

WEEK 6

Two parties, two parties

Shane Maloney

It is election night, nearly three hours after the close of polling, and the loyalists have gathered in the senior citizens' centre beside Collingwood Town Hall.

Perhaps a hundred of them have turned up – stuffers of letter-boxes and handers-out of how-to-vote cards, members of campaign committees, state parliamentarians, old hands and first-timers, rank-and-filers and backroom head-counters. There are platters of chicken wings, stubbies of beer and strings of cartoon rodent masks, but the atmosphere is a long way from festive. Mark Latham is yet to concede defeat but the extent of the rout is plain to see. Only the diehards are still bothering to glance at the tally room coverage on the big screen against the far wall.

The mood is subdued but it is not entirely despondent. Here, at least, there has not been ignominious defeat. Here, in the electorate of Melbourne, the line has been held. The threat from the left flank has been seen off. Percentage points lost in 2001 have been clawed back. A safe Labor seat is safe once again. The incumbent member, Lindsay Tanner, has been returned on primary votes.

Tanner has slipped into the room unheralded. A few minutes earlier, he'd fed his soundbite into the media coverage, a prediction of Liberal arrogance in victory. Now he is unobtrusively

working his way across the room, a handshake here, a rueful shrug there. Lindsay rarely looks entirely relaxed, but some of the accumulated tension of this endless campaign is finally beginning to drain away. He reaches the front and an attentive hush falls as he acknowledges the gathering.

Fears about the economy have cost the ALP a shot at government, he tells them, but to have won Melbourne so convincingly on primaries is a tribute to the efforts of the campaign workers.

In part, these words enact an obligatory political ritual, the formal thanking of the faithful. But they carry an additional weight with this particular crowd. At the last federal election, many of those in attendance tonight were abused and berated outside polling booths by traditional supporters unhappy with Kim Beazley's cave-in to the Liberal line on refugees. Some long-serving activists had even deserted Labor entirely and, like many voters, taken their business elsewhere. So those who stuck firm are entitled to feel somewhat vindicated by the day's results.

Their efforts could have been even more effectively employed, Tanner tells them, had campaign resources not been required to head off a distracting fad. Things might have been different elsewhere, in other words, if not for the Greens.

Meanwhile, the Greens are having their own wash-up event, a postcode away in Fitzroy. Their gathering place is the Spanish Club, its walls adorned with the escutcheons of Castile and Catalunya. If there is political significance in the choice, it's not evident. A big room, a bar and proximity to the Victorian Greens' political heartland probably dictated the venue.

The crowd is larger here and seems more homogeneous than the Laborites – thirtyish metropolitans, alike in their diversity, visibly alternative only at the fringes. Green triangles display the party name in Italian, Arabic and Turkish, and men with African faces sit around one of the tables, but the multiculturalism is largely emblematic. The electorate's ethnics, concentrated in its public housing estates, are reliably Labor.

In an office upstairs, the resident psephologist hunches over a commandeered computer, crunching numbers. The Greens candidate for Melbourne, Gemma Pinnell, has topped out at 18.5 per cent. It's an improvement on the 2001 vote, but well short of the second place needed to capture Liberal preferences. Attention has now moved to the Senate, where Labor's leg-up to Family First seems to have fatally soured David Ristrom's prospects.

The moment has arrived for Pinnell to front the folks. But as she begins her move, Mark Latham fills the big screen beside the stage. His concession speech runs on and on, and Pinnell is left lingering at the edge of the crowd, waiting her turn. It is testament to the hegemony of the major parties that nobody here has the notion, or the self-confidence, to cut the tally room feed and reclaim the room.

Latham finishes at last and Pinnell takes the rostrum. The bad news is already known, so she concentrates on the good. Here in Melbourne, the Green vote is up. Across the country, a million people have voted Green. Tasmania has put Christine Milne in the Senate. Sydney remains a possibility. Labor has outspent the Greens locally, but its preference deals reveal its true colours. Whatever today's outcome, the Greens are here to stay.

