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## **The Green Constituency – Evidence From Cunningham**

There has been much interest during recent years in the factors underpinning a rise in support for the Greens in Australian politics. For several years, the Greens have laid claim to the title of a third force in Australian politics. Their leader, Bob Brown, is now one of the more recognizable politicians in the news media. At the 2004 Federal election, support for the Greens easily surpassed, for the first time, that of the Democrats, hitherto the Greens' main rival in the 'third political force' stakes.

Examining the Federal seat of Cunningham as a case study, this paper seeks to make a contribution to our understanding of the broader Greens' demographic in Australia. Cunningham in New South Wales (NSW) was a safe Labor seat from its inception in 1949 until a by-election on 19 October 2002 when the seat was won by Michael Organ of the Greens. For the first time in Australian political history, a Greens candidate was elected to the House of Representatives. The Greens' triumph was short-lived. At the Federal election of 2004, Sharon Bird, the failed Labor candidate in 2002, regained Cunningham for Federal Labor by defeating Organ. This paper examines the briefly successful challenge to Labor's stranglehold on the steel and coal-mining Illawarra region and asks whether the result has long-term implications for Australian politics and the future of the Greens.

### **The Greens in Cunningham: Local Factors**

The fluke thesis dominates in political commentary about the Green victory and for understandable reasons. For Labor, Cunningham in 2002 was a perfect storm where everything that could go wrong did go wrong. The sitting ALP member, Stephen Martin quit within months of the Federal Election of 2001. In 2001, for the first time, Martin was forced to rely on preferences to win Cunningham after his primary vote slumped from 52% to 46%. Cunningham proved to be a leadership test for Simon Crean, something the

struggling and newly appointed Labor leader could have done without so soon after he replaced Kim Beazley in the wake of Labor's defeat in the 2001 Federal election.

The Labor candidate in the by-election, Sharon Bird, was selected by decree of the Labor hierarchy using the controversial N40 rule, and not by the normal methods of pre-selection. This imposition of the candidate came about despite Labor leader Simon Crean's promise not to pre-select candidates on the basis of factional deals hidden from public scrutiny.

A few months earlier, the Labor Lord Mayor of Wollongong, George Harrison, was forced to resign because of bankruptcy and allegations of corruption. In the ensuing election for Wollongong Lord Mayor, an independent, Alex Darling, easily defeated his Labor opponent, Bob Proudfoot. The Green candidate in the mayoral election was Michael Organ for whom the mayoral contest provided invaluable publicity immediately before the Cunningham by-election.

Organ was already a well-known local activist. That he was a life-long resident of the electorate distinguished him from Labor's Sharon Bird, who, popular rumour had it, obtained a postal address in Cunningham for electoral purposes only. Breaking with the typical image of Green candidates, Organ was clean-cut, moderate in tone, a Catholic and working class, with a long history in the local trade union movement.

To maximize the danger to Labor, the Liberals did not field an official candidate. A prominent Liberal Party member, David Moulds, who did stand, gave his preferences to the Greens over Labor. Moulds scored a respectable 13.59% compared to the 28% that the official Liberal candidate received in 2001 and 2004. The most devastating blow for Labor came when Peter Wilson, the president of the South Coast Trades and Labor Council, the peak union body in the Illawarra, decided to run in order to protest against the imposition of a Labor candidate and what was perceived as Crean's attacks on union influence in the Labor Party. Wilson, who was given some chance of winning

Cunningham by commentators before the poll, achieved a primary vote of 10.5% and his preferences flowed to the Greens.

It was the flow of preferences that defeated Labor. The ALP's Sharon Bird secured 38.13% of the primary vote, well ahead of the Greens' Organ who won 23.03%. Organ received 75.2% of the preferences, garnered from each of the eleven other candidates who all gave their preferences to Organ ahead of Bird (Young 2005, p.1).

