

Social movements and political parties: conflicts and balance¹

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Abstract

The paper addresses aspects of the relationship between political parties and social movements, with a focus on the Australian Greens. It posits some of the limitations and possibilities of this relationship, arguing that it is a necessary one, both to social movements seeking to pursue their agendas through the political system, and to political parties needing to be open to broad public participation and to maintain strong links to on-the-ground issues. It concludes that the Australian Greens have sought to strike a balance between party and movement, recognising the limits of both.

Introduction

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries the Left was renowned for being strong on organisation while the conservative side of politics relied on money and media dominance to advance their causes. The term "organising" is not used here to mean "well organised" in progressive politics, organising is about a commitment to involve and empower people through democratic decision-making. The term organising in Left politics embodies the society that is strived-for (see Alinsky 1971; Bobo et al 2001).

Organising as a tool for building democratic structures and taking the message to a wider audience is at the core of progressive movements and political parties (Bronfenbrenner 1998; Doyle 2001). Without that commitment, focussed campaigns and progressive political parties will fail to bring about the far-reaching structural changes required to build a society free of exploitation of people and the environment (Kovel 2007; Panitch 2007). While right wing commentators and conservative politicians abuse the Left for a lack of democracy – and there have been dictators, big and small – a deep commitment to participatory democracy has characterised most progressive movements and political parties (see Maddison and Hamilton 2006). The Left should not be intimidated by right wing attacks, or prevented from acknowledging the contributions its

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forebears have made to the democratic process through a whole range of political movements.

These days the Left no longer holds a clear advantage in organising – the wider society including the corporate world has learnt that there is a great advantage in involving ones colleagues, developing the collective mind and respecting and taking up different ways of working. As with many changes in society brought about by a whole range of social, industrial and environmental campaigns, contemporary movements rarely analyse and even more rarely take credit for the progressive changes that they have initiated (see Newman 2006).

Organising on the Left remains a critical asset. Partly because the Left lacks the resources that the corporate world has access to, but, more importantly, successful and democratic organising is a core attribute for the progressive side of politics because it reflects the fairer more just society that it is committed to building (see Rose 2005). But organisers on the Left need to be aware of the contradictions that have regularly arisen in the relationship between Left parties and progressive movements.

While in most cases it is social and environmental movements that give the lead to Left parties and Left MPs, there are exceptions which highlight the fluid nature of this relationship. Because parliamentary political parties in most cases have access to more resources and more opportunity to influence public opinion than most political movements, progressive MPs and indeed all members of Left parties have a responsibility to ensure that enhancing progressive causes comes before party sectional interests. Political parties of the Left need to make sure that not only do they have healthy internal democratic practices but that they do not place their leaders and their party above the movements that give life to so many of the causes on which their policies are based.

This article explores a range of themes – historical and contemporary – that shed light on the relationship between social movements and political parties. It addresses the role

of social movements in driving political agendas, and the role of political parties in either constraining or promoting those agendas. While the focus is on the Labor and Green parties in Australia, there is also discussion of the negative role that social movements can play, in blocking social change.

History of struggle

Progressive political movements have a fine history. In the last few centuries the great advances that have been made are a result of actions taken by social and environment movements – people coming together in a range of organisational forms to agitate for change (Burgmann 2004). The achievements show that while political parties and politicians play an important role in achieving important progressive reforms, the impetus and the driving force comes from political movements, from the action of people being well organised.

The defeat of slavery, the winning of universal free public education, the right to strike and decent working conditions, women's rights and environmental protection are some of the momentous changes that have come out of social and environmental movements. Their method of organising and their achievements have resulted in fundamental shifts in how democracies operate (see Goodwin and Jasper 2003; Tarrow 1998).

Australian history is a history of struggle since the 1788 invasion occurred. Many of the convicts who were sent to penal servitude in Australia were political prisoners. The Chartists campaigning to extend the right to vote, the British naval mutineers who took a stand against the flogging of sailors opposed to the on-board inhuman standards, and the Irish rebels agitating for political separation for Ireland from England laid a basis for radical political struggle in Australia that carries through to today (McKinlay 1979b; Alexander and Griffiths 2003).

There were the decades of insurrection by many Aboriginal tribes across Australia against the domination of their land by the British Empire, although much of this history has only been documented in recent years. The struggles of Aboriginal Australia did not

fire up in 1788 and then wither until the freedom bus rides of the 1960s (Goodall 1996). Campaigns by Aboriginal people, often with support from white communities, form a great deal of the Australian political legacy. These movements of agitation and opposition have used a variety of organisational forms that over centuries maintained pressure on the status quo and resulted in considerable change. However, some of these achievements have been eroded by the Howard government and in part by the continuing intervention policy of the Rudd government (see Altman and Hinkson 2007).

