

THE END OF THE PARTY? WHAT LABOR'S HISTORY CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE
RISE OF THE GREENS AND THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan, In accents most forlorn". Self-flagellation and teeth gnashing have long been favoured pastimes of members of the Labor Party and its fellow travellers. Angst-ridden debate about what Labor ought to stand for and the extent to which the Party has abandoned its founding principles have been standard fare in progressive political discourse since before Federation. However, since the 2010 Australian Federal election, the focal point for ALP navel gazing has shifted from ideological ennui to an existential panic. Just as Hanrahan, the protagonist of John O'Brien's iconic Australian bush poem, glumly predicted that his district's dry spell would foreshadow collective doom, so too have progressives begun to talk (sometimes in *accents most forlorn*, sometimes in open glee) of the terminal *roon* of the ALP. The dramatic collapse in Labor's primary vote since the formation of minority government by Julia Gillard in 2010 and the parallel rise in the prominence of The Greens has led many to speculate on the Party's very viability within this 'New Paradigm'.

In this vein, The Greens' former Parliamentary leader Bob Brown has predicted that:

*"I believe the Greens as a party are in a similar position to what the Labor Party was 100 years ago. We represent a widespread view of the community and our support is geographically widespread. I think that within 50 years we will supplant one of the major parties in Australia."*ⁱ

This idea is not just a Greens talking point; it has even been publicly entertained by some of the most senior figures in the ALP. Former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd has stated that given the prevailing electoral and organisational situation, he believes that Labor risks becoming a:

*"diminished political rump" and a "marginalised third party of Australian politics given the opportunism of the Greens"*ⁱⁱ.

Party elder, Senator John Faulkner, has similarly told colleagues that Labor is:

*"facing our first electoral challenge in history from the left, in the Greens. And we are a declining political force"*ⁱⁱⁱ.

While the left has always incorporated electoral pessimism into its electoral worldview, these statements should not be lightly dismissed. One should always be careful to avoid the assumption that the status quo reflects the natural order of things. Societies and systems of government continually evolve and so too do the actors and their roles in them. Political parties come and go. Since Federation, Australia has seen the rise and fall of both minor parties (eg the Democrats, One Nation) and former parties of Government (eg the United Australia Party, Free Trade Party, The Commonwealth Liberal Party, the Protectionist Party). Similarly, just this year in another stable democracy, the Liberals, a former party of Government, were usurped as the official opposition party in Canada by the New Democratic Party. As such, the primacy of the ALP as the dominant party of the left in Australian politics should not be taken for granted.

So are the Hanrahans right? Is Australia currently approaching an inflection point in which the nation's oldest political party could be usurped at the ballot box by a new progressive force? If so, what would this mean for progressive politics and how should the Party's leadership, and its ever diminishing number of members, respond?

To answer these questions, Labor should look to its past. As Graham Freudenberg wrote in "*Cause for Power*", the official history of the New South Wales branch of the ALP,

"The Australian Labor Party was born with a sense of history. That sense of its past has always been, and remains, one of its great sources of strength and its confidence about its future."^{iv}

Labor's history shows that the Party's current dire position is far from unique and further, that the threat posed by the Greens is nothing new. Like poor Hanrahan, those proclaiming the demise of the ALP are merely heralding the ebb of a long-term cycle. For more than a century, Labor has been pushed and pulled between forces of *electoralism* and those of *ideology* both within and outside the Party. However, in the long run, the ALP has always responded to bouts of ideological extremism that threatened its long term viability by successfully reaffirming its commitment to electoralism. Viewed in this way, Labor's history offers not only solace that the rise in the prominence of The Greens as an ideological challenger to the left of the ALP does not signal the decline of the Party, but also practical lessons for how it should go about responding to this challenge to its electoral prospects.

...

The history of the Australian Labor Party is best understood as a history of a conflict between the forces of electoralism and the forces of ideology. From the earliest days of the Labor party, in the shearers camps around Barcaldine and the workers cottages in Balmain, progressives have fought over whether the proper role of the Labor Party was to seek Government or to promote larger scale change in society through the pursuit of ideological ends. Labor historian Denis

Murphy has described this conflict as the clash between the *'more immediate goals of the empiricists and liberals'* within the ALP and the *'long term aspirations of the socialists and idealists'*.^v

The majority of the trade unionists who had sat under the Tree of Knowledge had their political enlightenment forged in the practicalities of wage negotiations. Having been under the jackboot of the Queensland Colonial Army and a hostile conservative Government, they understood the negative power of holding government. As a result, they had specific, practical policy goals for the Labor Party and they sought government to deliver them.

