign the AG were vilified by the political right, as well as by business, farmers, loggers, church groups and the media. Liberal Senator Nick Minchin, for instance, warned of their 'dangerous policies' which included abolition of the defence force, the introduction of inheritance taxes and the granting of the vote to murderers and rapists.⁴⁰ Minchin's fellow Liberal, Senator George Brandis, spoke of the AGs' 'crypto-fascist' politics, whose methods bore 'frightening' similarity to 'the methods and values of the Nazis',⁴¹ while Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson (Nat) described them as akin to old-style communists.⁴² The Family First Party ran tough advertisements describing party members as 'extremists' who sought to legalise the use of heroin and ecstasy: 'They're giving my kids easy access to marijuana.'⁴³ In the 2007 campaign less seemed to be heard from such critics, though Family First's Senator Steve Fielding described the AG as 'anti-family and anti-small business', warning that they sought to open 'drug shooting galleries', give free heroin to addicts and remove all criminal sanctions for drug users.⁴⁴ The critics making such extreme claims choose to ignore the fact

-
38. Dean Jaensch, 'The Liberal Campaign', in Ian McAllister and John Warhurst, *Australia Votes. The 1987 Federal Election*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988, p. 72.
 39. Scott Bennett, 'The Election in the Senate', in Clive Bean, Marian Simms, Scott Bennett and John Warhurst (eds), *The Politics of Retribution: the 1996 federal election*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 19.
 40. Phillip Hudson, 'Greens to impose extreme agenda, Minchin warns', *Sunday Age*, 1 August 2004.
 41. Katrina Willis, 'The Australian Greens', in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: The 2004 Australian Election*, API Network, Perth, 2005, p. 166.
 42. *Ibid*, p. 167.
 43. Sally Young, 'Political Advertising: Hey, Big Spender!', in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: The 2004 Australian Election*, API Network, Perth, 2005, p. 113; *Adelaide Advertiser*, 7 October 2004.
 44. Steve Fielding, 'Pro-drugs, anti-business party poses a danger', *Weekend Australian*, 19–20 May 2007.

that the AG were able to work with, and support, the minority Tasmanian governments of Michael Field (ALP, 1989–92) and Tony Rundle (Lib, 1996–98).

Clearly, the AG would not be in a position to make such legislative changes by themselves. An old claim, though, is that the environmental party would be simply a ‘front for the ALP’—this was a confident Coalition assertion in the 1990 election campaign which was the first major campaign to feature environmental issues.⁴⁵ In 2004 a Queensland Family First Senate candidate sent a letter to Queensland church ministers warning voters against electing a Labor government, which would be beholden to the AG holding the balance of power in the Senate. If this eventuated, Australia would see: ‘the decriminalisation of the use of cannabis and ecstasy, sex changes to be funded under Medicare ... and the removal of the Lord’s Prayer from the Parliament’. In addition gay marriage would be allowed and same-sex couples would be given full access to fertility and surrogacy services.⁴⁶ In 2007 Senator Minchin warned that a preference deal between the AG and Labor would impose a ‘frightening reality’ on a Labor Government. Inevitably, Labor would be held to ransom so as to implement what Minchin described as the AG ‘dangerous policy agenda’: ‘This is the first time in Australian history that a radical left-wing party like the Greens have been poised to gain such an unprecedented level of power in the Senate.’⁴⁷

Apart from attacks such as these, sections of the Australian media either have been prone to ignore the AGs’ non-environmental policies, or else have weighed in with criticism a great deal harsher than that made of the major parties’ policies and actions. In the 2001 election the *Business Review Weekly*, for instance, attacked the ‘Green menace’ whose members saw the environment ‘as the foundation for a vision of global revolution’.⁴⁸ Three years later the Melbourne *Herald Sun* described the party’s ‘radical manifesto’ as a combination of ‘political correctness and loopy Left run riot’.⁴⁹ One might suppose that such claims make it difficult for the AG to build their vote to a level as to be able to challenge the major parties.

The relationship with Labor

Ironically, despite Coalition claims about the closeness of Labor and the AG, the relationship between the two parties has been far from harmonious; this may also have affected voting behaviour. It certainly has added uncertainty at times to the future of the smaller party. The strained relationship is particularly obvious during inter-party pre-election negotiations over

45. Senator Chris Puplick (Lib), quoted in Lenore Taylor, ‘Conservationists claim victory in shifting focus of electorate’, *Australian*, 26 March 1990.

