

What was the Green vote  
worth to Labor?

*John Hyde*

It is true that Labor won the election against the odds. We should, nevertheless, beware of interpretations of the result which overstate the political influence of the interpreter.

When football matches are won by one-goal margins, only sports commentators are silly enough to ascribe the victories to particular goals. More serious analysts realise that each goal was necessary and none was sufficient. So it is with elections.

The election was close. It is, therefore, the case that every substantial bloc of votes cast for Labor, or acquired by Labor after the distribution of preferences, was a necessary part of the particular winning margin, and that none was of itself sufficient. It does not follow, however, that Labor put together the only possible combination of voting blocs needed to secure victory. Another combination might have given them a resounding win.

We can take the sporting analogy further. Labor's exploitation of issues which caused some people to vote Labor was the equivalent of sporting manouvers. Good manouvers, well executed, lead to goals; others result in loss of control of the ball and goals for the opposition. The showboats, though they sometimes score, more often are not worth their cost.

Still keeping football in mind, let us look, as dispassionately as we can, at the Labor win. Which tactics scored regularly, and seldom lost control of the ball to the Opposition? What were the circumstances which kept Labor in the play, and which were those that enabled the Opposition to score? I think that it was not Senator Richardson's showy play in the goalmouth---pretty as this was when it came off---but the solid mid-field effort of Keating, Walsh, Kerin and others which was essential to the Labor win. By 'essential' I mean that there was no alternative strategem.

We can also learn something from the distribution of the swings. There was a big swing away from Labor in Victoria and WA and a swing towards Labor in Queensland, Northern NSW and the Northern Territory. One lesson for Federal politicians is straightforward: if possible, don't become associated with corrupt or extremely incompetent state colleagues.

The substitution play that removed the Western Australian Premier seems to have provided one of the necessary conditions for Labor's wins in Canning, Cowan and Stirling. I can think of no offsetting bloc of votes given to the Coalition by it. And, for dealing with the stench of state colleagues, I know of no alternative and better strategy than being seen to clean them up. The tactic was successful.

The big election issue, however, was not malodorous state governments, but the economy. Tiny percentages of the large number of people who might have changed their vote for economic reasons could have been offset only by very large percentages in the number of people who might have changed their vote for other reasons. (Opinion polls showed that about 3% of voters thought that the environment was the principal issue---a large but not an overwhelming bloc.)

In other words, if either team had been thoroughly outmatched on the economy, it would have been thrashed. In the event, neither side was thoroughly outmatched. But with interest rates in the high teens and debt levels of third-world proportions, that Labor held its own was, in itself, remarkable. The rugged game played by Labor's economic-rationalist mid-fielders, in conditions that were far from their liking, was critical to victory.

These economic rationalists established Labor in voters' minds as marginally the better economic player. (Keating also occasionally dropped into the back line to execute professional fouls that were politically brilliant, but which will do the game no good. Unfortunately, as with the AFL, there is no send off rule for this sort of behaviour.) Conversely, it was on the issue of the economy, where it should have won, that the Coalition suffered its most telling loss.

We must evaluate Senator Richardson's fancy footwork with the green vote only against the background of the mid-field supremacy. We don't know whether Richardson increased Labor's preferred vote by more than he decreased its primary vote, but there are a few pointers. In Kalgoorlie, the only seat in WA where Labor's total vote went up, the sitting Member, Graham Campbell, vociferously and in unforgettable terms, dissociated himself from Richardson. It was not that there were many fewer greens in Kalgoorlie: Labor Party polling had shown that Kalgoorlie had almost the State average proportion of greens.

There are other indicators that Richardson was not the decisive player. In Victoria the green vote was overwhelmed by a third issue---the State Government. In Tasmania the Green and Democrat vote fell from 17% at the State election to 10%.

Most of the merry-go-round of preferences was probably little more than recycling of Labor votes. But, seriously from Labor's point of view, Richardson's shenanigans made it harder for Labor to win economic credibility. Mr Barry Cunningham and Peter Cleeland, who lost McMillan and McEwen respectively, claim that pandering to the greens lost Bendigo, McEwen and McMillan. These seats have forest industries within them and the margins were narrow. Senator Richardson was not, of course, a sufficient condition to account for the losses, but he might have been a necessary condition.

Who knows what damage Richardson did Labor in other marginals? In football parlance, how often was he responsible for his team losing control of the ball? His gratuitous scaring off of \\Rhone/Poulunc and other productive foreign investments; the much publicised decisions to prevent mining at Coronation Hill, pulp treatment at Wesley Vale and tourism at Shark Bay; and more in similar vein, must have damaged Labor's economic credentials.

Australian conservationists such as Mr Toyne and Mr Graham, and Mr Suzuki, a visiting Canadian, are free to demonstrate their ignorance of voting complexities any way they choose. Their unanimous conclusion that the Greens gave victory to Labor, however, seems decidedly unlikely. Let us wait a few weeks for the party professionals to report.

*John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy*

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