As historian, Ross Fitzgerald has written of this period

"Labor electoralism, to which most Queensland unions remained loyal for so long, was based on the notion that manipulation of the state was the most effective strategy for labour advancement. The immediate goals of this strategy were at no stage more ambitious than the modest extension of state enterprise and social welfare services, and 'socialism' was consciously redefined to fit within these bounds."^{vi}

Murphy has echoed this view, noting that

"In the years when the Labor party was establishing itself there was little intellectual tradition in Australian society. Reflecting this, the Labor party placed a greater emphasis on practical political questions and, though there were some theorists among the socialist groups, the party was only marginally concerned with theories of politics."^{vii}

To this end, the early policy platforms of the ALP were focused on a limited number of objectives that were directly relevant to the lives of their potential constituents: increased wages; workers compensation; workplace health and safety improvements; protections for workers against sickness, old age and unemployment; and electoral reforms to give workers genuine

representation (particularly universal, equal franchise, one vote, one value and the abolition of conservative upper houses).

However, as Murphy intimates, even in the late 1890s, there was a parallel, more ideological and militant stream of thought present in both the party and the broader progressive movement. This stream of thought rejected the incrementalism of the electoralists and advocated more fundamental political change. Over the course of Labor's history, groups both within the Labor movement (eg the Socialist Leagues, the Industrial Workers of the World, the One Big Unionists) and outside the ALP (eg Lang Labor, the Communist Party) have continually emerged seeking to shift Labor from its founding electoralist objective.

The degree of success that these groups achieved in influencing Labor's political agenda has varied significantly. Their influence has generally been stronger in periods of extreme adversity for progressive voters, when more extreme policy prescriptions became more appealing to a desperate electorate (eg wars, economic recession or depression) or when the ALP was facing adversity of its own, generally in the form of internal divisions on unrelated matters (eg religious sectarianism, single issue policy divides eg conscription).

An early example of the dynamic of this conflict between the electoralists and the ideologues within the progressive movement can be seen over the push for the inclusion of the nationalisation of industry as the key plank of Labor's policy platform. Driven initially by members of the Socialist Leagues (and later by the IWW), and opposed primarily by the Labor MPs and candidates who ultimately had to face the voters, the nationalisation objective divided and damaged the ALP for more than 20 years before the issue was laid to rest.

As Ross McMullin wrote in his centennial history of the ALP, the debate over the inclusion of the nationalisation plank in Labor's platform caused divisions within the ALP across the nation. When the nationalisation plank was not included in the 1898 NSW Labor electoral platform:

"Many socialists resigned from the Political Labor League, including its secretary. According to one of them, the Labor Party had 'degenerated into a mere vote-catching machine, doing no educational work, and generally following a policy of supineness.'^{viii}

The debate was even more rancorous in Queensland where in 1907 the Labor Premier Bill Kidston and the bulk of his Labor caucus split from the organisational wing of the ALP over the issue and the broader question of industrial control of the parliamentary party^{ix}. The split led to a decade of Opposition before a new leader, TJ Ryan was able to reunite the Party and return Labor to Government.

Ultimately, this early scene of conflict was resolved in favour of the electoralists at Labor's 1922 Federal Conference. While the party did incorporate a 'socialist objective' into its platform, in light of the fact that as 'Red Ted' Theodore noted, *'no two delegates would agree as to what socialisation of industry meant'*^x, a rider was agreed to the effect that the objective would only apply to the extent that it was necessary to *'eliminate exploitation and other anti-social features'* - effectively rendering the objective moot.^{xi}

...

Viewed within this historical context, the rise of the Greens and their policy agenda can be seen as simply the latest manifestation of the challenge to Labor's electoralist mission by ideologues within the progressive movement. In fact, the parallels between the rise of the Greens and one particular historical conflict of this kind are particularly striking.

For the pessimists, the ALP's collapse in surveyed primary support since the 2010 election is frequently cited as the most compelling evidence of Labor's impending demise. In the past 12 months, Labor's surveyed national primary support has fallen as low as 26% and has generally struggled to lift much above 30%. This is truly a disastrous situation and would result in the wholesale rout of the party should it be reproduced at an election. Many have speculated that such a rout would leave Labor vulnerable to being overtaken by The Greens. However, those

with an eye to history will know that this is not the first time Labor's primary support has been this low, nor is it the first time Labor has been electorally challenged from the Left.

At the 1931 Federal Election, the Labor Government led by Prime Minister James Scullin suffered a swing against it of -22%, leaving the ALP with a primary vote of just 27%. Labor MPs of the calibre of John Curtin, Ben Chifley and 'Red Ted' Theodore all lost their seats in the ensuing rout. While this result occurred in the throes of the Great Depression, Labor's catastrophic performance was not merely a function of economic circumstance. Instead, more than half of the collapse in Labor's support was directly attributable to the emergence of an opportunistic Left wing challenger to the ALP; the *Australian Labor Party (NSW)*, more popularly referred to a '*Lang Labor*'.