The allegedly rusted-on Labor voters of the Illawarra have a long history of not voting for Labor in local and state politics. From 1974, a majority of Wollongong voters supported the anti-Labor independent Frank Arkell as Lord Mayor and as their member of the NSW Legislative Assembly from 1984-91. What might loosely be described as 'green' issues have long been a factor in the history of politics in the Illawarra. Opinion polls consistently showed redevelopment, protection of the escarpment, and the degradation of the coastline as important issues in the beachside northern suburbs. Ever since a failed attempt to build a coal loader at Coalcliff in 1970, local residents and environmental activists have kept a vigilant eye over perceived threats to the natural beauty of the escarpment and beaches. Environmentalists conducted one of New South Wales's longest-running political campaigns when they opposed a housing development at Sandon Point, situated between Bulli and Thirroul. The local indigenous community also opposed the Sandon Point development, which had the support of the Labor-dominated council that George Harrison presided over. Michael Organ was one of the public faces of the Sandon Point protests.

Thus an amorphous 'environmental' vote was already apparent before the 2002 by-election. At the 2001 Federal Election, this green vote was shared among three minor-party and independent candidates – Carol Berry from the Greens who took 6.64% of the vote, Michael Newman from the Democrats (7.17%) and the Independent Trevor Mott (5.72%). In the 2002 by-election, the Greens improved to 23%, at the expense of the Democrats and Mott even more so than Labor. The Democrats finished ahead of the Greens in 2001 (7.2% to 6.6%) but in 2002, the Democrat vote slumped to 2.25%.

Finally, the Cunningham by-election took place amid the intense national and international debates over whether the US and its willing coalition should invade Iraq. Again, it seems reasonable to conclude that this issue, at a time when opinion polls showed general disapproval of the slide towards war, played a part in the election. Cunningham to some extent confirmed the view that the Greens had stamped themselves upon traditional 'left' issues like opposition to the American-led war. To quote Shaun Wilson: 'The Greens represent in the minds of sympathetic voters the vital centre of ideological opposition to John Howard's Australia' (Wilson 2002, p. 22).

Clearly the October 19 2002 by-election was a unique event. The particular confluence of local factors was unlikely to be repeated. But does this explain the emergence of the Greens as a force in the Illawarra region? In the absence of such one-off local factors, will the Greens remain a major political player into the future? To answer these questions we now consider the relationship between Cunningham and broader national political trends.

### **Cunningham and the Green Demographic**

A number of studies have examined the demography of Green voting in Australia. Using data from the 2001 Australian Electoral Survey, Wilson builds a picture of Green voters as:

more likely to be women, have no religion, live in large cities and have a university qualification than Labor or Coalition voters. They are also slightly more likely to be younger, single, and live in a household with a gross income above \$50,000. Green voters are as likely to identify as middle class as Liberals (Wilson 2002, p. 21).

Vromen and Turnbull point to the fact that the recent Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 'bears out the popular view that Greens supporters are mainly young, professional, and live in the inner cities' (Vromen and Turnbull 2004). However, they also argue that the picture is more complicated than this. While 18-34 year olds comprise

a significant proportion of Green voters, a larger portion comes from the older group of 35-49 year olds. 'The Greens', they argue, 'are not just a youth party' (Vromen and Turnbull 2004). Furthermore, although inner-city suburbs are the home of 40 per cent of Green voters, other areas of Green strength are 'rural areas or villages' and 'small country towns' such as those found throughout the strongly Green north coast of New South Wales (Vromen and Turnbull 2004). In terms of occupation, professionals and associate professionals together comprised 46 per cent of Greens supporters; clerical and trades-people were also well represented (Vromen and Turnbull 2004).

How do these factors relate to the Cunningham electorate? After its defeat, Labor explained the unexpected defeat not in terms of its own errors but as a consequence of changing demography. The Cunningham electorate comprises a long stretch of coastline that issues south from Sydney and the Royal National Park to Wollongong, the third largest city in New South Wales. Cunningham was established as a Federal seat just as the post-war industrial boom transformed what was once a dairy and coal-mining region into the manufacturing hub of New South Wales. Migrants from Europe were attracted to the industrial site of Port Kembla, Australia's major steel works, which is located just to the south of Wollongong in the neighbouring Federal electorate of Throsby.