Within an hour, both events are winding up. No matter what construction is put upon the outcome in Melbourne, neither the Greens nor Labor can take any pleasure from a Howard victory. For now, bed is the only option. The recrimination and rebuilding can wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

Melbourne's inner north has long been shaping up as a key battleground between the nascent Greens and the long-entrenched ALP. In municipal, state and federal polls, the Greens have begun to give Labor a serious run for its money and some of the comrades are taking it hard. On more than one occasion, I've heard

the Greens described as anti-working-class racists. I've yet to be warned about the bark underpants and mandatory vegetarianism, but it's probably only a matter of time.

Three weeks before the federal election, I run into my local ward councillor, a Green. I ask him what he makes of his party's prospects. See for yourself, he suggests. Gemma Pinnell and Lindsay Tanner will both be speaking at a local secondary college the next day. Why not go along?

Attendance is voluntary and there are a scant 40 kids lounging in the auditorium at 11.30 the following morning. Most of them are a year or two below voting age, but three candidates have turned up, ready and willing to give them the full treatment.

Gemma Pinnell is 31, an official for a tertiary education union. Her demeanour is serious, concerned. There's a slight sibilance to her voice that tends to undercut her ability to sound authoritative. But she's not selling her personality, she's sticking to the message, tailoring it to the age group. The Greens support votes at sixteen, saving the trees, the abolition of HECS and an end to mandatory detention of asylum seekers. If these are hot issues for the voters of tomorrow, they don't exactly set the room on fire. The applause is friendly but perfunctory.

Next up is the Socialist Alliance candidate, a former student at this school. Her one-size-fits-all prescription for the evils of war and capitalism falls on deaf ears. By fifteen, the kids around here are pretty well Trot-proof.

At 48, Lindsay Tanner might appear to be generations removed from his teenage audience. But as shadow communications minister, he speaks their language. If elected, he tells them, Labor will outlaw unfair mobile phone contracts, implement multichannel digital television, bring in a television version of Triple J and abolish up-front tertiary fees. And unlike the Greens, Labor would be able to deliver on its promises. Ears begin to prick up. For this lot, phones are a hip-pocket issue and media is the vision thing. Tanner takes the round on points.

This is retail politics in action. If it's worth knocking on doors, it's worth sending your message home with the kids. And the mere fact that you care enough to turn up is a message in itself. The side-bar message to the Greens is that Labor will go toe-to-toe for any and every vote.

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But elections aren't decided in high school debates. Winning over the 87,557 registered voters in the seat of Melbourne will take money and organisation. Labor has both. A few days later, I witness them being put to work at a campaign meeting in Lindsay Tanner's office. Presiding over the session is Mary Day, Tanner's long-time electorate manager. Day is an expansive, unflappable woman whose cheerful but firm hand has held the administrative tiller around here since back when the seat belonged to Hawke-era minister Gerry Hand. Around the table sit a score of volunteers and staffers, stuffing envelopes as they coordinate their tasks for the remaining two weeks of the campaign.

There is plenty of stuffing to be done. As a sitting member, Tanner has a \$125,000 annual printing allowance, enough to pay for quite a few handsomely glossy flyers. Into the envelopes they go, as Mary reports that Tanner has drawn top spot on the ballot. If there is a donkey vote out there, it is now Lindsay's.

All those envelopes will require stamps, of course. The incumbent's \$27,500 electoral allowance will help there. Helpful, too, are the three office staff and the unlimited phone and fax calls. As a shadow minister, Tanner also has portfolio staff. And as a well-liked local member, a high-profile national player and a former union official, he has no shortage of generous and helpful friends. In this part of the world, even his reputation as something of an intellectual works to his advantage. The Nova, an art-house cinema in Carlton, has donated screen time.