Lang Labor was a splinter group of left wing Labor MPs loyal to the New South Wales Premier Jack Lang who triggered the 1931 election by voting with the conservative Opposition against the Government on a confidence motion. Lang Labor MPs advocated the adoption of the Lang Plan in response to the Great Depression, a populist left wing programme which called for a repudiation of Australia's foreign debt (what we would call 'default' today) and the abandonment of the gold standard in favour of a goods standard that would significantly increase the monetary supply. While Conservatives and moderates were aghast at such an extreme proposal at the time, Lang Labor was able to capture around 10% of the national vote in the 1931 election. As its support was largely concentrated in NSW, it was further able to convert this support into four seats in Federal Parliament (including the infamous hard left MP Eddie Ward, who would go on to become a constant thorn in the sides of both Curtin and Chifley). At the subsequent election in 1934, Lang Labor increased its support to 14% and its Parliamentary representation to nine seats. Meanwhile Labor's primary support fell even further to just 26%, consigning the divided progressive movement to continued Opposition.

The similarities between the circumstances in which the progressive movement found itself in the early 1930s and current electoral environment are significant. In both cases, the progressive

movement is deeply divided. On one side is an insurgent minority group supported by 10-15% of voters and advocating an extreme policy agenda to which the majority of the electorate is actively hostile. On the other side is the bulk of the progressive movement, weakened by internal conflict and external vicissitudes, fighting a war on two fronts and losing the vital middle ground necessary to form government.

So what does history tell us about the prospects for the Greens and the ALP within this context?

...

The first lesson from history is that while left wing insurgent groups have been able to divide the progressive vote and damage the ALP, as Lang Labor found, there is a hard ceiling on the growth of their vote. The Greens may be able to woo voters within ideologically sympathetic geographic enclaves, but they are unlikely to grow their level of electoral support beyond around 15% of the national vote without significantly moderating their agenda and broadening their appeal. An examination of Australian polling and electoral data over the past decade provides substantial empirical support for this view.

Peter Brent, a well known scion of the psephological blogosphere under his pseudonym, Mumble, recently compared a time series of ten years of Labor and Greens poll and election results and noted that:

“Since late 2001, Greens have tended to do well in the polls when Labor has done badly... The Greens feed on dissatisfaction with the ALP from (in crude terms) “the left”. Their chances of winning more lower house seats at the next election largely depend on how badly the ALP does.”^{xii}

As such, the data show that in 2001 when September 11 and the Tampa saw Labor’s vote crash, the Greens’ vote spiked by 5 percentage points. In contrast, in 2007, when Kevin07 had Labor ascendant, the Greens’ vote increased only 1 percentage point on their 2004 result. The pattern

continued in the 2010 election, when a calamitous election campaign marred by internal Labor recriminations led to the Greens' vote jumping 4 percentage points to around 13% of the national vote (11.76% in the House of Representatives and 13.11% in the Senate).

However, it is important to note that while The Greens' vote tends to increase when Labor's vote falls, *this relationship is not linear*. More often, only a small proportion of the fall in Labor's support transfers into increased support for The Greens. Significantly, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the Gillard government, unparalleled prominence of Greens' spokesmen in the hung parliament and major wins on their key policy issues, the Greens' surveyed level of support has barely increased at all since the 2010 election, bouncing between 12 and 15%.

Instead, as can be seen from the work of another online psephologist, Scott Steel (AKA Possum's Pollytics), a weighted aggregation of major pollsters as at 28 September 2011 (around Labor's nadir), shows that while Labor's Primary support had fallen by 9.7 percentage points since the 2010 election, the Greens' primary support had increased by only 0.6 percentage points.^{xiii} For every ten voters who had left Labor since the 2010 election, only one had gone to the Greens and five had gone to the Tony Abbott led Liberal Party.

Similar patterns can be observed in the recent Victorian, New South Wales and Queensland State elections. In Victoria, despite a major Greens' campaign to build on their record 2010 Federal Election result by electing a number of lower house MPs in inner city Melbourne electorates, The Greens' primary vote increased by only 1.17 percentage points to 11.21% of the state wide result, a result that failed to produce a single lower house seat. Meanwhile, Labor's primary vote had fallen by 6.81 percentage points on a statewide basis, more than half of which was picked up by the Liberal and National parties.

The 2011 New South Wales state election result told a particularly damning story of the limits of The Greens' electoral appeal. Despite confronting what was universally regarded as a historically incompetent State Labor Government and an utterly demoralised Labor organisation, The Greens

were only able to increase its primary vote by 1.33 percentage points (to 10.3%) in the face of a 13.43 percentage point fall in Labor's primary vote.