The Illawarra changed significantly after the recession of the early 1980s caused the steel works and local mines to shed jobs. After 1981, the workforce of the steel works was cut from more than twenty thousand to around five thousand. From 1986 to 1996, employment in the region's mining sector fell by 37.8%. During the same period there was a 28.5% jobs decline in manufacturing. Wollongong Council engaged in a frantic effort to re-badge Wollongong as a tourist destination. Because of its beaches and a spectacular escarpment, the Illawarra has indeed proved attractive to tourists and migrants from Sydney attracted to the cheaper homes and the natural beauty of the region (Young 2003, p. 48).

In 2002, the steel works and coal mining remained, in economic terms, the most important industries; but the largest growth in jobs occurred in clerical, sales and service

workers along with professionals. The University of Wollongong became the region's second-largest employer; graduate numbers more than doubled between 1986-96. From 2000, house prices followed Sydney prices upwards; the average price of a dwelling in the March 2002 quarter was 10.7% more than in the previous quarter (Young 2003, p. 50). Unemployment remained above the state average but mainly affected the central and southern part of the Cunningham electorate and not the northern beachside suburbs. Labor pointed out that the gentrification of the northern beachside suburbs, the most northerly of which were added to Cunningham after a redistribution in 1999, made these areas more difficult for Labor.

In a survey of the Cunningham by-election, Scott Bennett noted that 'there is a significant difference between the seats of Cunningham in the north of the city and Throsby in the south' (Bennett 2002). While Throsby remains a bastion of Labor support, with high unemployment mixed with traditional industrial working class occupations, demographic changes have transformed the seat of Cunningham. As Bennett also points out that, demographic shifts away from a traditional working class base were evident in the 2001 election in which sitting Member Stephen Martin's vote declined by 8.1 per cent (Bennett 2002).

Cunningham, and especially its northern suburbs, met the criteria of higher than average number of youth and professionals. In line with Vromen and Turnbull's analysis of the Green demographic, the northern suburbs of Wollongong also contain a significant proportion of trades-people and clerical workers, professionals and associate professionals. In demographic terms, the northern suburbs of Cunningham in particular resemble a combination of inner-city Sydney or Melbourne with its professional, artistic and student base, and the north coast of New South Wales with its alternative lifestyle and environmental sensibilities. The exception is the town of Helensburgh, which is separated geographically from the rest of the Illawarra by the escarpment, is much closer in occupation base to the outer-suburbs of Sydney than the northern suburbs of the Illawarra, and returns a consistently high Labor vote. Vromen and Turnbull's point out

that Greens support is 'weakest among intermediate production and transport workers and labourers' (Vromen and Turnbull 2002).

One striking factor of the 2002 by-election was that the best indicator of a strong Green vote was house prices. The 2515 postcode area, which comprises the northern beachside suburbs and the corresponding polling booths of Austinmer, Thirroul East, Scarborough, Coledale, Thirroul and Wombarra boasted the highest average house prices in the Illawarra (\$585,566 in 2002) as well as six of the eight highest Green votes in Cunningham. Organ comfortably defeated Labor at the booths of Austinmer (Organ gaining 44% of the primary vote), Thirroul East (43%), Scarborough (40.54%), Coledale (38.4%), Thirroul (38.2%) and Wombarra (36.46%). The Greens also won Stanwell Park (39.15%), Otford (38.8%), Bulli Central (35.88%) and Bulli Hospital (35.54%), which border the booths contained within the 2515 postcode (Young 2003, pp. 52-54).

Having won ten of twelve booths in the more prosperous north, the Greens were able to win only the two small booths of Fairy Meadow South and Mount Kembla among the thirty-one remaining booths in the electorate. The established working-class suburbs in the center and south were home to the lowest average house prices and to the lowest Green votes in Cunningham. A cluster of working class suburbs in the centre of Cunningham – Towradgi (a Green vote of 15.73%) Corrimal East (18.78%), Corrimal (18.17%), Tarrawanna (18.14%), Towradgi East (19.73%) and Bellambi (13.53%) – were grouped under the postcode 2518 and accounted for six of the ten lowest Green votes and the lowest average house prices (\$346,104) in Cunningham. The low point for the Greens was 13.53% in Bellambi, an area that contains the largest block of housing commission in the Illawarra and the largest Labor vote (Young 2003, p. 53).

