



THE FAR-LEFT HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN GREENS

The Greens' past shows they are a party of the radical left, not the environment, argues **Christian Kerr**.

CHRISTIAN KERR
Journalist with *The Australian*



A paradox lies at the very heart of the Greens. ‘The first Green Party anywhere in the world began in Australia in 1972, the United Tasmania Group, which grew out of pioneering Australian environmental campaigns,’ the official creation story on their website reads. ‘Early elections saw Greens representatives hold the balance of power at the state level, including Bob Brown and Christine Milne in Tasmania. In 1992, the Greens formed a national party.’

Not only is this strangely condensed. It omits what one would think are details absolutely crucial to the story of the Greens.

Yes, the Greens were born from the United Tasmania Group. It itself sprang from the Lake Pedder Action group, the body formed to try to revoke the removal of national park status and flooding and enlargement of the south-west Tasmanian lake as part of a hydro-electric project in the late sixties and early seventies.

The group was created to contest seats at the 1972 Tasmanian election, as flooding was set to get underway. It came within a few hundred votes of winning a seat, but its vote declined at the next election. Many of its members and other Lake Pedder activists drifted into the Tasmanian Wilderness Society in 1976, including the Launceston general practitioner Bob Brown.

The Wilderness Society was formed to continue and expand the work of the Lake Pedder campaign—and harness its energy to stop the Hydro-Electric Commission’s planned Franklin Dam on the Gordon River in the state’s rugged south-west.

Brown was a prominent figure in the Wilderness Society from its earliest days. He wrote about rafting the Franklin River in the very first issue of its journal and became the society’s director in 1978, putting him at the very forefront of the dam debate.

It was an Australian Democrat, Norm Sanders, who was first elected to the state parliament off the back of the controversy. He became a member for Denison in a by-election early in 1980, the first Australian political candidate elected on an environmental platform. But Brown very much became the face of the ‘No Dams’ campaign as it spread beyond Tasmania and mounted as a federal issue as the 1983 election loomed.

Sanders resigned from the

were joined by three other members—Christine Milne, Lance Armstrong and Di Hollister—largely elected in protest against a proposed paper pulp mill at Wesley Vale, outside the north-eastern centre of Devonport.

It was during this term of parliament that the movement got a name. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society had already spread to the mainland, dropping the specific state reference as its work broadened. The growing political organisation found a title too.

The title came from the Green Ban campaigns in Sydney of the early 1970s which had begun after women from the well-heeled suburb of Hunters Hill, rebuffed by the local council and Liberal state government,

appealed to the hard-left New South Wales branch of the militant Builders Labourers Federation to stop local development.

Jack Munday,

the BLF leader, coined the term at the start of 1973 to differentiate its environmentally-focussed actions from the traditional union ‘black bans’.

The actions spread in 1973 and 1974 across different parts of Sydney. The union and activists joined forces to block developments in Potts Point and the Rocks, in the Anglican-church owned areas of Glebe, and against a freeway development that would have cut through the inner-western suburbs of Ultimo, Annandale, Rozelle and Leichhardt.

The movement impressed a young visiting German bureaucrat from the European Commission and left-wing activist, Petra Kelly. She was fascinated by the collaboration between the workers of the BLF and the residents of the bohemian or rapidly gentrifying areas where the Green Ban actions occurred.

The name stuck with her and when at the start of 1980 she became a key

➤ **THE GREAT PARADOX OF THE GREENS IS THAT THEIR ORIGINS LIE IN A CAMPAIGN TO FIGHT THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOURCE OF RENEWABLE ENERGY**

parliament at the end of 1982 in protest at what he described as the ‘totalitarian’ treatment of dam protesters by the state government. More than 1500 had been arrested, including Brown.

Under Tasmania’s electoral system, a count back was held to determine who would succeed Sanders in Denison. The successful candidate was announced on January 4 1983. It was Brown, who the same day had emerged from 19 days in Hobart’s Risdon Prison for obstructing workers at the Franklin Dam site.

Brown had contested Denison at the 1982 poll as an independent. He was returned in the 1986 Tasmanian election, along with a second environmental campaigner from the neighbouring seat of Franklin, Gerry Bates.

The movement continued to grow in strength. Both Brown and Bates were returned at the 1989 election, and



■ The Greens woodchip protest

➤ AT THE VERY CORE OF THE GREENS’ PHILOSOPHY TODAY IS THAT THE PLANET ITSELF IS FACED BY AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS **THAT CAN ONLY BE RESOLVED BY RADICALLY REMODELLING NOT JUST THE ECONOMY, BUT SOCIETY ITSELF**

▶ CONTINUED

driver in an effort to unite groups of environmentalists, peace activists, anti-NATO, anti-nuclear and anti-industrialisation protesters into a single movement in a drive for real political power and parliamentary representation in her homeland she bestowed it on the new body. They became Die Grünen, the Greens.