Tellingly, as ABC elections analyst Antony Green subsequently noted, The Greens were not able to capitalise on the collapse of the Labor Primary in Labor held seats:

“There was a swathe of inner-city seats such as Coogee and Heffron where a collapse in Labor's first preference vote could have put the Greens into second place. Instead the Green vote was static and all the change in vote was from Labor to Liberal. Even in the one seat the Greens did win, Balmain, the victory came about entirely because Labor's collapse in support was so large that Labor fell to third place”. ^{xiv}

Ultimately, even left leaning former Labor voters who had given up on the ALP in disgust, did not opt for The Greens. The Liberal Party increased their primary support by a total of 11.64 percentage points in the election; ten times the increase in The Greens' vote.

A similar pattern can be seen in the most recent Queensland election in which a swing against the Labor Party of 15.4 percentage points (leaving a primary vote of just 26.8%) was accompanied by a *fall* in The Greens primary vote of 1.2 percentage points (to a primary of just 7.2%).

Consistent with the experience of all movements that have challenged the Labor Party from the left since Federation, recent polling and electoral evidence strongly suggests that the Greens' appeal, at least as the party is currently orientated, is limited to a small sub-set of ideologically sympathetic Labor voters. In total, across the Victorian, New South Wales and Queensland election results and polling since the 2010 Federal election, Labor has lost an average of 11.33 percentage points of primary support while the Greens have increased their primary support by an average of only 0.475 percentage points.

Given the parallels between the rise in the prominence of the Greens and Labor's historic experience with left wing movements inside and outside the ALP, what lessons can the Party learn from its history to avoid the long periods of damaging division that have often accompanied these movements?

During the first ten years of the ALP, when the future viability of the ALP was last discussed as openly as it is today, an intense debate developed within the Party about the electoral and parliamentary strategy that Labor should employ to advance its policy goals. Denis Murphy described the four most prominent theories as being:

1. *“Labor should remain on the cross benches, like the Irish Nationalists in the House of Commons, and support whichever of the two existing parties would agree to implementing parts of the Labor platform;*
2. *Since the Labor party could not hope, for some time, to win sufficient votes to govern in its own right, it should seek to achieve necessary reforms through judicious alliances with reform-minded Liberals;*
3. *The Labor party should merge with or remain a part of the Liberal party;*
4. *As it would be only when Labor gained office in its own right that it could bring about any meaningful or major reforms, the party should eschew all alliances and maintain a separate and independent identity”.*

Given that Labor has now outgrown the option of sitting on the cross benches and that the ideological gulf between the ALP and The Greens is too significant for a merger to be a realistic possibility, options 2 and 4 remain as the only viable strategies for the modern ALP.

In the 1890s, Labor chose the fourth option, to seek office in its own right and to see off all progressive challengers, and has pursued it for the better part of 100 years. It was the right decision for Labor and the progressive movement then, and offers a template for Labor's future now.

In response to the increasing prominence of The Greens, Labor must explicitly reaffirm its strategy of seeking office in its own right, with all of the tactical implications that entails. History has repeatedly taught that when ideology has drawn Labor's focus away from the need to obtain majority support, the progressive movement has achieved nothing in the face of long term conservative governments. Labor must not make the mistakes of previous Labor leaders like Arthur Calwell who acquiesced to the agendas of the left wing movements without regard to their electoral consequences. As the former UK Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell has warned progressives: "*we can never go farther than we can persuade at least half of the people to go.*"

In this regard, Labor should not be under any illusions as to the electoral viability of The Greens' agenda. The ANU's Australian Electoral Study has found that on a left-right scale running from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right) while voters on average place themselves in the centre of the scale, at 5.03, they place the Greens on average at 3.3; significantly more left wing than the mean voter.^{xv} Older, but more granular academic research shows that the attitudes of Greens candidates on specific policy issues are substantially to the left of the views of not only the broader electorate, but even of those of self-identified Labor voters^{xvi}. For example, given a choice between reducing taxes or spending more on social services, 93% of Greens candidates favoured spending more on social services. Labor voters, however, were split fairly evenly, with roughly a third favouring reduced taxes, a third favouring more social services, and a third indicating no real preference. Similarly, only 26.5% of Greens candidates agreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that high income tax makes people less willing to work hard, while in contrast 66.6% of Labor voters did so. This ideological gulf seems likely to explain the apparent ceiling on The Greens vote, even in the most fortuitous of electoral environments, revealed by recent polling and electoral data. Labor should take note of this electoral disconnect and not embrace the electoral irrelevance of this agenda.

Ideological isolation is a particular risk in a situation in which Labor is confronted by a left wing movement that is active electorally. Labor can never be 'more left' than The Greens on totemic

ideological issues. No matter how far Labor moves to the left, The Greens will always be able to move further across themselves, continuing to harvest the votes of those who are motivated by left wing orthodoxy. However, by engaging in an ideological bidding war with a party who is pitching to only a narrow segment of the voting population, Labor can very easily lose the votes of the vast majority of voters who are not motivated by these issues, driving them into the camp of the conservatives.