A failure to appeal to ethnic minorities was a second strong feature of the Green vote. The Illawarra has attracted migrants from all over the world and from southern Europe in particular. Macedonian and Italian are the most likely non-English languages to be spoken in the Illawarra as a whole. But in the northern suburbs, the picture is very

different. While 82% of those living in the 2515 postcode were Australian-born (compared to 76% in Wollongong itself), overseas born residents came from (in order) the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA. Thus the Green-voting suburbs were home to higher real estate prices and displayed a greater concentration of residents born in Australia, or from English-speaking countries or from the northern half of Europe, in comparison with the rest of the Illawarra (Young 2003, p. 51).

From the data described above, it is reasonable to conclude that the support base for the Greens in the Cunningham by-election of 2002 corresponded fairly closely with what is known about Green voters throughout Australia. To put it another way: rather than the Cunningham victory being the result of uniquely local factors, or of factors peculiar to by-elections, such factors were overlaid by long term demographic shifts, which meant that from the turn of the millennium, an increasing proportion of the voting population of Cunningham fit the profile of the typical Greens voter nationally.

### **Prospects for the Future: Beyond Post-materialism?**

Writing about the Cunningham by-election, Shaun Wilson noted that:

Naturally, Labor was keen to downplay the significance of this result in ideological terms, preferring to see it in purely pragmatic terms i.e. the typical backlash of an electorate who did not want a by-election forced on them. This is a mistake. The Greens appear 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 (Wilson 2002, p. 19)

This claim would soon be tested in the Federal Election of 2004. The challenge for the Greens in the 2004 Federal Election in Cunningham was to consolidate its strongholds in the northern suburbs and to make inroads into the more working-class and ethnically diverse suburbs further south. In particular, the Greens hoped to win votes from the Trade Union candidate, Peter Wilson who did not stand in the 2004 Federal Election.

The Greens failed in both tasks. Overall, its primary vote in 2004 was 20.1% - much higher than their 2001 vote of 6.64% but lower than the 23.03% of the 2002 by-election. The Green strategy was to win enough votes to finish ahead of the Liberals and then win the seat on the basis of preferences from the Liberals and others. This strategy failed when the Liberals scored 28.8% of the vote. In 2004, Labor whose primary vote improved by only a single point to 39.6%, would win Cunningham from the Liberals on the basis of Green preferences.

After its defeat, the Greens put the blame on national factors beyond their control. Michael Organ told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the 2004 election saw a 'shift towards the Coalition and that's obviously had a factor down here in Cunningham in decreasing the Greens' vote' (AAP 2004). The Liberal vote was impressive in that, unlike the Labor Party, it did not lose ground from 2001. John Larter, the Liberal candidate, was chosen only on the eve of the 2004 Federal Election and did not have a high public profile as Michael Organ and Sharon Bird did. It seems reasonable to conclude that national factors and the preference of voters for John Howard over Mark Latham for Prime Minister did have an impact in the Cunningham by-election.

Elsewhere it was pointed out that the Green victory in 2002 itself inspired a backlash in a hostile press and among hostile political parties who now saw the Greens as the Goliath to be slain and not the David to be aided (Manning and Rootes 2005). As James Norman put it, the Greens had to contend with 'the full weight of the Murdoch tabloid machine' and the vitriolic attacks from small conservative religious-based parties such as Family First and the Christian Democrats (Norman 2004, pp. 8-9). This is likely to be a recurring problem encountered by the Greens. It is as a party of principle, standing up for liberal social values, that the Greens have distinguished themselves from the major parties in recent years. Yet this clearly provides a convenient target on which conservative parties can hang their particular brand of moral panic. At the same time, the Greens' economic and industrial relations policies, which have in recent years taken on a harder social democratic edge, worry business leaders.

So concerned was the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI 2004) by the Greens' policies that in the lead up to the 2004 Federal election, it devoted the first five pages of its regular *ACCI Review* to an article entitled 'Greens economic policies will harm economic growth and increase unemployment'. Viewed from this perspective, the success of the Greens in Cunningham elevated their status to that of a more serious political threat to large corporate interests, prompting less sympathetic treatment from corporate media. In Cunningham, Michael Organ's high-profile advocacy of legalizing same-sex marriage may have confirmed for some the polemical warnings of the Christian Right. Perhaps the most vocal anti-Green message came from Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party, which scored a respectable 3.48% of the vote in Cunningham in 2004.