46. Malcolm Cole, ‘Rallying faithful with fear of godless Labor’, *Courier Mail*, 7 October 2004.

47. Michelle Grattan, ‘The small fry start swim upstream’, *Age*, 29 October 2007; Ross Peake, ‘Brown flags Labor preference deal’, *Canberra Times*, 29 October 2007.

48. David Forman, ‘The Green menace’, *Business Review Weekly*, 19 February 1996, pp. 39–40.

49. ‘Don’t laugh, it’s serious’, editorial, *Herald Sun*, 31 August 2004.

preferences, but it can also be seen in the reaction of Labor spokespeople to the AGs' determination to act at arm's length from the ALP between elections.

A typical scenario in recent years has been the party's leader attempting to push Labor into a preference-swap at a Commonwealth or state election. While this is being given publicity in the media, Labor spokespeople will proclaim their determination not to be rushed into any hasty settlement. Prior to the 2007 Commonwealth election there was Labor frustration with AG threats to abandon preference agreements with the ALP if it did not hasten to a deal. Labor's Alan Griffin stated that his party's objective was 'to ensure we maximise the chances of defeating John Howard, not electing Greens' senators.'⁵⁰ At such times it seems that the advantage has primarily been with the larger party, limiting the development of the smaller. Labor views seem to be influenced by an attitude that there is no other realistic option for AG voters but to give them their second preferences. Negotiations at times seem superfluous.⁵¹

It must also be said that negotiations are sometimes seen as occasions of betrayal. Great was the AG annoyance in 2004 when Labor preferences elected a Family First senator in Victoria, causing them to fail to win a seat they believed would have been theirs had they been preferred ahead of Family First. A similar deal almost saw the failure of Christine Milne to win a Tasmanian seat, even though her party had won 13.3 per cent of first preferences.⁵² Labor, therefore, has a perennial resentment of the AG assumption that preferences between the two parties always should be exchanged, especially as there is some research to suggest that having a formal exchange of preferences adds relatively little to the size of the Labor vote.⁵³

The difficult Labor-AG relationship also can be illustrated by reference to examples of ill-feeling between the two parties. These are often a result of the AGs' determination to remain independent between elections, Labor's feeling of betrayal from a party that it seemingly assumes will prefer itself to the Coalition parties or the determination of Labor to rid itself of this continual nuisance. A not-unusual example of Labor criticism was former Labor Leader Mark Latham's claim that if the AG won the Cunningham by-election in 2002, the Port Kembla steelworks would close because the radical party wanted Australia to sign the Kyoto Treaty.⁵⁴ Former Labor Finance Minister Peter Walsh similarly warned that 'fanatics cannot be appeased', pointing to what he claimed was the AGs' 'sabotage' of the timber industry in Western Australia.⁵⁵ In Tasmania the party frustrated Labor by assisting the Rundle Liberal

50. Steve Lewis, 'Greens apply pressure', *Herald Sun*, 30 August 2007.

51. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

52. Scott Bennett, Gerard Newman and Andrew Kopras, 'Commonwealth Election 2004', *Research Brief*, no. 13, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2004–05, p. 30.

53. Glenn Milne, 'No real value in vote deals', *Australian*, 24 May 2004.

54. Bruce Toms, 'Review of the Greens', *Australian Options*, Autumn 2003, p. 33.

55. Peter Walsh, 'Goodbye to life as we like it when the greens get in for their chop', *Australian*, 6 August 2002.

Government to survive, while more recently the Brumby Government has expressed resentment of the AG often supporting the Opposition in the Victorian Legislative Council.⁵⁶ Federal Labor front-bencher, Lindsay Tanner, asserted during the 2007 election that the AG were ‘on about knocking over Labor’ rather than working to defeat the Howard Government.⁵⁷ One of the most determined acts by Labor to rid itself of the AG came with the Bacon Government’s reduction in the size of the Tasmanian Parliament, which had the particular aim of limiting the AGs’ membership of the House of Assembly.⁵⁸ All of this is a reminder of the words of Professor John Warhurst of the Australian National University, who has described the relationship between the ALP and the AG as ‘a combustible mix’.⁵⁹ It is likely to remain so.

