



Civil War In The Greens

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Watch the Greens. Watch them very carefully. Bob Brown's retirement does not mean the party is over. Rather, Brown has executed a very clever bid to boost both their vote and coffers.

Civil war has been raging in the Greens all year. It flared up spectacularly in mid-February when Brown's biographer, James Norman, slapped down controversial New South Wales Senator Lee Rhiannon and her hard-left allies in a bid to reassert Brown's authority.

The dispute began when Rhiannon's partner in her Democracy4Sale campaign finance project, Norman Thompson, mauled Brown for accepting a \$1.68 million donation from Wotif travel giant founder Graeme Wood in the 2010 campaign. It was the largest political donation in Australian history – and it bankrolled the Greens first major television advertising campaign.

This fight was all part of a broader battle to determine the structure and direction of the Greens and the long-term leadership succession when Brown stood down.

'The perception is strong that those who donate gain influence above and beyond the average person,' Thompson claimed in an article in *Crikey* that was later revealed to have been co-authored with Rhiannon and her office.

'Now it appears the Greens are in the same league as the old parties,' he continued.

Norman then hit back with a piece on *The Punch* contrasting 'the more centrist pragmatic approach taken by leader Bob Brown and many other Green MPs' with 'the more traditional left and dogmatic stand taken by some NSW Greens headed by Lee Rhiannon'. He went on:

'This is the same problem that faced the German Greens in the 1990s when they eventually split into two factions the fundamentalists and the realists (or pragmatists). Rhiannon fits into the first group and Brown personifies the second... The problem stems from those bound to old-left class warfare ideology versus those who wish to move the party into a more nationalised, centre-left position. Bob Brown summed it up when he said: "The Democrats wanted to keep the bastards honest, we want to replace them." Democracy is about compromise and working with others, totalitarianism is the politics of prosecuting dogmatic ideologies.'

Greens sources say Brown and his supporters have tried to take constitutional power from the influential state divisions to reinforce the relatively weak federal party in a bid to guarantee it will still follow his footsteps once he is gone. The large and left-leaning NSW Greens division is seen as an obstacle to his plan to make the party a major force in politics.

Brown denied the party was divided in the wake of the Norman article. 'We're a broad church,' he told me. But he repeated his biographer's warning, saying 'There will be people who are uncomfortable with the getting of power. That's always a problem for people.'

His message suddenly toughened. 'In Germany the fundamentalist Greens said they were the anti-party, or the anti-politics party. They got voted out very quickly.'

In another shot at the NSW party he expressed no regrets over the Wood donation. 'I wish we had two or three of them and I'll be looking for more at the next election,' Brown said. 'People in ethical business want to donate to the Greens,' he continued. 'Should that right be taken away from them?'

Since then, of course, Duntroon graduate, Masters of Economics holder, Merrill Lynch and Deutsche Bank alumni-turned winemaker in Tasmania's bucolic Tamar Valley, Peter Whish-Wilson has been chosen to replace Brown in the Senate. An old colleague from Merrills with finely tuned political instincts calls it 'a stroke of genius by Brown.'



‘Peter is a nice, sensible guy,’ the banker says. ‘He could walk into a small town pub or a boardroom and strike up a conversation with anyone and they’d agree.’

Whish-Wilson’s former workmate adds ‘Peter is leadership material.’ And Bob Brown aligned Greens agree. Whish-Wilson has already given the ideologues of NSW a gentle roughing up. ‘I don’t think anyone has a right to say that their brand of being Greenies is better than anyone else’s,’ he told the ABC recently.

Browns’ successor as leader and fellow Tasmanian, Christine Milne, is 60-not much younger than him. If they can see off Rhiannon’s watermelons, the Tasmanians have a new contender for the leadership, moderate sounding-and no doubt close to many of those cashed up ‘people in ethical business’ Brown mentioned. Brown may be gone, but the Greens could well be around bedevilling us in ways no one expected.