The strong showing of the Liberals Australia wide and much more intense scrutiny and criticism of the Greens in Cunningham were two reasons for the poorer than expected showing of the Greens. But this conclusion avoids a more obvious reason for the Greens' failure to improve its primary vote. The Greens proved unable to win working-class booths despite the prodigious efforts made by Green candidates, organizers and activists to win over those who voted for Peter Wilson in 2002. The working class electoral booths in the 2518 postcode area mostly registered a steady or reduced Green vote - Towradgi (the Green vote was 15.73% in 2002 and 16.17% in 2004), Towradgi East (19.73% in 2002 and 17.05% in 2004), Corrimal (18.17% in 2002 and 13.94% in 2004), East Corrimal (18.78% in 2002 and 16.50% in 2004) and Tarrawanna (18.14% in 2002 and 15.03% in 2004) with only Bellambi, the worst result for the Greens in 2002 showing a substantial improvement (13.53% in 2002 and 17.73% in 2004).

Because the Liberals were standing in this election, the Green task was more difficult. Nonetheless, the Greens did not make an impression upon the working-class or migrant vote as they needed to do if they were to hold the seat. It is also likely that at least a small number of voters deserted Organ for Labor in 2004, having sent a protest vote in 2002 and having concluded in 2004 that a primary vote for Organ (and therefore not for Labor) was a de-facto vote for the Liberals.

Labor Party strategists could take heart from the debates started by Ronald Inglehart who claimed to identified a new breed of post-materialist voters who have grown up in an era of post-World War Two abundance in the industrialized West and who often chose to vote on non-economic quality-of-life issues as distinct from the economic issues that previously determined elections. These post-materialists are supposed to come from the younger cohorts of the middle class, have relatively high levels of education secure and/or professional jobs and higher incomes (Inglehart, 1971, 1977).

The politics of post-materialism, it has been argued, has superseded the class antagonisms between labour and capital for more affluent voters. It is often noted that in Western Europe post-materialist issues, such as environmental issues, especially nuclear power, have spurred Green voting. In the case of Cunningham, nuclear power was not an issue but overdevelopment and other environmental issues clearly were. But because post-materialism is the privilege of the relatively affluent, the Greens, from this perspective, have to fight in the end more for the Liberal demographic than the Labor working-class and migrant vote.

Comparing the by-election and 2004 Federal election results for Cunningham, it is clear that there was a significant defection of voters from the Greens in 2002 to the Liberals in 2004. In the Green-voting suburbs to the north, the Liberal vote (absent in 2002 when there was no official Liberal candidate) ensured that the Greens placed first in only four (Austinmer, Coledale, Scarborough and Stanwell Park) of the twelve booths that they won in 2002. Labor took over first place in all eight of the booths where the Greens lost their lead from 2002. In every case the Liberal, Labor and Green vote fell within the 20% to 40% range, meaning that these were reasonably tight three-cornered contests with the anti-Labor vote shared between the Greens and the Liberals.

A number of authors have identified a contradiction between the Greens' policies and history of radical struggle, on the one hand, and their ambitions to be a third political

force and win lower house seats, on the other. Haydon Manning (2002, p. 17), for example, argued that the Greens are increasingly beset by a conflict between the political pragmatism necessary to be a credible third force in Australian politics, and the ‘political ideology’ of a ‘traditional left social democratic economic program’. This conflict therefore mirrors that between the ‘realos’ and the ‘fundis’ within the German Greens. For Manning, unless the Greens are able to act much more pragmatically, as did the Democrats in their heyday, they will be marginalized and stigmatized as inflexible ideologues.

Hutton and Connors (2004) see the conflict as being between ‘green Greens’ and ‘Left Greens’ – or between those for whom environmental issues are prioritized and those with a social democratic politics. They use the issue of school funding as an example. While ‘Left Greens’ see government funding of public schools as crucial, ‘green Greens’ are more likely to see a role for publicly funding poorer private schools, or even private schools offering alternative curricula.

