

Small parties hold the keys  
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Neither the Greens nor Victorian Nationals will "control" the Upper House after this month's state election, says BRIAN COSTAR

TO WIN a seat in the new-look Victorian Upper House, a candidate will have to win a quota of 16.6 per cent of the vote.

The likely outcome of this new system is that neither Labor nor the Liberals will gain a majority of Upper House members, and that smaller parties -- the Nationals and the Greens -- may share the balance of power.

This means that those Upper House members who belong to the Greens or Nationals will determine whether or not legislation over which the major parties disagree ultimately passes.

Some members of the business community, together with a number of outdoor recreation and timber groups, have expressed concern at the possibility of the Greens "controlling" the upper house. This is a misunderstanding of the realities of parliament.

A party with two or three members out of 40 will not be able to control the Legislative Council.

Most legislation passes without division and minor parties can exercise influence only when the major parties disagree.

In the event that the Greens put up "radical" motions, Labor, the Liberals and the Nationals would most likely combine to defeat them.

It's often overlooked that the system of proportional representation being used in the Upper House includes preferential voting.

Preferential voting almost obliges the parties to issue how-to-vote cards which duplicate the official ballot paper and indicate a set of preferences the party wants its supporters to follow.

This, in turn, encourages the parties to negotiate deals to exchange preferences to their mutual electoral advantage.

Provided that no financial inducements are issued, these arrangements are perfectly legal.

Preference allocations will be particularly important in the Upper House because, under the new voting system, the preferences of both major and minor parties will affect results.

Parties and candidates have until November 17 to submit their how-to-vote cards to the Victorian Electoral Commission for registration, but already there has been feverish speculation on who has done deals with whom.

Of course we won't know for certain until noon on November 25, but we can make some educated guesses.

The Liberals and the Nationals, despite not being in coalition, will preference one another.

Labor will probably prefer the Nationals to the Liberals but perhaps not in every seat.

Country Alliance will preference either of the non-Labor parties. The Democratic Labor party (yes, they still exist) will preference the Liberals, as will Family First.

And People Power will prefer the Greens.

The big question, of course, centres on Green preferences but tactically it's a no-brainer.

Why would the ALP not enter a preference deal with the Greens, when the latest ACNeilsen Poll has them on 13 per cent of the vote, compared with Family First's paltry 1 per cent?

Will the Liberal Party put strategy ahead of ideology and give their preferences to the Greens in seats such as Melbourne and Richmond, in the hope of unseating Health Minister Bronwyn Pike and Cabinet Secretary Dick Wynne?

Some Liberals may see compelling reasons to do just that.

The mechanics of the proportional voting system make it very difficult to be certain on which party or candidate will win fifth place in each of the eight Upper House regions, but let's be bold.

In Eastern Victoria, the result is likely to be Labor two, Liberal two and National one. (It is unlikely, but not impossible, that the Greens could snare one seat.)

In Northern Victoria, the same result is predicted, although there is a chance of the Nationals gaining an extra place.

In Western Victoria, the result looks like being Liberal three and Labor two but, again, the Nationals could secure a place at the expense of the Liberals.

Based on these predictions the Greens and Nationals will, for the first time in Victoria's history, collectively hold the balance of power in the Upper House.

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