Voting behaviour

A frustration for the AG is the voting behaviour of the great mass of Australians. Some, but far from enough, are prepared to support the party. There are various factors involved, including the fear of the possible consequences of voting for the AG and the ongoing prickly relationship with the ALP, both referred to above. Other factors include a preference for the major parties, the narrow social base of support, the existence of regional attitudes, and a desire of some to vote strategically.

Voter loyalty to the major parties

The problem for minor party and independent candidates is that the major parties usually garner a sufficiently large proportion of the vote between them in each contest to leave few votes for other candidates. In the 2007 Commonwealth election, for instance, the Coalition vote was 42.1 per cent and the ALP vote was 43.4 per cent—85.5 per cent in total. The highest AG first preference return of 22.8 per cent in Melbourne was still overshadowed by the combined Labor-Liberal vote of 73 per cent in the inner-city electorate. AG candidates contesting elections where Preferential Voting is in use thus have to undermine the voter support that the major parties have held for so long. There has been a decline in major party votes since 1949, but even in 1990 when the Democrats gained a remarkable 11.3 per cent of the House of Representatives vote, the major parties still garnered a vote of 82.9 per cent. It is therefore clear that the obvious problem for the AG (and the DLP and Democrats before them) is that a large proportion of voters who shift their vote from a major party simply vote for another major party, rather than for one of the minors. The eternal conundrum is how to devise a means of enticing voters away from the Coalition and the ALP—and holding them.

56. Peter Ker, ‘Brown thanks Libs for byelection boost’, *Age*, 3 September 2007.

57. ‘Greens hurt us—ALP’, *Herald Sun*, 2 October 2007.

58. Scott Bennett, ‘The Reduction in the Size of the Tasmanian Parliament’, *Research Note*, no. 2, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 1998–99.

59. John Warhurst, ‘Labor seeks advantage and preference in the Greens’ light’, *Canberra Times*, 5 July 2007.

Who supports the Australian Greens?

What type of voter has supported the AG to date? Is there is a ‘typical’ voter? Do different factors impact upon different voters? Is there a difference between long-term and occasional supporters of AG candidates? To a large degree this is a matter of guesswork, because there are many factors which individually impact upon voters’ choices when they enter the polling booth. While acknowledging the difficulties, analysts suggest that there are some patterns that emerge from survey research undertaken in recent years. Some of this is based on research focusing on responses of individuals; some focuses on those parts of the country where the AG vote is strongest—or weakest.

Using the data from the Australian Electoral Study, academics Clive Bean of the Queensland University of Technology and Ian McAllister of the Australian National University have drawn the following picture of AG voters (Table 7).

Table 7: Australian Greens voters—social structure and voting behaviour (%)

Characteristic	2001 election	2004 election
Male	4	7
Female	7	9
Under 25	8	18
25–44	8	10
45–64	4	7
65+	3	4
Rural	4	6
Urban	6	9
Catholic	5	5
Anglican	3	6
Uniting	6	4
Other	5	7
No religion	10	18
No post-school qualification	3	4
Non-degree qualification	4	6
University degree	12	18
Manual	3	7
Non-manual	4	6
Self-employed	7	6
Government employed	5	9
Union	7	10
Non-union	5	8

Sources: Clive Bean and Ian McAllister, ‘From impossibility to certainty: Explaining the Coalition’s victory in 2001’, in John Warhurst and Marian Simms (eds), *2001: The Centenary Election*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia Qld, 2002, ch. 27; Clive Bean and Ian McAllister, ‘Voting Behaviour: Not an Election of Interest (Rates)’, in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: 2004 Australian Election*, API Network, Perth, 2005, ch. 27.

According to these and other findings, AG sympathisers are most likely to be young (especially under 25), female, university-educated and residents of towns and cities. They are likely to be religious non-believers and, if employed, holders of public service jobs. A Morgan poll taken in 2007 confirmed the city-country split, but found no difference based on gender. The 18–24 and 25–34 cohorts (12.5 per cent) showed a significantly higher level of support than the 35–49 (8.5 per cent) or 50+ (5.5 per cent) cohorts.⁶⁰ For academics Nick Economou and Margaret Reynolds, the ‘particularly striking socio-economic characteristic’ in the AG vote in the 2002 Victorian State election was obvious in electorates that had a higher rate of concentration of voters with tertiary educational qualifications.⁶¹ A different slant on this question came from academic Paul Williams’ analysis of the Queensland electorate at the time of the 2004 Queensland State election. His findings suggested that AG support was highest in the inner Brisbane suburbs, particularly those with a higher proportion of younger voters, a lower proportion of older voters, a larger share of multicultural residents and a significant number of transient voters. A higher proportion of these Queensland voters had previously supported the ALP rather than the Coalition parties. Conversely, the AG had to struggle to win votes in rural and provincial electorates, which had larger numbers of older voters and fewer younger voters, than in urban electorates. Such electorates contained more settled communities, with less internal migration. Relatively few residents had immigrant backgrounds.⁶²