As the former Finance Minister, Lindsay Tanner, a Labor figure who has had more cause to contemplate the rise of the Greens than most, warned:

“The Greens have appropriated elements of the belief system of Whitlam Labor and, free of the constraints of seeking to govern, intensified them to a point where they have no prospect of attracting majority support. Labor can only compete with Green grandstanding at the price of an indefinite period in opposition”^{xvii}

The current electoral situation in which Labor has lost nearly 1.3 million primary votes to the Tony Abbott led Liberal Party and only around 140,000 votes to The Greens ought to give the current party leadership pause for thought in this respect.

As such, in response to the increasing prominence of The Greens, Labor must, in the words of Dennis Murphy, *‘eschew all alliances and maintain a separate and independent identity’*. In the modern context this means that Labor must rule out any form of governing arrangement, formal or informal, with The Greens. Unsurprisingly, building on the current formalised ‘alliance’ arrangements with The Greens appears to be a key strategic objective for the Greens. Robert Manne, one of their most vocal cheer leaders of late has gone so far as to assert that:.

“It is obvious that if there is to be a progressive politics in Australia, its sine qua non is an informal version of what the Europeans call the “Red-Green alliance”.”^{xviii}

While such an arrangement may well offer a rosy future for the Greens, as predicted by Labor strategists in the 1890s, such arrangements presents great danger for Labor. Labor must reject the tactical convenience of such an approach in the name of the long term strategic good of the progressive movement. As Labor has learnt over the past 12 months, a state of parliamentary alliance with The Greens is the worst of both worlds for the ALP. On the one hand, Labor surrenders the agency of progressive reform. Regardless of the actual distribution of responsibility within the alliance, The Greens are able to claim sole credit with left leaning voters for all progressive reforms initiated by the Government. In this way, a Red-Green governing alliance would deliver the inner cities to The Greens in perpetuity.

On the other hand, and more significantly, governing with The Greens adds to the degree of difficulty in Labor's efforts to fight the conservatives for the middle ground of Australian politics. The Greens are not a moderating alliance partner of the style of the Australian Democrats. As they freely admit, The Greens role in an alliance with Labor is not to "Keep the Bastards Honest", but instead to suck its host party dry. Under such an arrangement, Labor forfeits the power to set the political agenda and to choose the issues on which it engages the opposition. As a result, issues that are important to a minority of voters but risk alienating mainstream voters (eg ending mandatory detention of refugees) are permanently parked at the front of the political agenda, perpetually sapping Labor's political capital. The inconsistent electoral objectives of Labor and The Greens and the competitive dynamics between the parties mean that any alliance can only ever be destructive to the broader progressive movement's ability to secure government.

In this respect, it seems certain that with the benefit of hindsight, the current Labor Government's formalised alliance agreement with the Australian Greens will be seen as the greatest strategic mistake of the Gillard Government. While Paul Kelly was no doubt exaggerating when he stated that "*the once great Labor Party passes into history with this deal*", the alliance model is clearly electorally unsustainable for the ALP in the long run.

The reality is that Labor has little to lose and much to gain from explicitly saying that it will have nothing to do with The Greens. Even the absence of preference swap deals with The Greens in the lower house is unlikely to have any significant effect on Labor's electoral prospects. ABC elections expert Antony Green has analysed preference flow data from preceding elections and has found that assuming a Greens primary vote of 10%, Green how to vote directions are worth only 0.3% of the vote^{xix}. Ultimately, securing Greens' preferences should not be a major priority for Labor's electoral strategists. Certainly, it should not be prioritised over efforts to win back the support of the larger block of voters who have left the party to support Tony Abbott's Opposition. There is indisputably widespread dysfunction in the modern ALP, however the dysfunction is not the instinct to retain government. To this end, Labor must make the moral case for electoralism as the least-worst hope for the progressive movement. By focusing on remaining relevant to the interests, hopes and dreams of the majority of Australian voters, much can be achieved through the use of Government to achieve incremental progressive reform.

...

The final and most important lesson that the ALP must learn from its history of responding to left wing challenges within the progressive movement is that while The Greens must be actively confronted and their agenda rejected, the ALP must ensure that the necessary confrontation does not alienate future Labor voters and members. In this respect, Labor has handled past divisions in the progressive movement poorly. All too often, Labor leaders like Kidston, Lang and Evatt have responded to internal divisions with an aggression and personal acrimony that split the party and the progressive movement for years to come. The early signs of such a fractious division between the supporters of the ALP and those of The Greens are already observable.

