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Catchline: ON THE DRY SIDE 419

The Greens' Vote

John Hyde

Remember how Senator Richardson single-handedly won the last election for Labor with a policy which encouraged Labor voters to vote Green or Democrat---a policy that allowed Labor to slide in on minor-party preferences? On election night, however, the Labor victory was put down to the odour surrounding the Nationals in Queensland and Northern NSW, and to the Peacock factor. Since then an account of Senator Richardson's brilliant strategy has been fostered by guess who. That, dearly beloved, is how political myths are made.

There is, however, more than some doubt about whether the Richardson strategy worked to Labor's advantage. Senator Walsh, for instance, argues that it backfired. Labor's share of primary votes was the lowest since World War II, and Walsh claims that the push for Green and Democrat preferences had served only to legitimise defections by erstwhile Labor voters. Might not some of these voters be lost to Labor for ever?

Walsh was not alone in questioning the Richardson strategy. Indeed, his doubts seem to be shared by other Labor strategists. Immediately after the election, Senator Richardson was shifted to another portfolio and the Government became more pro-development than both we and the Greens were led to expect during the campaign. And, even if Labor had not so obviously distanced itself from Richardson's brand of environmentalism, anyone who had once tried to trace the effect of Democratic Labor Party (DLP) preferences upon the Liberal vote was bound to be a mite skeptical about the worth of the Richardson way.

There is little doubt that the DLP split assisted the Coalition to retain office, but it did so by convincing potential Labor voters that the Liberal Party was a better choice than a Labor Party with Communist tendencies. The DLP was not able to direct the preferences of blindly loyal followers, of which there were few. In the absence of a DLP

candidate, each preferred vote would have been a primary vote for the major party that ultimately received the preferred vote. Thus, the DLP changed Australian politics by changing public opinion, not because of a quirk in the electoral system. It, therefore, did not pay the Liberal Party to encourage people to vote DLP---and it did not do so.

The Greens' and Democrats' influence in the most recent election seemed analogous to that of the DLP in the 1960s and I, for this reason, suspected that the Richardson strategy was nonsense. It was, nevertheless, nice to have my suspicions confirmed by solid analysis. This was provided by Dr Ron Brunton, Research Manager of the Australian Institute of Public Policy's newly-established Environmental Policy Unit. Having carefully turned the available data this way and that, and weighed the arguments from both sides, he concludes: "There are no hard figures that could really tell us whether Labor won because of the Richardson strategy or in spite of it".

Brunton is scathing of the analysis done by Simon Balderstone which argued that Labor won ten of the marginal seats on Democrats and/or Green preferences. (Mr Balderstone is a former adviser to Senator Richardson and is now adviser to Mr Hawke on the environment.) The poll results cannot be employed to say why people voted as they did.

We are left then to conjecture about why people voted as they did by asking which explanations are most reasonable. We know that many people were concerned about environmental degradation: some even claimed that 'care for environment' was the most important electoral issue. Since Labor was seen by many as having the better environmental credentials, concern for the environment must have caused some people to vote Labor---just as fear of communism had once caused some people to vote Liberal.

Labor gained its environmental credentials, however, by stopping economic development at Coronation Hill, Wesley Vale and elsewhere. Thus, the parallel with the 1960s DLP ceases at this point---whereas opposing Communism did not involve opposing something else that people wanted, opposing economic development did. Again, when the DLP branded the ALP pro-Communist (or not sufficiently anti-Communist) it was clear profit for the Coalition parties, but when the Greens and Democrats branded the Coalition anti-environment (or not sufficiently pro-environment) they conferred only a mixed blessing upon Labor.

If, on the other hand, a political party could convince the electorate that its policies would deliver both employment (with rising material living standards) and a clean, attractive and diverse physical environment, then that, surely, would be an electoral advantage. (That party might still lose an election for any of a host of other reasons.) What is more, policies promising environmental protection with development should not be difficult to sell. The easily verifiable facts that poverty and environmental degradation go

together, and that only the highly-developed capitalist economies take good care of their air, water and landscapes, come very close to being knock-down political arguments.

The Richardson strategy, if it can be credited with anything, can be credited with talking the Coalition out of fulsomely promising economic development. Instead of going flat out to win the very many people who are concerned about the environment but who also want the ability to pay off their mortgages, the Coalition tried to appease the few 'deep greens' by promising appropriate prohibitions. Of course, some prohibitions are appropriate, but these should not be central to the debate. The environment's greatest protection will come from making our society so rich that it can afford clean air and water, well-kept parks and so on. The Coalition must have lost votes by not making this argument understood.

The Coalition, which could never have won the votes of people committed to heavy-handed government controls, threw away the opportunity to win the votes of the ordinary, sensible environmentalists. It could have honestly promised much of the best of both worlds---that is, an attractive environment and jobs. Thus, by conning the Opposition, perhaps Senator Richardson's tactic was a clever one after all.

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