

Green Arithmetic and Doctors' Wives—The Election 2004

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WHEN a newspaper with the popular—and populist—instincts of Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* claims a political tag as its own, poll watchers take notice. And so it was late in May, when political editor Malcolm Farr wrote about 'the doctors' wives ... the women the Government most fear'.

Who are they? 'They look and sound like Liberal supporters', said Farr, 'but this year they are considering voting Green—even Labor'.

When Parliament resumed at the end of the winter recess, Newspoll still had the Greens on six per cent. This was fifty per cent higher than the Nationals, who only managed four. The Greens thrashed their old rivals for the protest vote, the Australian Democrats, who just managed to rate one per cent.

The Morgan Poll results from the same period put the Greens in a stronger position. Morgan gave the party eight per cent, with the Democrats on 2.5 per cent and a mere 1.5 per cent of voters signalling support for the Nationals.

Where is the Greens support coming from, and what might it mean for the Federal election?

First, some matters of electoral arithmetic need to be looked at. The Australian Democrats have traditionally been a Senate party. Electoral Commission figures show that, in 2001, they won 7.25 per cent of the Senate primary vote, compared to 5.41 per cent of the first preference ballots in the House of Representatives.

The Greens, in contrast, received 4.94 per cent of Senate primaries

and 4.96 per cent in the Lower House.

These voting patterns, tied with their increased vote, mean that the Greens' preferences will be more influential than the Democrats' in shaping the outcome of the House of Representatives results and deciding who will win government.

Since the last election, the Australian Democrats have lost a leader and disintegrated. Simon Crean has become the first Labor leader to be dumped without ever contesting an election and his party has embarked on the Latham experiment. Electoral redistributions have also occurred in Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

Using these new boundaries and the 2001 primary voting figures, it appears that the Greens' ten strongest seats are Melbourne, Sydney, Grayndler (NSW), Batman (Vic), Melbourne Ports, Kooyong (Vic), Denison (Tas), Richmond (NSW), Wentworth (NSW) and Franklin (Tas).

Of these, Richmond is the only rural or regional seat, and it includes the hippie havens of the New South Wales north coast. Franklin is semi-rural, but most of the electors live in the Hobart suburbs on the Derwent's eastern shores.

Batman, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, is the only genuinely blue-collar electorate on the list. Sydney, Grayndler, Melbourne Ports and Melbourne are fashionable and rapidly gentrifying. Denison takes in Hobart's poshest parts, while Wentworth and Kooyong respectively rate third and fourth highest on the list of

electorates ranked by relative socioeconomic advantage prepared by the Parliamentary Library from the 2001 Census.

Indeed, Wentworth and Kooyong and Dennison—and much of Sydney and Grayndler and Melbourne Ports and Melbourne—take us back to the doctors' wives. Who are these people? Farr explains that these women come from comfortable families created by high-income husbands.

The 'doctors' wives' are not seriously troubled by financial pressure and have plenty of time to think about other issues. They have opposed the Government's border protection policy and cannot forgive John Howard for Tampa. Now they are angry over Australia's presence in Iraq. They are appalled by the atrocities committed on Iraqi prisoners and believe Australia has been tarnished. Like most Australians they didn't want us to sign on for the war and now they are ready to punish the Government.

Farr specifically warns that their backlash could be felt in seats such as Wentworth, and adds that the doctors' wives could also influence Senate contests, with the Liberals the losers.

So why will they vote this way? The 'Power' edition of *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*, published at the end of July, may have some answers.

The figure at the top of its Cultural Power list was, and remains, invisible—the young woman whose sexual assault allegations against members of the Canterbury Bulldogs

Rugby League Club sparked off a re-thinking of sexual mores throughout organized sport and in the wider community.

Then, at number two, was the Australian Greens leader, Senator Bob Brown.

He was propelled there by an unlikely pair of experts, according to the *AFR*—Robert Manne, the conservative, turned bleeding heart, Professor of Politics at La Trobe University and Max Moore-Wilton, a friend of John Howard's, former head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and now Sydney Airport Corporation CEO.