Many in the Labor party, particularly those in the inner cities, resent the way that the Greens actively court Labor voters, without the constraint of having to make their appeal palatable to the broader population. The feeling that The Greens are opportunists betraying the broader progressive movement's electoral prospects in pursuit of their own narrow political self interest is palpable and the source of much anger. The Greens' tendency to frame their campaigns as

black and white morality plays in which the ALP is condemned not simply for adopting a different electoral strategy or policy approach, but as being actively morally inferior to the Greens particularly grates. As Proust once said, those that we hate the most are those who are most like ourselves, but with our faults uncured. Given that to many on the Labor side, the world view of The Greens is that of a left wing student politician who never confronted the realities of democratic politics, it's easy to see why there is so much animosity towards the party within the ALP.

Despite this, Labor must learn from its' history to resist the temptation to engage in personal attacks on The Greens. The animosity that has accompanied historic splits within the Australian progressive movement over nationalisation, conscription, the response to the depression and communism has wastefully diverted the energies and distracted the attentions of those who ought to be working for Labor's electoralist mission. Labor members should remind themselves that one of John Curtin's first acts as Leader of the ALP was to establish a series of ALP Unity Conferences in which the motions to expel Lang Labor supporters were rescinded and Lang Labor MPs were invited to rejoin the Labor caucus. The resulting détente brought the McKell Government into power in New South Wales and the Curtin led Labor Party into power federally not long after. If the rancour and betrayals of a party split could be successfully overcome in this way in the name of progressive solidarity, so too can the petty frustrations of responding to opportunism and hypocrisy.

Instead of engaging in counter-productive ad hominem attacks, Labor must adopt an approach to confronting The Greens that keeps an eye to a future in which these voters (and members) are brought back into the fold. Instead of either belittling The Greens and their supporters, or engaging in an unwinnable ideological auction for their support, Labor should seek to confront The Greens asymmetrically, competing for the support of these voters using the comparative advantages of the ALP in political philosophy and policy making.

Philosophically, Labor must explicitly and forcefully make the moral case for electoralism to progressive voters. In general, progressive voters are highly engaged with politics and more interested in the philosophical case for political actions than the typical voter. This presents an opportunity to combat The Greens' characterisation of Labor as a party of Hollowmen who prioritise political self-interest over the moral consequences of their political actions by demonstrating the benefits to the progressive movement of securing government.

In this respect Labor must explicitly make the case that far from being cynical or self-interested, the pursuit of Government is the moral imperative upon which the modern progressive movement must rest. Labor must emphasise, as Gough Whitlam famously told the Victorian Branch of the ALP, that the principle of electoralism has always been *the* defining tradition of the Labor Party:

“There is nothing more disloyal to the traditions of Labor than the new heresy that power is not important, or that the attainment of political power is not fundamental to our purposes. The men who formed the Labor Party in the 1890s knew all about power. They were not ashamed to seek it and they were not embarrassed when they won it.”

Labor must assert that the collective achievements of the Australian progressive movement over the past 120 years are a function of Labor's ability to secure and retain Government. It has been the touch stone of the achievements of all the great Labor leaders. In this respect, Labor must aggressively call out the Australian left's habit of engaging in what Christopher Hitchens has described as 'grave robbing', the stealing and repurposing of the legacies of Labor's past heroes. Current Labor leaders are frequently held up for comparison against a revisionist imagining of Labor's past in which electoral matters are absent and ideological purity was the order of the day. Not un-coincidentally, this golden era has always existed just beyond the immediate memory and experiences of those proclaiming it.

In reality, the heroes of Labor's past against which the ideological integrity of Labor's current MPs is compared were invariably themselves electoralists rather than ideologues. When talking about John Curtin's record as a party hero, few progressives raise the fact that he was vilified by the left for opposing the existing ALP party platform in order to send conscript soldiers overseas to fight in the Pacific theatre. Fewer still raise the fact that when confronted with ongoing opposition from the left in caucus, Curtin simply stated that "*what is irrelevant can be endured*". When lauding Chifley's commitment to the Light on the Hill, few modern left wingers bring up his use of the military to break up a communist led strike in the Australian coal industry in 1949. Fewer still recall the "whatever it takes" electoral practices that he employed to fight Lang Labor during the 1930s. Yet these electorally critical actions were all essential to the ability of these great leaders to secure Government.

In a similar way, the Whitlam Government is constantly cited by those on the left as an example of ideological rigor that ought to be followed by the modern ALP^{xx}. Yet most conveniently forget that when Whitlam made his famous '*crash or crash through*' comment, he wasn't referring to the parliamentary obstructionism of Malcolm Fraser's Liberal Party, but instead to the ideological obstructionism of the left wing of 1960s ALP. Indeed, Whitlam's leadership was made on his electoralist resistance to the Left, most famously when he castigated the hard left controlled 1967 Victorian State Conference for their disregard for the consequences of electoral failure.

