

The Green Movement And Electoral Politics

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A recent edition of the *Bulletin* magazine dealt with the topic of the green movement in Australia under the title "The Green Mess." Now, while the journalist was obviously intent on making the divisions in the movement the main angle of his story, greens can hardly feel aggrieved if the media tends to focus less on their positive contributions and more and more on their failure to get their act together.

The record over the last few months has been appalling: four green Senate tickets in New South Wales for the forthcoming Federal elections, a Western Australian green ticket being put up against Jo. Vallentine and serious divisions, especially in New South Wales, between the conservation movement and green political groups. There is an urgent need for greens and social movement activists to develop a coherent philosophical and political direction which puts electoral involvement where it belongs — as one element of a political strategy for radical social change.

There are more weaknesses than the failure to observe basic common sense about the public acceptability of a movement which presents four different Senate tickets. Some greens, especially those coming from established radical political traditions or from issue-oriented movements with a strong social justice orientation, have become involved in a no-win conflict with the nature conservation groups. They rightly assert that green politics has a broader scope than concern for the environment and, because they mistrust the narrowness of the nature conservation perspective, they have turned this political difference into a yawning chasm. This sort of green sectarianism can have only one outcome — the increasing marginalisation of green politics.

This does not mean that the differences between "broad" and "narrow" greens is unimportant. Any reluctance of nature conservationists, for example, to take on broad principles of social justice and equity will become a major stumbling block to the development of a coherent approach to sustainable economics and "broad" greens will need to argue their case logically and sensitively. Here, the approach of the Rainbow Alliance has been more productive. The ideas in their *New Economic Directions for Australia* paper can feed into the thinking of the conservation movement and the social movements generally. Bringing together the goals of reduced levels of material consumption on the one hand with the provision of a guaranteed adequate income funded out of a genuinely progressive taxation scheme on the other allows for the development of a society which aims at the ultimate goal of green

politics — the end of a social system which equates progress with the dominating of human beings over nature and the domination of some human beings by others. *New Economic Directions* also calls for the creation of an economic system based on four types of structures — a democratically controlled public sector, a co-operative sector, a small business sector and a community-based barter sector. Working towards a more self-reliant economy which is no longer based on control by a large corporate sector will obviously involve the green movement in different struggles to the "bushfire" campaigns designed to preserve threatened, environmentally sensitive areas which have comprised the majority of green activities over the last decade. This is the logical direction for the green movement to take but the waters can only be muddied by the schismatic behaviour of greens intent on marginalisation.

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There is a further weakness in the direction of some greens. This is their obsession with electoral politics. If greens want to create a society with more participatory, more decentralised and more egalitarian social structures, then they have to recognise the limitations involved in electoral politics. This does not mean that we need to adopt the approach of writers like Brian Martin and Chris Rootes¹ who argue that any involvement in electoral politics necessarily means that the movement supports the limited nature of current forms of representative democracy. The key to successful electoral involvement would seem to be getting a balance between grassroots activity and electoral participation so that one builds on the other. Programmatic support by green candidates for a radical devolution of power would seem to be essential. Participation in elections enables groups to present political alternatives on a wider

stage at a time when most people are considering political alternatives and, if green candidates are successful, they can change the political agenda through the pressure this success places on the main parties. However, a green political strategy which is based on the social movements will need to maintain a clear primary focus on involvement in grassroots activity since it is at the level of the community that destructive and oppressive attitudes are most easily and productively challenged. Elections are not the place where new challenges to these attitudes are made. It is where the concrete demands which have arisen in people's struggles are put into a political framework. Without this clear link with the green movement, green politicians will soon become as irrelevant as any other politicians as they struggle to win the "middle ground" which is where electoral victories are won.

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Groups like the Rainbow Alliance and the various green political groups around Australia need to develop political strategies which recognise and build upon the work done by the social movements during the last two decades. They need to avoid the dogmatic and sectarian behaviour which has characterised so many marginalised left groups and they need to get a sensible perspective on electoral involvement. An appropriate model for action, therefore, would involve the development of community based campaigns — in cooperation with other community groups — which, by their very nature, go to the heart of what is wrong with our society and which present viable alternatives. As a component of such a campaign, candidates could stand on a green ticket taking up the demands of that movement and having that movement's support. The most appropriate level for such electoral activity would usually be that of local government.

REFERENCE

1. See articles by these authors in this issue of *Social Alternatives*.

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