

Green election fever



UH-OH! THE GREEN PARTY INTENDS TO REPRESENT GREEN INTERESTS IN PARLIAMENT!



WHAT, LIKE THE LABOR PARTY REPRESENTS WORKERS' INTERESTS IN PARLIAMENT?



WHO DO WE MAKE THE CHEQUE OUT TO?...



Australian greens seem to have been captured by the excitement of elections. The election of the Tasmanian independents has raised hopes enormously. But do environmentalists really gain all that much by participating in electoral politics? Brian Martin presents a sceptical view.

Environmental issues in Australia are becoming increasingly linked to political parties and electoral politics. Green-style parties are springing up all over the place. The traditional parties, both Labor and the Liberals, are desperately trying to improve their image of environmental consciousness, while the Democrats keep touting their soundness.

At the recent Ecopolitics IV conference in Adelaide, politicians from various parties were in evidence. Most participants seemed to believe that working through the electoral system was the way to go.

But wait a moment! Should it be automatically assumed that electoral politics is a good place to devote environmental energies? After all, the Labor party was once the hope of working class radicals, and look where it is now. Although electioneering may be all the rage, I think some careful scrutiny is called for.

One big problem with electoral politics is that it tends to remove power and initiative from people at the grassroots level. Environmentalists have long been effective at taking issues into their own hands. Public education

campaigns, direct action, promotion of alternative technologies and practices — all these can be done without reliance on politicians.

Politicians can be helpful in such efforts, and some undoubtedly are. But that's different from activists getting involved in parties and election campaigning. Most of the effort in this is effort taken away from immediate campaigns. Indeed, the whole idea of elections is to get someone else — politicians — to take action.

The worst part is after the election. Win or lose, many activists lose heart. After the Liberal victories in 1977 and 1980, the anti-uranium movement lost energy. Partly it was because too much hope was put in a Labor victory. Partly it was because there was no well-developed long-term strategy which went beyond action by the national government. These struggles are indeed long-term. In 1980, many anti-uranium activists were burnt out. Yet now, a decade later, the issue remains of crucial importance.

Electoral 'victory' can be even more disempowering. After Labor was elected in 1983, activism on south-west Tasmania rapidly declined. Everyone expected the government to take over. Yet the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission was and still is building dams.

Elections give the general public little encouragement for personal action. Filling out a ballot paper every few years is hardly a great deal of participation in decision-making in environmental matters, or anything else. To get people hopeful about elections is to divert attention from the need for people to get involved themselves.

If elections tend to disempower ac-

tivists and the general public, who do they empower? Politicians and the government, of course. They are the only ones allegedly given a 'mandate'. The trouble is that politicians are the least likely people to preside over a really lasting change in the way society is organised — and the way society is organised is the root of most environmental problems.

Politicians and government bureaucrats are subject to incredible lobbying efforts by industry and government enterprises. Environmentalists can and do try to compete in this process. Some are very skilful at it and achieve impressive victories. But environmental lobbying and pressure group tactics cannot alter the basic driving forces behind government policy. Governments, among other things, must manage an economy based on large corporate and government enterprises. Policies upsetting the basic economic arrangements are virtually impossible.

At best, environmental lobbying and electioneering can achieve reforms in policy. This means protecting some patches of wilderness, applying more restrictions to industrial emissions, stopping particular projects etc. But more fundamental changes are ruled out.

The Government response to anti-logging campaigns is, at best, to protect some forests. Well and good. But the basic structure of the industry and government remains: the forest industries, the market economy, the forestry commissions etc. In other words, the driving forces remain the same. Some projects can be stopped, but the same battles have to be fought time and time again. After all, pro-environment policies can be reversed. Voting and lobbying change only a few individuals, not the political and economic arrangements which lead to environmentally destructive actions.

A green government?

Is this perhaps too pessimistic? Isn't it possible for a real greening of the political system? Let's say that at some future time a really green government takes office — perhaps following the rapid growth of a green party or the greening of one of the existing parties. Surely this would be a breakthrough?