"We euphemise deep disasters as 'temporary setbacks; the nearer Labor approaches electoral annihilation, the more fervently we proclaim its indestructibility. We juggle with percentages, distributions and voting systems to show how we shall, infallibly, at the present rate of progress, win office in 1998. Worse, we construct a philosophy of failure, which finds in defeat a form of justification and proof of the purity of our principles. Certainly the impotent are pure."

Another current darling of many a green voting modern progressives, Paul Keating, was infamously hostile to the Left's resistance of his efforts to modernise Labor policy. Few remember now that Keating summed up the agenda of the left wing of the 1980s ALP as being about:

“wider nature strips, more trees and we'll all make wicker baskets in Balmain. Then we'll all live in renovated terraces in Balmain and we'll have the arts and crafts shops and everything else is bad and evil.”

Keating long insisted that his role was to resist the Left's efforts to shift the focus of the ALP from electoralism to ideological orthodoxy, stating on one occasion that:

“(The Left) are trying to make my party into something other than it is... They're appendages. That's why I'll never abandon ship, and never let those people capture it.”

To be sure, Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam and Keating all were champions of the Labor movement who achieved great things for the progressive cause. But they all understood the self-evident truth that without government, and all of the compromises, trade-offs and sacrifices to obtain majority support that it entails, they could achieve nothing.

They understood the truth of George Orwell's characterisation of the uneasiness that many progressives feel when contemplating the necessities of political engagement:

“We see the need of engaging in politics while also seeing what a dirty, degrading business it is. And most of us still have a lingering belief that every choice, even every political choice, is between good and evil, and that if a thing is necessary it is also right. We should, I think, get rid of this belief, which belongs to the nursery. In politics one can never do more than decide which of two evils is the lesser, and there are some situations from which one can only escape by acting like a devil or a lunatic.”

Or to put it more succinctly, as Governor Willie Stark did in Robert Penn Warren's magisterial account of the political practice, "*All the King's Men*":

"You got to make good out of bad. That's all there is to make it with."

Instead, Labor must confidently assert that the only thing in politics that can be definitively labelled as immoral in democratic politics is prioritising a desire to be *seen* to do good over a willingness to *actually do* what is required to achieve good. It is those who put their own feelings of purity and ideological superiority above the practical necessities of the democratic process who are the real cynics. To this end, as David Foster Wallace has written, the most common mistake of ostensibly well intentioned progressives is:

"not conceptual or ideological but spiritual and rhetorical—their narcissistic attachment to assumptions that maximize their own appearance of virtue tends to cost them both the theater and the war."^{xxi}

It is well to ask whether one is taking a political position out of self-interest, but it's worth recognising when doing so that an individual's self-interest can encompass a range of needs. Knowingly adopting an unpopular position is frequently just as self-interested and philosophically hollow as adopting a position that is likely to attract popular support.

...

On the policy front, Labor must use its greater expertise and experience of the realities of policy making to actively highlight the areas in which The Greens' policies produce outcomes contrary to the Party's purported progressive aims. There are numerous instances of such contradictions that the ALP can choose from in this regard within The Greens' voluminous policy papers. One particularly egregious example can be seen in The Greens' Higher Education policy that commits the party to:

"Abolish fees for educational services at public universities for Australian students and forgive HECS debts and FEE-HELP debt incurred at public universities."^{xxii}

Even on the face of its own internal logic, the impact of this policy is deeply regressive. If one accepted (against 20 years of evidence to the contrary) that HECS fees discouraged those from lower socio-economic backgrounds from attending university, the effect of *forgiving* the outstanding HECS debts of those who attended university regardless is to deliver a massive financial windfall gain to those individuals who were not in fact discouraged from attending. The practical effect of this policy would be to deliver around \$20 billion in windfall gains to the professional classes of doctors, lawyers, architects and accountants, *for no public benefit*.

Responding to a similar proposal to forgive student loans that was floated in the United States the name of economic stimulus, Justin Wolfers, a much lauded Australian-born economist at the Wharton School asked:

"If we are going to give money away, why on earth would we give it to college grads? This is the one group who we know typically have high incomes, and who have enjoyed income growth over the past four decades. The group who has been hurt over the past few decades is high school dropouts. So my question for the proponents: Why give money to college grads rather than the 15% of the population in poverty?"

Conclusion: Worst. Idea. Ever. And I bet that the proponents can't find a single economist to support this idiotic idea."^{xxiii}

This is but one example of the outcome of The Greens' policy prescriptions failing to live up to their progressive billing. Similar arguments can be made regarding the outcomes of The Greens policies in areas including Solar Feed-In Tariffs, local planning controls, refugee policy, opposition to the war in Afghanistan, and the termination of the ANZUS treaty to name but a few examples. In this way, highlighting the perverse consequences of The Greens' policies rather

than engaging in personal conflict with their members and supporters, offers Labor a road map for competing for the support of progressive voters without risking a repeat of the damaging divisions and animosities of the past.

...