Manne offered this view:

Outside the economy, some people think—and maybe they are part of the elite—that the country has not gone well in the last few years with regard to things like indigenous matters; the republic; multiculturalism; refugees; the environment. I'm one of the people who think that this period will be seen, when it is understood, to be a backward-looking period in our history where all the possibilities of the seventies, eighties and nineties have been squandered. In so far as there is anyone who stands for at least part of that vision, it's Bob Brown.

Moore-Wilton was more succinct: 'I actually think Bob Brown should be there. I think the Greens are a rising force, not a declining force'.

Canberra Gallery veteran Michelle Grattan observed in *The Age* just before Parliament resumed that 'the politics of the grand gesture will be on show in Election 2004'.

But why, in a time of prosperity, are presumably well heeled, well educated voters planning to cast protest votes?

An intriguing explanation comes in the form of a paper published in Britain in February by Civitas, The Institute for the Study of Civil Society, entitled 'Conspicuous Compassion: Why sometimes it really is cruel to be kind'.

Its author, Patrick West, postulates a fascinating hypothesis that explains the motivation of the 'doctors' wives' and many Green voters. His thesis is simple: he claims that we live in an age of conspicuous compassion.

Immodest alms-giving may be as old as humanity—consider the tale of Jesus rebuking the self-exalting Pharisee—but it has flowered spectacularly of recent. We are given to ostentatious displays of empathy to a degree hitherto unknown. We sport countless empathy ribbons, send flowers to recently deceased celebrities, weep in public over the deaths of murdered children, apologise for historical misdemeanours, wear red noses for the starving of Africa, go on demonstrations to proclaim 'Drop the Debt' or 'Not in My Name'. We feel each other's pain. In the West in general, and Britain in particular, we project ourselves as humane, sensitive and sympathetic souls. Today's three Cs are not, as one minister of education said, 'culture, creativity and community', but rather, as commentator Theodore Dalrymple has put it, 'compassion, caring and crying in public'.

West is no old man despairing the decay of his culture. Instead, he is a 30-year-old cultural historian. His thesis is that these 'displays of empathy do not change the world for the better: they do not help the poor, diseased, dispossessed or bereaved.' Instead, he writes: 'Our culture of ostentatious caring concerns, rather, projecting one's ego, and informing others what a deeply caring individual you are. It is about feeling good, not doing good, and illustrates not how altruistic we have become, but how selfish'. He continues:

This phenomenon is not some harmless foible. Outlandish and cynical displays of empathy can bring about decidedly 'uncaring' consequences. In terms of the Third World, 'dropping the debt', may not help starving Africans at

all. It may make their lives worse by rewarding their kleptocratic governments, freeing up their budgets to buy more guns to perpetuate their pointless wars ...

I believe that conspicuous compassion ... is a symptom of what the psychologist Oliver James has dubbed our 'low serotonin' society. We are given to such displays of empathy because we want to be loved ourselves. Despite being healthier, richer and better off than in living memory, we are not happier. Rather, we are more depressed than ever. This is because we have become atomized and lonely. Binding institutions such as the Church, marriage, the family and the nation have withered in the post-war era. We have turned into communities of strangers ... No wonder we are given to crying in public.

This, surely, offers an explanation for the doctors' wives in the leafy suburbs and the trendies in the luxurious new apartment blocks rising amongst the former industrial lands and decaying terraces and workmen's cottages in seats such as Sydney and Port Melbourne.

But what of the seats where the Greens score the lowest vote?

They are Capricornia, in Queensland, Calare, Chifley and Gwydir in New South Wales, Maranoa, Wide Bay and Kennedy in Queensland again, New England in NSW, Mallee in Victoria and Makin in South Australia.

