

ALP

MARGINS

Where there's a Wills...

In April 1990 I wrote that "Australian politics...may be about to undergo quite dramatic structural change, with political forces outside the ALP and coalition parties taking seats in lower houses and exercising real political power". I argued that there was a growing electoral trend towards progressive non-ALP candidates which seriously threatened the ALP's viability as a major political party.

At first glance, the tremendous victory of Phil Cleary in the Wills by-election in April is a dramatic reaffirmation of this claim. But is this really the case? Closer inspection reveals that the Wills outcome should be treated with a good deal of caution. It certainly confirms the strong trend towards independent candidates, but should not be seen necessarily as the first in a wave of seats to fall to such candidates.

The fact that this was a by-election is obviously important. Phil Cleary received a level of media attention, including extended television appearances, which no candidate receives in a general election. The spectre of hung parliaments and instability caused by independents holding the balance of power (a potent factor in Tasmania in 1992 and probably in the recent British elections) was absent. The limited time available for preselection and campaigning meant that the natural ad-

vantages that party machines enjoy over independents—money, resources and full-time staff—were minimised.

This was accentuated by Cleary's late entry into the race; after fighting a phoney war for several weeks, the ALP and Liberals were left flat-footed by the late emergence of a high profile candidate fighting on real issues. Both major parties seemed to take an inordinate length of time to realise that a Cleary victory was a distinct possibility and were ultimately reduced to hollow cries of "an independent member won't be able to fix unemployment in Wills". Perhaps the voters were smart enough to realise that no member for Wills, be they party member or independent, can be anything more than completely peripheral to what happens to unemployment: national and international factors overwhelmingly determine that outcome.

The successful candidate is also unusual. Phil Cleary has a much broader appeal than the vast majority of would-be independent parliamentarians. He appeals to the politically aware minority because he is an articulate and intelligent person with a well-developed worldview. He also appeals to the unaware because he is a current local sporting hero who is very well known in the electorate and outside it. With the Liberals tagging him as a "Labor stooge", Hawke describing him as a "good bloke", and the Labor camp not really seriously attacking him, what reason did an ordinary Labor voter have for not voting for Phil Cleary?

The Wills electorate is also unusual. It is based on one of the very few areas in Australia that has a lengthy tradition of independent Labor MPs. Many political activists and disillusioned ex-Labor members live in or near the electorate. Wills incorporates much of the Brunswick municipality, currently governed by one of the most leftwing councils in Australia. And Wills has suffered the consequences of 'economic rationalism' much more than most electorates.

The role of unemployment in the election has been a fraction inflated. It was obviously a dominant theme in all major candidates' campaigns, but I doubt very much whether by itself it was a dominant determinant of voter behaviour. If the ALP simply shrugs its shoulders and writes off the result as a response to very high regional unemployment, it will be making a very serious mistake: unemployment was part of a broader patchwork of issues.

In fact, the vote for Phil Cleary was a rejection of almost everything the ALP now seems to stand for. In particular, it was a rejection of the party's recently acquired born-to-rule mentality. It was a rejection of arrogance; a rejection of smart operators adept at electoral manipulation but light on substance; a rejection not only of 'economic rationalism' but also of the managerial/technocratic mentality which allows contemporary Labor to embrace that alien philosophy. It is not so much specific Labor policies that have alienated the electorate: it is a general sense of what Labor has become. Phil Cleary won because he was 'one of us', a fighter who stood for something, and a down-to-earth character light years removed from the slick real estate agent parody that is all too common in the major parties.

Twice this year—in Tasmania and Wills—the ALP has polled less than 30% of the vote in areas where it has traditionally dominated. Although there are many unusual features in Phil Cleary's win unlikely to be reflected elsewhere, it is sobering to reflect that Cleary didn't just win: he bolted home by the length of the straight. He could have handed back 6 or 7% of his 34% to Labor and still won. Despite the tentative signs of movement away from the appalling Labor culture of the 80s, which are inherent in *One Nation*, and Paul Keating's forays into republicanism, the ALP remains in a very precarious position.

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