The historical record is not so

promising. In nearly every case where a radical government has been elected in a time of social ferment, the government has served as a break on social change, rather than a spur towards it. This includes the New Deal administration which took office in the United States in 1933 at the height of the depression, the Popular Front elected in France in 1936 (which proceeded to take every effort against strikes and occupations), the British Labour government elected in 1945, and the Eurosocialist governments in France, Spain and Greece in the 1980s.

A green government would probably introduce some desirable legislation and take some symbolic stands. But it might very well be hostile to radical grassroots action, which could jeopardise its standing. The splits within the German Greens are indicative of the problems.

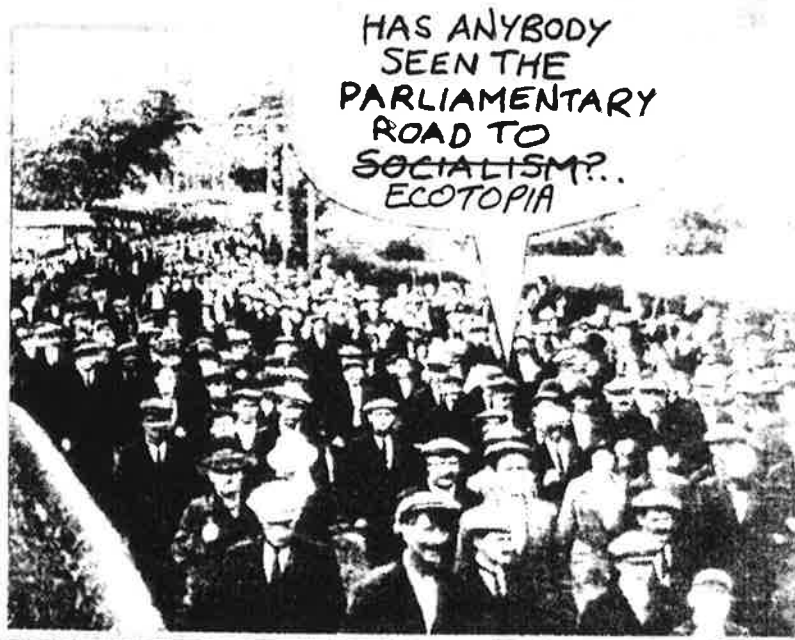
By present indications, green parties are unlikely to be able to form a government on their own. Entering coalitions is more likely, and this is a prescription for compromise. Politicians in a coalition government always see the prospect of doing something positive, and so activists and supporters are counselled to keep waiting. "Don't rock the boat too much, or else the gains in the pipeline may be jeopardised." Once again, the

grassroots are disempowered.

Green participation in coalitions actually helps to legitimate the policies made. That's the whole idea of electoral participation, after all. If we vote, we should accept the election verdict, so the argument goes. This obscures the extremely limited degree of participation represented by voting in an election.

There's another problem with a green government, and that is that all government operates by coercion. Government decisions are backed up, ultimately, by the military and police. Is this the proper way for environmental decisions to be enforced? Some environmentalists may believe that protecting the environment is so important that using autocratic means is justified if necessary. I'm not one of them.

In any list of the disadvantages of electoral politics, it is hard to avoid mentioning the incredible bitterness and bad feelings so often produced. Struggles over parties, candidates, policies and personalities are rife, and are enough to alienate many a potential supporter. This is mostly due to the quest for power. People believe their views, or their personal power, are so important that other people can be stepped on. This is basically the philosophy that the ends justify the





means: getting elected justifies some rough play along the way. This is the same philosophy that has generated most present-day environmental problems.

Alternatives to elections

It's all very well to criticise electoral politics, but is there any better way to proceed? This is something that has to be decided by all those involved. What I will do here is argue that there are some other ways.

My emphasis is on the long term. That means doing things now with an eye towards many years hence. Many environmental problems are urgent, to be sure. The great temptation is to assume that governmental action is the only way to confront these urgent problems. The trouble is that the driving forces are not addressed, and the 'urgent' problems persist or reappear.

The basic alternative to looking to governments for solutions is to build from the grassroots: popular education, community groups, people's campaigns. The idea of the 'grassroots' is vague, but in practical terms it refers to lots of environmental campaigns over the years, those which have involved people directly in changing their lives. This includes much of the anti-uranium campaign, recycling, promotion of solar energy and organic farming..