The emerging political force in Tasmania borrowed back the name. They had originally been ‘the Independents’. At the end of 1991 they became ‘the Green Independents’. By August of 1992 they had become ‘the Greens’.

At the same time, the movement took the green triangular logo that had been the symbol of the Franklin protestors, removed the words ‘No Dams’, and replaced them with the party name.

It was an act rich in symbolism—and hypocrisy. The anti-Franklin protests, like the protests against the flooding of Lake Pedder before them, had been community-based social movements.

A political party had appropriated

their symbol while at the same time adopting a name that attempted to hide the fact that it actually was a party. Even now the media simply refers to them as the Greens. It was telling that the day after Milne discarded her agreement with the government that Julia Gillard, for the very first time, referred to them as ‘the Greens party’.

There was a lack of honesty in its actions, an ambiguity—an ambiguity that continues to match the paradox of the party that is so obvious today.

The 30th anniversary of the election of the Hawke government on March 5 this year was also heralded by the Greens as the 30th anniversary of the saving of the Franklin. Hawke had promised to block the proposal. UNESCO had awarded world heritage listing status to the wild rivers of Tasmania in December 1982. The incoming Hawke government went on to introduce legislation to stop work on the Franklin Dam and successfully defending its acts against a High Court challenge by Tasmania, saying that as they dealt with a listing under an international

treaty, they were constitutionally valid under the Commonwealth’s external affairs powers.

The environmental issues of 2013, however, are very different to those of 1983. True, some are still fought on a case by case, location by location basis. But at the very core of the Greens’ philosophy today is that the planet itself is faced by an existential crisis that can only be resolved by radically remodelling not just the economy, but society itself—and the relationship of both with the ecology.

At the heart of that existential crisis—or at least one of its most crucial elements—is the supposed threat of climate change, of global warming caused largely by the production and use of coal to generate the electricity that not only powers our industries, but powers—and empowers—our society.

The great paradox of the Greens is that their origins lie in a campaign to fight the development of a source of renewable energy, hydro-electrical power, that their great day of celebration marked the effective end of the push to develop this cheap and

carbon-neutral means of powering the Tasmanian economy.

Nothing was said about this on March 5 by this supposed party of the environment. It is a fact that simply cannot be acknowledged by any member. This dark, guilty secret, the party's very own original sin, is kept absolutely hidden. Which begs the question: what else do the Greens have to hide?

The Lake Pedder and Franklin Dam struggles are central to the Greens mythos. So, indeed, are their Tasmanian roots.

It can be seen in their choice of parliamentary leaders; Bob Brown, the friendly family doctor politicalised by the Pedder debate who goes on to lead the fight for the Franklin. His replacement Christine Milne, the country school teacher and farmer's daughter who becomes a force in the campaign against the Wesley Vale pulp mill because of what it will mean for the local environment. And the heir apparent, Peter Whish-Wilson, the Wall Street master of the universe who is humanised by the events of the September 11 terrorist attacks and retreats to his own little part of Tasmania where he becomes a simple vigneron and raises a family, only to find his solace disturbed by yet another milling project which drives him into activism.

The Tasmanian Greens present their story as a tale of ordinary folk driven into politics by threats to the environment that also threaten their community. If we look at the entity known as the Australian Greens—and how it came about, we find a very different story.

True, the story of the Australian Greens is the story of social movements, but these represent far more than local environmental mobilisations. They have drawn their support and platform from organisations that involve trade unions, the peace and disarmament

movement, opponents of the two Gulf Wars and involvement in Afghanistan, anti-urban development activists, the women's and gay rights movements, animal activists, the community legal centres movement, opponents of coal seam gas, opponents of genetically modified organisms... the list goes on.

Their former national convenor, Stewart Jackson, said in his doctoral thesis 'the Australian Greens has a complex history, bringing together a number of different strands of social and political thinking.'

This, of course, has assisted the Greens with their rise to the current position they enjoy as the balance of power party in the federal parliament. But it has also created tension in the parliamentary party and the party organisation with the promise of more to come, tension that with Brown now gone as leader and the more abrasive Milne in charge could become unmanageable, particularly if—as the polls suggest—their parliamentary representation in Canberra is set to fall.

A look at the history of the Greens' representation in the Commonwealth Parliament shows the very different backgrounds of members of the party to the Tasmanian branch. Brown might have been the first member of the Australian Greens to sit on the red leather benches of the Senate. But he was not the first Green. That honour went to West Australian peace and anti-nuclear activist Jo Valentine.