As far as issues are concerned, AG voters are seen as relatively uninterested in industrial relations, taxation, interest rates and terrorism issues, but very concerned about the environment and education matters.⁶³ They have been described as the most ‘social-democratic’ section of society, strongly believing in the importance of social spending rather than the cutting of taxes, and claiming that the gap between rich and poor is something that should be addressed by governments.⁶⁴ Other findings have suggested that AG supporters believe that big business have ‘too much power’ in contrast with trade unions, and that they

60. Morgan Poll Finding No. 4208, 7 September 2007.

61. Economou and Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

62. Paul D. Williams, ‘The Greening of the Queensland Electorate?’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 41, no. 3, September 2006, p. 333.

63. Clive Bean and Ian McAllister, ‘From impossibility to certainty: Explaining the Coalition’s victory in 2001’, in John Warhurst and Marian Simms (eds), *2001: The Centenary Election*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2002, ch. 27; Clive Bean and Ian McAllister, ‘Voting Behaviour: Not an Election of Interest (Rates)’, in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: 2004 Australian Election*, API Network, Perth, 2005, ch. 27.

64. Shaun Wilson, Gabrielle Meagher and Trevor Breusch, ‘Where to for the welfare state?’, in Shaun Wilson et al, *Australian Social Attitudes. The First Report*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2005, pp. 107, 110; David Denemark et al, *Australian Social Attitudes 2. Citizenship, work and aspirations*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, p. 23.

are ‘particularly untrusting’ of governments.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, AG identifiers have higher than average rates of political participation.⁶⁶

To list such characteristics is to omit many others that are relevant to the Australian voting population. Few AG voters are farmers or rural workers, while Australians who work in labouring, retail or hospitality jobs are more likely to vote for a major party. Poorer families and those who are unemployed do not look for help from an environmental party; nor do most migrant families. It used to be a truism of Australian politics that the party preference of many voters was that of the voter’s parents. This influence has declined in importance, but it would be wrong to assume that it has disappeared. All of which works against any substantial increase in voter support for the AG.

Regional attitudes

Not surprisingly, then, there are clear regional patterns to the AG’s support, or lack of it. In the 2004 Commonwealth election the Senate state votes ranged from 13.3 per cent in Tasmania to only 5.4 per cent in Queensland. In the following election the Tasmanian vote had climbed to 18.1 per cent, but the South Australian vote was only 6.5 per cent. When House of Representatives seats are classified according to Australian Electoral Commission classifications, the regional nature of the AG vote becomes more obvious (Table 8).

Table 8: Australian Greens House of Representatives vote 2004, 2007—regional figures (%)

Classification	AG vote 2004	AG vote 2007
Inner metropolitan	10.0	10.8
Outer metropolitan	6.3	6.5
<i>Total metropolitan</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.5</i>
Provincial	7.4	7.5
Rural	5.5	6.4
<i>Total non-metro</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>6.8</i>

Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

This can be seen further across the states and territories (Table 9).

65. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 21; Clive Bean and David Denmark, ‘Citizenship, participation, efficacy and trust in Australia’, in Denmark et al, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

66. Gabrielle Meagher and Shaun Wilson, ‘Are unions regaining popular legitimacy in Australia?’, in Denmark et al, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

Table 9: Australian Greens vote House of Representatives 2007—regional figures (%)

Area	Inner metro	Outer metro	Provincial	Rural
Australia	10.8 (+0.8)	6.5 (+0.2)	7.6 (+0.2)	6.4 (+0.9)
New South Wales	9.7 (-0.5)	5.7 (-0.9)	9.2 (-1.1)	6.8 (+0.8)
Victoria	13.3 (+1.2)	6.5 (+0.3)	7.3 (+0.5)	6.3 (+1.2)
Queensland	8.5 (+1.8)	5.9 (+0.3)	4.8 (+0.5)	5.2 (+0.6)
Western Australia	10.9 (+1.5)	7.7 (+1.2)	8.6 (+3.8)	7.1 (-0.1)
South Australia	8.0 (+1.8)	6.7 (+1.3)	na	6.1 (+1.3)
Tasmania	18.6 (+4.0)	14.4 (+3.2)	15.3 (+7.2)	9.7 (+1.9)
ACT	13.2 (+2.4)	na	na	na
Northern Territory	9.1 (+2.3)	na	na	6.9 (+1.3)