The meeting proceeds in a businesslike manner, focused on practicalities. Booth rosters. Leafletting schedules. Instructions for

scrutineers. In an electorate as diverse as Melbourne, no single issue dominates the campaign. All bases must be covered. At least the tone of the incoming emails is encouraging this time around, a reversal of the post-*Tampa* response. A silver-haired veteran reports back from the street-stall volunteers that Tanner's high personal recognition factor is a strong positive. This card is being played for all it is worth. Tanner's face beams down from large billboards in key locations throughout the area.

The spend appears to be paying off. The Liberals, never a serious threat, are running dead. The Greens have yet to make their presence felt in wide swaths of the electorate, particularly the more conservative residential suburbs such as Ascot Vale. Overall, the ALP grapevine reports minimal Green activity. Possibly the Greens are concentrating their efforts in areas of proven support like Fitzroy, but so far their challenge is shaping up as something of a non-event.

Not that Labor can afford to lower its guard, Mary Day warns her team. She passes around a Greens handbill promoting the line that a preference vote is never wasted. By preferencing Labor, it claims, Greens voters can have two bites of the cherry.

The gathered campaigners do not need to be told that this notion must be nipped in the bud. They are well aware that if the Greens manage to pick up more primary votes than the Liberals, they might well make it over the line. The stuffing continues unabated.

The author of four books on contemporary Australian society, Lindsay Tanner argues that the Greens are potentially more than just a short-term electoral threat. In the process of transforming themselves from tree-huggers into a party of values, the Greens are winning the allegiance of the kind of grassroots progressives who were traditionally drawn to Labor. A month before the election, Tanner warned that Green erosion of Labor's socially

progressive constituency would push Labor even further to the right.

"One of the things that worries me is that, if we get to the position in the medium term, where there are four or five electorates around held by the Greens and not Labor, and that section of the community, the most politically aware section of the community, is parked on another party, then the Labor Party's going to change. What it will mean is that in future for issues like native title and the republic – forget it!"

In an attempt to assess this argument, I spoke with the secretary of an inner-north ALP branch, a staffer for a state MP with different factional affiliations from Tanner's.

"The problem is not that Labor is facing a wave of resignations or defections, but that new activists who would once have joined the ALP now join the Greens.

"For those with a commitment to majoritarian politics, Labor remains the only serious option. Whatever differences might exist among its individual members, a political party is first and foremost a machine for winning power. If challengers from outside are not confronted, vehemently and viscerally, the whole system is placed at risk. The classic response is to de-legitimize your opponents. Hence the characterisation of the Greens as middle-class, university-educated white people – inauthentic from a working-class point of view.

"Safe seats are particularly sensitive because they constitute the foundation of a patronage system that provides opportunities for personal advancement. And you can't have a viable patronage system without stable outcomes. Neutralising a threat like the Greens means campaigning on unifying issues such as Medicare rather than polarising ones like refugees."

Refugees remain an issue for the woman running the Labor stall outside the Safeway supermarket in Smith Street, Fitzroy, the following Saturday afternoon. "I'm on the Labor-Greens cusp but I want Howard out."

She is standing just a stone's throw from St Mark's hall where the Greens scored a record high primary vote of 29.4 per cent in the 2002 state poll, almost unseating Health Minister Bronwyn Pike. But that was then and this is now – and a week from the election there is little visible evidence of runaway Green momentum, even here in their electoral heartland. Some of the shops have green triangles in the window, but they are mainly places like Soul Food, an organic cafe and hotbed of ferals.

When Gemma Pinnell arrives on a tour of the hustings, I ask her about the Indochinese voters in the nearby public housing tower blocks. She agrees that they will be a challenge. She is more optimistic about the gay vote, citing census data to the effect that Melbourne contains the third-largest concentration of same-sex couples of any electorate in Australia. Labor's stance on homosexual marriage gives the Greens a fair chance of picking up their votes, she believes.

With the election only days away, I get the nod to observe Pinnell's campaign committee at work. They meet in the Union Club Hotel, one of those old-style Fitzroy watering holes that have adapted incrementally to the changing demographic of the suburb. The pictures are kitsch but the beer is good.