All but Makin and Chifley are rural or regional seats. Chifley, in Sydney's outer west, has the highest proportion of people aged between five and 14 and the second highest proportion of one-parent families with dependent children. At number 71 out of 150, Makin, out of these, is the highest ranking seat in the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage. Calare and Capricornia come in at numbers 51 and 52 respectively, followed by New England at number 38. The rest are in the bottom 25 per cent. ▶

Wide Bay, the area of Queensland coast around Maryborough and Hervey Bay, is the inverse of Wentworth. It comes in third from the bottom, not third from the top. It contains the highest proportion of families in the nation with a weekly income below \$500 and lowest national family median income, just \$608.

The voters and residents of Makin are getting on with life. They live in the growth corridor of Adelaide's north-east, and aren't doing too badly with a median family income of \$932 a week. That may be why they don't vote Green.

The problems and preoccupations of the people of Chifley must be shaped by the suburbs of the Mt Druitt public housing estate it encompasses. These clearly exclude matters Green. And what of the other 10 electorates, the rural and regional seats where Bob Brown's vote is lowest? Victorian Farmers Federation's Paul Weller has some answers.

'Bob Brown's Greens political party represents farmers' biggest threat,' he told the VFF annual conference in July. 'The Green movement is very powerful. It is able to influence the metropolitan media and political decisions. Prime examples of this are the decision to commit more environmental water to the Snowy and Murray rivers.'

The Murray provides the perfect micro example of impacts of Green whim. The Council of Australian Governments has decided to increase environmental flows to the river by 500 gigalitres under the Living Murray First Step decision. This is only a third of the volume originally proposed, but local communities and irrigators are already disputing Murray Darling Basin Commission claims that the move will cost \$17.9 million annually.

The Living Murray Local Government Alliance, a group of nine local governments in north central Victoria and south central NSW, covering 35,473 square kilometres and home to 161,095 people, commis-

sioned modelling of its own by La Trobe University's Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities.

'Water', as the report states, 'is the economic lifeblood of the region'.

The Centre's modelling found that a 500 GL increase in environmental flows through reduced allocations would cost the region just over \$100 million. Some 752 jobs would be lost, mainly from agriculture and

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manufacturing, but also from the retail, hospitality, transport and storage, and property and business services sectors. If the water was sourced by purchases from the market, however, output would be reduced by some 4.6 per cent and lead to the loss of 3,288 jobs across the council areas, a drop of five per cent.

The final evaluation was familiar. It said that the impact of any of these eventualities would be serious in regional centres, particularly those engaged in agriculture-related value-adding activities such as food processing, but may be 'terminal' for a number of rural towns in the region. The report continued:

The flow-on effects to every sector in an economy have been demonstrated above and reductions in rural towns could be expected to take many of them below the critical mass sufficient

for a sustainable future. Losses of key sectors such as banking or petrol retail businesses will often be enough to force residents to travel to larger regional centres and change their shopping habits to the detriment of local businesses. Falling populations can also lead to the loss of a number of services such as schools and hospitals, thus further threatening the viability of the smaller towns.

Employment opportunities for younger people, even in the regional centres, would be expected to diminish further until few or no employment opportunities will force nearly all young people to leave the region and exacerbate existing trends of ageing populations in these areas, thus threatening the long-term sustainability of the region.

All this, not because of evil economic rationalism, but because of conspicuous compassion. How many other little groups of communities face similar threats from the Greens?

In his speech, the VFF's Paul Weller warned how radical environmental groups must be made accountable for the positions they take. 'There is a role for the media in this, too', he said. 'The Greens have got off too easily for too long in the public debate, with feel-good statements. It is no longer good enough for journalists just to report what Bob Brown says. Journalists should critically report the Greens' policies and potential impact in the same way they do for the major parties.'

But what do they do when those parties are off chasing Greens' preferences? What happens when those preferences make the difference between government and opposition? In the age of conspicuous compassion, what comes first—the needs of country communities or the feelings of doctors' wives?

Christian Kerr is a postgraduate politics student, political commentator and former federal and state Liberal ministerial adviser.

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