Source: Scott Bennett, Gerard Newman and Andrew Kopras, 'Commonwealth Election 2004', *Research Brief*, no. 13, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2004–05; Scott Bennett and Stephen Barber, 'Commonwealth Election 2007', *Research Paper*, no. 30, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2007–08

In 2004, of the five electorates with the highest AG vote, four (Sydney, Grayndler, Melbourne, Bennelong) were inner metropolitan seats, and one (Cunningham) was a provincial seat. Of the five smallest AG votes, four were in rural seats (Maranoa, Calare, Blair and Murray) and one (Capricornia) was a provincial seat. Three years later the five highest AG votes were all in inner metropolitan electorates (Melbourne, Sydney, Grayndler, Denison, Batman). Of the five lowest votes, four were in rural electorates (Flynn, Calare, Murray, Parkes) and the provincial electorate of Capricornia once again featured. An indication of the difficulty the party has in substantially increasing its vote, was the fact that the five highest votes in the 2004 election averaged a first preference vote of 19.6 per cent—three years later the figure had not altered. The lowest five votes produced an average vote of 2.4 per cent in 2004, but this climbed just 0.4 per cent in 2007. In both elections the party's votes tended to be highest in Labor electorates and lowest in electorates won by the Nationals.

These figures are a reminder of the point made earlier about social structure and voting behaviour. In the last two Commonwealth elections, for example, the AG gained about one vote in every 10 cast by those of high socio-economic status, whereas they received only about one in 20 from those in the lowest socio-economic group.⁶⁷ The four inner metropolitan

67. For the data used in this paragraph see Andrew Kopras, 'Electoral rankings: Census 2001 (2003 boundaries)', *Research Paper*, no. 1, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2004–05; Paul Nelson, 'Electoral division rankings: Census 2006 second release', *Research Paper*, no. 23, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2007–08.

seats referred to here are among the electorates with the highest salary-earners (\$1500 per week) and high proportions of tertiary-educated voters, whereas the four rural seats all are among the seats which have the highest proportion of people earning less than \$500 per week and the highest proportion of tradespeople and labourers. The electorates least keen on the AG were also among those with the highest proportion of people employed in the agricultural sector. The Mayo and Lyne by-elections held on the same day in September 2008 illustrate these points. In both contests there was no Labor candidate. The two are non-metropolitan electorates, but the near-Adelaide Mayo returned a 21.3 per cent AG vote, while in the New South Wales north coast electorate the party's candidate received just 7.1 per cent. All of which makes it difficult for the Greens to achieve a uniformly healthy regional vote, or see any worthwhile increase in its level.

House and Senate votes

An interesting development in Australian voting behaviour since 1955, has been the preparedness of a significant number of voters to vote differently in House of Representatives and Senate elections. A sign that many voters are politically aware enough to seek to maximise the impact of their vote, the change has paralleled the histories of the three most significant minor parties—the DLP, the Democrats and the AG. Clearly many voters understand the impact of the use of different electoral systems. It can be claimed that to vote for a significant minor party in Senate elections is as rational as voting for a major party in House of Representatives. From the perspective of the minor party, however, it is frustrating because any claim to be a major player must surely rest on the health of the party's vote in lower house elections. Typically, when Australian voters are required on the same day to cast a Preferential Voting ballot in a lower house election and a PR ballot in an upper house election, a greater number of voters will support minor parties in the Proportional Representation election. This has led to the commonly-heard view that there is a perception among voters that voting for an AG candidate in a Preferential Voting lower house election is a 'wasted' vote.⁶⁸ The gap between Preferential Voting and PR votes cast on the same day can be seen in the seven Commonwealth elections held between 1990 and 2007. The minor party vote in Senate contests averaged 4.3 per cent higher than for the House (Table 10).