In two years time, it is possible that Labor will be out of power in every jurisdiction in Australia. With a seemingly ever-decreasing number of voters and members, it is easy for supporters of the Party to become disconsolate. However, Labor will always have one asset that will never diminish; its history.

Labor's history provides important perspective on the scale of the threat posed by the rise in prominence of The Greens. To this end, history suggests that while The Greens are unlikely to usurp Labor's role as the major party of the Left in Australia, unless their agenda is confronted and rejected, they could do serious damage to the electoral prospects of the progressive movement. Labor's history also provides practical lessons on how the party ought to engage with the threat posed by The Greens. Importantly, Labor's history offers warnings of the electoral danger of giving into ideology and cutting the Party off from the concerns of the mainstream of Australian voters. However, Labor's history also shows the futility of engaging in the fractious, emotional splits of the past and the need for the threat of The Greens to be confronted in a way that does not alienate future potential voters and supporters.

More than anything however, Labor Members and the Party's fellow travellers, Labor's rich and meaningful history will always be a source of solace and strength for those who study it closely. In a world in which there are three media cycles in a day and the attrition rate amongst MPs, staff and journalists has never been higher, it can sometimes feel like the institutional memory of Australian politics does not stretch beyond the current term of the Government. In this environment, it is easy to get caught up in the idea that we are living in unique times and that our democracy has never seen the likes of the forces that are buffeting the political actors who are

currently on stage. It is only when one consciously steps back and look at the long arc of Australian political history, that it becomes clear that there are bigger, more enduring trends at work. For better or for worse, over the past 120 years in Australian progressive politics, those bigger trends have unfolded through the Australian Labor Party. With the benefit of a historical perspective, Labor members can take comfort from the fact that despite the Party's current difficulties, there is nothing in the emergence of The Greens to make one think that this will not continue for the next 120 years.

As Paul Keating once said with an eye to the Party's history:

'We at least in the Labor Party know, that we are part of a big story, which is also the story of our country. And what do they know?'

ⁱ Shanahan, D. "Greens will supersede ALP: Bob Brown", *The Australian*, published on 2 July 2011. Available online from: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/greens-will-supersede-alp-bob-brown/story-fn59niix-1226085967764>

^{iv} Freudenberg, G. (1991), "Cause for Power: The Official History of the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party", Pluto Press.

^v Murphy, D. (1990), "T.J. Ryan: a political biography", University of Queensland Press.

^{vi} Fitzgerald, R. & Thornton, H. (1989), "Labor in Queensland: from the 1800s to 1988", University of Queensland Press.

^{vii} Murphy, D. (1990), "T.J. Ryan: a political biography", University of Queensland Press.

^{viii} McMullin, R. (1991), "The Light on the Hill", Oxford University Press Australia.

^{ix} Fitzgerald, R. & Thornton, H. (1989), "Labor in Queensland: from the 1800s to 1988", University of Queensland Press.

^x McMullin, R. (1991), "The Light on the Hill", Oxford University Press Australia.

^{xi} McMullin, R. (1991), "The Light on the Hill", Oxford University Press Australia.

^{xii} Brent, P. "A quick electoral history of The Greens", published 26 October 2011. Available online from: http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/mumble/index.php/theaustralian/comments/greens_and_labor_support

^{xiii} Steel, S. "Wipeout", published 28 September 2011. Available online from <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics/2011/09/28/wipeout/>

- ^{xiv} Green, A. “Does it matter if the Greens do not Direct Preferences to Labor”, published 7 November 2011. Available online from <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/2011/11/does-it-matter-if-the-greens-do-not-direct-preferences-to-labor.html>
- ^{xv} McAllister, I. & Pietse, J. (2011) “Trends in Australian political opinion: results from the Australian election study, 1987-2010”, *Australian National Institute for Public Policy*. Available online from <http://aes.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Trends%20in%20Australian%20Political%20Opinion.pdf>
- ^{xvi} Betts, K. (2004), “PEOPLE AND PARLIAMENTARIANS: THE GREAT DIVIDE”, *People and Place*, vol. 12, no. 2, 64.
- ^{xvii} Dyrenfurth, N. (2010), “All That's Left: What Labor Should Stand For”, UNSW Press.
- ^{xix} Green, A. “Does it matter if the Greens do not Direct Preferences to Labor”, published 7 November 2011. Available online from <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/2011/11/does-it-matter-if-the-greens-do-not-direct-preferences-to-labor.html>
- ^{xxi} Wallace, D. (2005), “Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays”, Little, Brown and Company.
- ^{xxii} The Greens, “Education”. Available online from <http://greens.org.au/policies/care-for-people/education>
- ^{xxiii} Wolfers, J. (2011), “Forgive Student Loans? Worst Idea Ever”. Available online from: <http://www.freakonomics.com/2011/09/19/forgive-student-loans-worst-idea-ever/>