Common to both of these perspectives is a perception of conflict having been generated by the Greens efforts to frame themselves much more as a social democratic party, and to occupy territory perceived as having been vacated by Labor. While there are some clear parallels between the ‘post-materialist’ disposition and the traditional concern of the Greens and its supporters with environmental and ‘quality of life issues’, Green voters also share some of the economic mindset of Labor voters. Wilson, for example, identifies Green voters as only slightly less redistributionist than Labor supporters (67% as compared with 69%), and has noted that Green voters favour increased social spending rather than tax cuts as the means for achieving this (Wilson 2002, pp. 21-22). Green voters are likely to favour ‘welfare state policies’ (Wilson 2002, p. 22) – very much an old-style materialist concern. Of course it is possible that Green voters are sufficiently well off to look to the welfare state as a means of helping others while Labor voters feel the need for a welfare state as a crucial economic safeguard for themselves.

As Wilson has put it, 'Green voters represent a constituency that goes beyond traditional environmentalism' (Wilson 2002, p. 19). But how far can this constituency be extended? In Cunningham the Greens made a play for the left. Michael Organ made a concerted effort during his tenure as Member for Cunningham to strengthen his support within the Illawarra trade union movement. This is consistent with Greens' strategies nationally. Not only are the Greens' industrial relations policies closely aligned with those of the labour movement, Greens senators, Bob Brown and Kerrie Nettle, were often invited to speak at trade union functions, forums and rallies (Manning 2002; Norman 2004). Perhaps more telling was that both the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and Electrical Trades Union have provided direct financial support to the Greens in recent years.

Did the Greens win a substantial amount of the 10.5% that voted for Wilson, the trade union candidate in 2002? It would seem on the surface that little of Wilson's vote went back to Labor. Labor's vote in 2004 came in at only 39.6%, an improvement of only 1% on 2002. Given that many Wilson voters were likely formerly Labor voters, had they returned en masse to the Labor fold, one would expect a higher vote for Labor. Some of the Wilson and Labor vote must have found its way into the 2.4% achieved by the Progressive Labor Party, which did not stand in 2002 and had the good fortune of being placed first on the ballot paper in 2004. While it seems likely that Organ's vote was buoyed by a small and difficult-to-quantify number of voters who moved from Wilson to the Greens, it was relatively little reward for the effort that the Greens put in to wooing this vote. If the Greens received some of the identifiable trade union vote from 2002, it was less than hoped for.

## **Conclusion**

The 2004 election showed that Cunningham has become a three-cornered contest with challenges for each of the three principal parties. Ever since 2001 when the Labor vote

slipped below 50%, it has been theoretically possible for a Liberal-Green alliance to unseat Labor. The Labor primary vote presently stands at 39.6%, giving them a strong but by no means unassailable advantage. The Liberals would have been heartened by a vote of 28.8% that was achieved with minimal campaigning and a new and relatively unknown candidate. The Greens (20.1%) were left with the most work to do and are faced with the dilemma of what sort of party they are. There seems to be an upper limit to Green voting in Federal elections worldwide, from Germany to Australia. The reason may be that materialist concerns remain at the core of voting behaviour in Cunningham and elsewhere. The problem for the Greens in Cunningham was that for all their efforts to impress working class and migrant voters that the Greens have as good or better leftist credentials than the Labor Party, the voters were unmoved.

Demographic change in Cunningham during the last decade has created a Greens support base that conforms to what is known of Greens supporters elsewhere in Australia. Whether these people will continue to vote Green is a matter of conjecture. Some commentators suggest that the Green tide has peaked in Australia. But a similarly strong Green vote in the State electorate of Keira (which lies within the Federal seat of Cunningham and thus shares a similar demographic) in 2003 suggests that the Greens will remain a strong political force into the future. The potential for growth in this vote, however, is far from certain. Adopting a leftist political stance made it more difficult to attract those who would normally vote Liberal but did not deliver an improvement in votes in traditional Labor-voting working class suburbs. Nor did incumbency prove a vote winner. The Green dilemma in Cunningham is one that reflects the key challenge facing the Greens nation-wide.

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