Valentine entered the Senate on 1 July 1985 after election as a member of the Nuclear Disarmament Party at the 1984 poll. She took her seat, however, as an independent, having left the party along with its figurehead Peter Garret in April 1985, saying it had been infiltrated and captured by the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party.

Valentine was re-elected at the head of her own 'Peace Group' ticket in the 1987 double dissolution, but sat as the representative of the Greens WA

from 1990.

Valentine cited the Quakers and the Vietnam Moratorium movement as keys to her activism. While a parliamentarian, she was arrested protesting outside the Australian/US joint facility at Pine Gap. She also marched against the American Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

She resigned citing ill health in March 1992 (while continuing active involvement in various anti-American, anti-uranium, anti-nuclear and anti-urban development campaigns) and was replaced by Christabel Chamarette, a psychologist and Christian anti-war activist who served until she was defeated at the 1996 poll.

Another Greens WA Senator, Dee Margetts, a former high school teacher and librarian until 1988, when she took the role of coordinator for People for Nuclear Disarmament, was elected at the 1993 election and served one term.

As well as the disarmament movement, other disparate factions from the Left founded the WA Greens in 1990. Key amongst these was the Alternative Coalition; a largely-Fremantle based group of members and former members of various communist parties left politically homeless by the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

The experience of the WA Greens does not only demonstrate the diverse interests of the party. It is the best example of how Green parties developed autonomously and independently across Australia. It applies equally to the growth of the party in others states. As in Tasmania and Western Australia, the NSW Greens developed organically. Its genesis however lay in yet another very different group, members of the Labor left from Sydney's inner west expelled from backing far left 'independent' candidates in the 1984 local government elections

► CONTINUED

in the Leichardt municipality—Rats in the Ranks territory.

Many of these were involved in a broader Labor Party reading group, set up in part as a response to what the participants saw as the regrettable dilution of socialist principles in the party at the time.

A Green party was formally registered in the state in 1985. Its members were concerned about wilderness preservation and forestry, but urban development issues and ideas around direct democracy were maybe even more significant. As one of its now leading lights—and then a dedicated servant of the Moscow aligned Socialist Party of Australia—Lee Rhiannon has observed, the band of political pioneers consisted of ‘environmental and resident

activists, nuclear disarmers, dissidents from the Labor Party, feminists, anarchists, those inspired by the German Greens and socialists of various kinds.’

Rhiannon says the party’s platform ‘emphasised social equality and a just society, with support for a nuclear free, peaceful and sharing world; grassroots democracy; social freedom and equality for all people; a liveable city and a sustainable and just democracy, working in harmony with the natural environment.’

Another key influence on the NSW Greens was the short lived New Left Party. The Communist Party of Australia had split with Moscow over the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The hardliners had continued on as the SPA while the CPA became increasingly Eurocommunist in outlook.

A broad left conference in Sydney in 1986, the 1989 issuing of a ‘Time to act’ statement propounding the

founding of a new political party and the collapse of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe lead to the formation of the New Left Party. Its manifesto called for ‘social justice, the expansion of democracy, a diverse multicultural Australia, an ecologically sustainable society and a non-violent nuclear free world.’

Its founding conference took place in Leichardt in June 1990, where a constitution, political program and decentralised organisational structure were ratified. Many members of the old CPA and other communist groups, including Castroites, joined and it was hoped the party’s name would attract activists from across the Left. The party failed, folding in the early nineties, but searching for an alternative, many of its members

► FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OUR POLITICAL HISTORY, A PARTY OF NOT JUST THE LEFT, BUT THE **EMPHATICALLY IDEOLOGICAL LEFT, CONTROLS THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE SENATE**

found the Greens. The New Left Party became a crucial crossing point between communist and the Greens and gave a unique ideological flavour to the NSW organisation.

The Queensland Greens had a very different origin. They were founded to support the bid for the Brisbane Lord mayoralty in 1984 by veteran anti-war, disarmament and land rights activist Drew Hutton, who had also taken an interest in urban development issues such as evictions from the inner city for new projects and freeway plans, as the Brisbane Greens, their core largely drawn from anarchist groups.

The group became inactive after the unsuccessful campaign, but an undercurrent of activity gradually grew by the start of the nineties into the Queensland Greens Network which, after issuing an edict banning members of the hard-left Democratic Socialist Party in 1991, rechristened

itself the Queensland Greens.

The DSP also caused trouble for the development of the Greens in South Australia. Their initial manifestation, the Green Electoral Movement, was a DSP front. DSP influence also ran strong in its successor, the Green Alliance SA. For a brief time in the early nineties the Green Alliance fought with a group calling itself the Green Party of South Australia until it purged itself of the DSP influence by proscribing members of other political parties and the Green Party of SA was deregistered by the Australian Electoral Commission when its membership fell below 500, enabling the Greens SA to be formed in 1995.