At eight on a Tuesday evening, the joint is humming. In the lounge, a crowd of punters is hooting along to an amateur video, drinks in hand, toddlers underfoot. Out the back in the fibreglass-roofed courtyard, a mixed dozen Greens are scarfing down counter meals as they conduct their business. I recognise one of the faces from ALP circles.

As with the Labor team, the Greens talk revolves around the practicalities – letterbox drops and briefings for booth captains. The Greens style is less brisk, however, more easygoing. I have trouble identifying exactly who is doing the chairing. The topic turns to the recycling of how-to-vote cards. Cost is the concern

here as much as the environment. The Electoral Commission has promised to have a procedure in place but the Greens will have a back-up system.

As things are winding down, Gemma Pinnell arrives from a pitch to residents of the Collingwood public housing estate. Nam Bui, the Vietnam-born Greens candidate for the western suburbs seat of Gellibrand, was along to help. This is the tail end of a fifteen-hour day that began with an early morning meet-and-greet of rail commuters but Gemma is resolutely upbeat. Her aim remains fixed on a primary vote target in “the high twenties.”

Next day, I call the Labor defector, a former member of a key state policy committee. Ordinary members of the ALP have been voting Green in the Senate for years, he tells me. After *Tampa*, some let their Labor membership lapse and joined the Greens. Others began to assist the Greens while remaining within the Labor Party, in some cases while holding jobs in the apparatus. Naturally, such people would be unwilling to jeopardise their employment by speaking to me.

This cloak-and-dagger stuff is all very well, I suggested, but the drift of a few disillusioned supporters won't put much of a dent in Labor's cashed-up publicity campaign.

Ordinarily, on-the-street campaigning is crucial, he admits. Direct mail, letterboxing and so forth. In this case, however, Labor's big spend may well fuel growing public scepticism about the major parties.

But such talk is easy to dismiss as wishful thinking. The disillusionment of its own left has been a feature of the Labor Party since its inception. In the inner suburbs, this tendency has long been sustained by the social attitudes of successive waves of incoming renovators. As Labor moves inexorably and irredeemably to the right and an independent party of principle begins to emerge, it is inevitable that some on the Labor left are tempted to jump ship.

But while the “green line” is slowly creeping outwards from the inner city, it will soon reach the point where social activists and old lefties are thin on the ground. Out there, the battle lines are unambiguously Labor versus Liberal.

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Finally, Bob has arrived.

The location is Readings bookstore in Lygon Street, Carlton. The occasion is the launch of *Bob Brown: Gentle Revolutionary*, a new biography by journalist and Greens publicist James Norman. The election is now less than two days away.

The store is packed, the crowd craning for a view over rows of bookshelves. It’s the biggest turnout since Gough Whitlam, estimates proprietor Mark Rubbo. In the flesh, Brown looks younger than his media self, less drawn. If our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, Bob Brown’s is a well-maintained Presbyterian community centre.

He answers questions from the floor, speaking of his disappointment at Labor’s preference deal with Family First and deploring the scare campaign run by sections of the media, particularly the misrepresentation of the Greens’ harm-minimisation approach to drugs. When he begins to sign books, the line extends through Personal Development all the way to History. Some of the buyers were invited to the launch but others are merely passers-by, drawn by the activity. I can’t help but wonder if Green chances in Melbourne might have been improved had Bob Brown come to town more often.

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Just before the close of polls, I do a quick reconnaissance of the booths in my neighbourhood. The handers-out of Greens cards are making confident noises, but the Laborites are positively buoyant. “Last time, people practically spat on us. This time, they saw us as their best chance of getting rid of Howard.”

But it is Family First who catch my eye. They seem tentative, unfamiliar with the procedure. A high proportion of them are young Asians. The pair I approach identify themselves as “Australians for Christ.” They are not political, they say. They are “just helping a friend.”

Soon, it will be clear what friend they mean. But for now, there is nothing to be done but to witness the falling of the darkness and to go forth into the gathering gloom.