Action at the grassroots is never entirely separate from the formal political system. The point is that grassroots action can lead to changes in policy, even though little or no direct involvement in parties or elections is undertaken. The anti-uranium movement has been high-

ly successful in preventing the introduction of nuclear power, uranium enrichment or waste reprocessing in Australia. Both Liberal and Labor governments have responded to campaigns and changes in public attitudes.

It should be recognised, though, that a social movement is not a permanent alternative. Grassroots action, like electoral politics, is a way of operating within the present system – and the present system is based on a very small number of people having great power to make decisions.

The big challenge is to work towards a more participatory system. Electoral politics is precisely the way not to do this, since electoral politics is based on limited participation and hence reinforces the present system. Grassroots campaigns have limitations, but at least offer the hope of promoting alternative structures.

Participation: what does it mean? I'm concerned here about people participating directly in making decisions that affect them. Most people seldom do this. Voting every few years is at best indirect participation; it is the elected (as well as non-elected) officials who participate directly in decision-making. Writing a letter to a politician is similarly indirect. Even joining a rally or occupation, if the main aim is to obtain media coverage and influence politicians, is a form of indirect participation.

The most important area for direct participation is, for most people, at work. Most jobs offer little opportunity for employees to participate in decision-making. Indeed, most

enterprises, private and public, are autocratic. The alternative is workers' control: the workers collectively make the decisions. For the many enterprises which have major effects on the public, members of the affected community should be involved as well. The goal then is worker-community control.

Australia in the 1970s had one of the most widely admired examples of worker-community control: the Green Bans. Also often cited are the British Lucas Aerospace workers' plans, for producing socially useful products. The idea of workers' plans has been taken up in many countries, including in Australia by Victorian railway unions, for example.

In the 1980s, Australian employers such as the timber industry have become more successful in pitting workers and environmentalists against each other. Many environmentalists would be wary of giving workers control over decisions, in case they continued destructive practices. These environmentalists would rather give power to governments to intervene from above. Thus, rather than promoting greater participation, environmentalists have reduced it through their focus on governments.

Decision-making

What is the practical meaning of participation in this 'worker-community control'? How are decisions actually to be made? There are a number of methods worth exploring.

One is consensus. This has been greatly developed in parts of the environment movement and other social movements. It has great strengths, but also some limitations, especially in large groups of people with fundamentally different interests.

Another method is voting. Voting may have limitations when used to select politicians, but it usually works better with smaller groups, especially when voting directly on policy rather than for representatives to make policy. Voting can overcome the stranglehold of a minority that can block consensus. The danger is that voting allows minorities to be overrun and alienated.

A less well-known method is random selection. Decision-makers can be selected randomly from volunteers, rather like the selection of a jury. The advantage here is that all interested

people get an equal chance. Electoral politics is dominated by ambitious, power-seeking individuals; consensus is often dominated by those who can manipulate feelings or stay at endless meetings. Random selection offers a way over these problems.

Studies in the United States and West Germany with randomly selected 'policy juries' — some dealing with environmental issues — have shown that people quickly become knowledgeable about the issues and are highly responsive to the general interest.

Whatever the decision-making method, small scale is vital for participation. Large electorates, or even large consensus groups, make for frustration and alienation. Small groups, each dealing with specific issues, offer the best prospects. This means some type of decentralisation and coordination of different groups.

These are some of the alternatives, all well worth exploring and promoting today. The best place to start is in environmental organisations themselves. If grassroots participation is the goal, as an alternative to elected and nonelected autocrats, then there's no place like home to begin. The bureaucracy and powerbroking in some environmental organisations are not promising in this respect. But, as I said, the struggle is bound to be a long one.

Today we see leaders of the Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, as nominal leaders of the labour movement, taking amazing anti-worker stands. In the future, will environmentalists have to struggle against repressive green politicians and greenocrats? Is green election fever the symptom of a serious disease?

Suggested reading

John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* (London: Polity Press, 1985). Random selection for an alternative society.

Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Consequences of Consent: Elections, Citizen Control and Popular Acquiescence* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982). The limitations of voting as participation.

Jane J Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). On consensus and voting.

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