Its first parliamentary representative, Legislative Councillor Mark Parnell, has said that while many of the Greens SA foundation members had close links to the ‘non-government

organisation conservation sector’; many others came from the ‘community legal centre movement and human rights groups’. Parnell himself straddled both worlds, as a lawyer with the Environmental Defender’s Office, a free community legal centre specialising in public interest environmental law. The human rights angle can be seen in the Greens’ first Senator from the state, Sarah Hanson-Young, a former Amnesty International official and campaigner for asylum seekers.

The DSP again posed problems in Victoria. It formed a front organisation that took the name, the Victoria Greens Alliance. This competed with a broad-left body the Rainbow Alliance, a largely academic-orientated group founded by La Trobe University’s Joe Camilleri and RMIT teacher Belinda Probert. It advocated a range of left policies on a broad front

of issues including urban planning, ecologically sustainable economics, Aboriginal land rights, equality, peace and disarmament. It slipped into decline in the early 1990s, particularly after the election of the Kennett state government in 1992, and was formally dissolved in 1996.

The Australian Greens Victoria emerged in 1993. The party contested just one seat in 1993 federal election and performed poorly in the 1996 poll despite a well-publicised campaign surrounding their lead Senate candidate, the controversial philosopher and animal rights activist Peter Singer. It was not until 2010 that the party finally succeeded in having a candidate elected to the Senate, the year the Greens made their House of Representatives breakthrough when Liberal preferences delivered the electorate of Melbourne to Adam Bandt, the first federal Green to win a lower house seat at a general election.

The frenzy of factionalised state-based activity, ironically, delayed the development of a national Greens party. Bob Brown's official biographer, James Norman, recalls how the NSW Greens frustrated the creation of a national grouping as they owned the rights to the name 'The Australian Greens.'

The story of the development of the Green parties outside Tasmania and the creation of the Australian Greens exposes the broad range of activist groups over and above the environmental campaigners that have most been identified with the party.

All of these come from the Left. All of them, by deliberate decision, by attempts at hijacking the party, by something akin to osmosis or by simply having nowhere else to go that offers any possibility for action, have adopted the Greens as the vehicle they can use to implement a broad, hard-left agenda.

These left activists must be delighted that the Greens have

gained the balance of power in the Senate and a key vote in the House of Representatives at a time when the ALP primary vote is at levels unseen since the early 1930s when it saw supporters follow Lyons to the UAP and others peel off to back Lang Labor.

The political spectrum swung to the right in the eighties, when the Hawke government embraced economic reforms squibbed through the Fraser years. Now, under the influence of the Greens, we are seeing it pulled back to the Left.

For the first time in our political history, a party of not just the Left, but the emphatically ideological left, controls the balance of power in the Senate.

The Australian Democrats became increasingly left leaning as the party evolved, but it was born as a body that rejected the policies of both Labor and Liberal as too extreme. It was naturally inclined towards negotiation and compromise; to improving legislative outcomes rather than blocking them. Even under leaders such as Natasha Stott-Despoja and now prominent Green Andrew Bartlett, Democrat Andrew Murray won the admiration of both sides of politics for his efforts to maximise the social outcomes of government while minimising its cost and reach.

Likewise, despite the near-successful efforts to rewrite history, the Democratic Labor Party was a party of the centre too. It stood against communism—but for the working man. Now, with the rise of the Greens, the political dynamic has changed.

The Labor Right grouping within the ALP has been able to restrain the Left faction for a generation now with warnings of what loss of support from the great body of the voting population will mean electorally. Now, with the party under siege from both sides—and the Greens surging into what was once its heartland—the Left faction have seized an opportunity to

set the agenda. This can be seen in the debate over the original mining super-profits tax and on calls to lift the dole, in Doug Cameron's calls for increases in taxation, but nowhere is it more obvious than in the field of renewable energy.

The massive renewable energy spending over recent years, let alone the \$10 green slush fund established under the carbon tax laws, show the power of the Greens and their allies in the environmental NGOs and their influence on the government. The renewable energy lobby, along with the public health and education activists so beloved by the Greens have not just taken the place of the manufacturers of half a century ago as the nation's most successful rent seekers. Like them, they are successfully inserting themselves into the bureaucracy in a bid to guarantee more bounty flows their way.

This new proximity to power, however, has, as always happens when power is at hand, raised tensions within the party over what direction to take and how far to go, tensions that are beginning to alert the electorate to the true nature of the Greens—and threaten to spark major division in the party. **R**