Table 10: Combined minor party votes 1990–2004 (%)

Election	House of Representatives	Senate	Senate-HR margin
1990	17.1	19.7	2.6
1993	10.8	13.5	2.7
1996	13.9	19.8	5.9
1998	20.4	25.0	4.6
2001	19.2	23.9	4.7
2004	15.7	19.9	4.2
2007	14.5	19.8	5.3
			4.3 average

68. Mike Steketee, 'Jolly Green giant killers', *Weekend Australian*, 26 October 2002.

As far as the AG have been concerned, in most Commonwealth elections since 1990 they have had a higher vote in Senate elections than in those for the House of Representatives (2001 being the exception). In 2007 the party's Senate vote was 1.4 per cent higher—this represented 176,970 votes. If the AG are to achieve major party status, these votes, and many more besides, have to appear in both their Senate and House of Representatives tallies.

Conclusion—always on the fringe?

What of the future for the Australian Greens?

When Bob Brown referred to the demise of the two-party system (see above, p. 10), he was speaking after the AG upset win in the Cunningham by-election of October 2002, a success that was not repeated in the 2004 general election when Michael Organ was opposed by both major parties. In fact, for the 2004 AG national vote to rise only 2.2 per cent in the House of Representatives election and 2.7 per cent in the Senate election was a poor result, considering that the bottom fell out of the Democrats vote. As we have seen, in 2007 the AG national vote barely moved, increasing by less than one per cent in the House of Representatives and only 1.4 per cent in the Senate. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this is still behind the heady days enjoyed by the Australian Democrats in 1990 and by One Nation eight years later.

This is perhaps not as surprising as it might appear. Haydon Manning of Flinders University has made the point that the AG ideological beliefs probably appeal to a relatively small part of the Australian community. This is a view that is in accord with that of Green activist, Drew Hutton, who has stated that he is not 'super-confident of building a constituency beyond the 5–7 per cent'. Hutton also spoke of a core environmental constituency of 'probably 3 per cent'.⁶⁹ Nick Economou has speculated that the party is probably always likely to pick up votes from voters disillusioned with their first party choice, but that this support is always likely to be fickle. Major parties' policies and leaders change and many voters return to where they are most comfortable. If that is the case, the core AG constituency is likely to remain small—barring an explosion that knocks out one of the major players. Even were such to occur, however, it would be likely that a replacement middle-of-the-road party would emerge from the ashes. Economou notes that 'it's not easy being Green'.⁷⁰

With the continuing ability of the Coalition and Labor parties to gain around 80 per cent of the Australian vote, it must be wondered if the AG will manage to make any greater inroad into mainstream politics than the DLP of long ago or the Australian Democrats. It seems clear that a great many voters see the AG as basically concerned with environmental matters—and little else. Their name may well give them an indentifiable brand, but it may also be a factor that limits their future growth. It must also be wondered if the departure of Bob Brown from the leadership will limit the party's future hopes—the Tasmanian Senator will be 69 at the expiry of his current Senate term on 30 June 2014.

69. Quoted in Lohrey, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

70. Nick Economou, 'Why it's not easy being Green', *Age*, 26 November 2006.

The AG may well remain a significant political force thanks to continued victories in Proportional Representation elections, and especially those for the Senate, though they may never really be able to challenge the major parties. Were Australian parliaments to remove Proportional Representation from their voting arrangements and replace it with Preferential Voting, the AG's main political impact would be very much more restricted to pressure group activity rather than to parliamentary work.

In conclusion it may be relevant to quote *Australian* journalist, Mike Steketee, who asserted in 2002 that the Australian Greens were 'unlikely to be storming the bastions just yet'.⁷¹ Relatively little has changed since he wrote those words.

© Copyright Commonwealth of Australia

This work is copyright. Except to the extent of uses permitted by the *Copyright Act 1968*, no person may reproduce or transmit any part of this work by any process without the prior written consent of the Parliamentary Librarian. This requirement does not apply to members of the Parliament of Australia acting in the course of their official duties.

This work has been prepared to support the work of the Australian Parliament using information available at the time of production. The views expressed do not reflect an official position of the Parliamentary Library, nor do they constitute professional legal opinion.

Feedback is welcome and may be provided to: web.library@aph.gov.au. Any concerns or complaints should be directed to the Parliamentary Librarian. Parliamentary Library staff are available to discuss the contents of publications with Senators and Members and their staff. To access this service, clients may contact the author or the Library's Central Entry Point for referral.

71. Steketee, op. cit.