While inequality and environmental destruction in this country remains extensive, the achievements of a range of social movements have been considerable, and something to be acknowledged and celebrated. Popular mass actions have played a key part in many of the most significant campaigns that have reshaped this country and its policies abroad.

In the 1960s and 1970s large demonstrations occurred around Australia against the Vietnam War and the apartheid regime. In 1982 thousands of people travelled to Tasmania to save the Franklin River (West 1993). Throughout the 1980s hundreds of thousands participated in anti-nuclear and peace movement actions. While all these activities started with a dedicated group of supporters they grew to become mass movements that attracted mainstream support and resulted in some important shifts in government policy (Doyle 2001; McPhillips 2002).

However, progress in many key areas has stalled or gone backwards. Despite the powerful Your Rights @ Work campaign (see McManus in this Issue), casualisation of the workforce and the watering down of key on-the-job rights continues; women's quest for equal pay is slipping with the gender pay gap widening since 2004 (Office for Women 2009); and a meaningful response to climate change and peak oil is limited in the wake of political pressure by the powerful fossil fuel industry (Pearce 2009).

The backsliding is a result of the fact that the movements that were drivers for social and environment change have in part been captured or subverted by government or

mainstream political powers. Goals have been tempered due to a range of financial and organisational constraints (see Madison in this Issue). More than ever, representatives of political parties need to be able to speak out and provide a radical lead. But for such a lead to bring meaningful change a broad-based movement is still needed to exert and maintain pressure on all political parties. At the same time, movements themselves, when acting on narrow sectional interests, can ossify and become roadblocks to change.

When movements become roadblocks

Divisions between movements - rights for women workers

While Australian trade unions have been at the forefront of many of the progressive struggles that have shaped Australian society there have been times when leading unionists have limited struggle and inhibited the achievement of a fairer society. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, trade union leaders in the meat and public transport industries stopped women achieving the right to do the same work as their male colleagues.

Clarrie O'Shea, the Victorian State Secretary of the Australian Tramway and Motor Omnibus Employees' Association, for two decades denied women tram workers the right to drive trams. This was the same Clarrie O'Shea who in 1969 became a household name when he was gaoled by [John Kerr](#) – who later became the infamous governor general who dismissed the Whitlam government - for refusing to pay \$8,000 in fines imposed on his union, which put him in contempt of the Industrial Court (McKinley 1979b; Milner 2009).

Today women do drive Melbourne trams. But the breakthrough did not come until 1975 when the women who were still fighting for their rights found support within the recently elected Whitlam Labor Government and the women's groups that constituted the 1970s second wave of feminism.

This new found support reinvigorated the campaign with women organising on a rank and file basis through the union. At the same time the Federal Minister for Labour Clyde

Cameron announced that he planned to ratify the International Labor Organisation Convention on Discrimination and that committees to investigate complaints would be set up. This turned up the heat on the union but it took another two years before Emma Zelinka became the first woman to drive a Melbourne tram (Windschuttle 1980)

So while the wider movement of rank and file union activists and women's groups were the driving force, the actions of a Labor Minister played a pivotal role in bringing sense to an out-of-date union leadership.

Divisions within a movement: greenwashing coal

In recent times the groups that make up the environment movement have adopted different tactics in their response to climate change. With about 40 percent of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions coming from mining and burning coal, the radical end of the environment movement have identified the need to target the coal industry and state and federal government policies that support this industry.

In 2007 and 2008 non-violent direct action aimed at stopping the expansion of the coal industry was initiated by a number of environment groups including Greenpeace Australia, Friends of the Earth and Rising Tide. The Australian Greens supported many of these actions with Greens MPs participating in protests against new coal projects.

Meanwhile, groups that are seen as part of the environment movement such as World Wide Fund for Nature and the Climate Institute, are backing key tactical manoeuvres of the coal industry such as carbon capture and storage technology (CCS) (WWF-Australia 2008). Their position on this controversial development is limiting the effectiveness of the growing campaigns to wind-back greenhouse gas emissions.

When WWF and the Climate Institute joined forces with the CFMEU Mining Division and the Australian Coal Association they were in fact engaging in a major greenwash project designed to attract government money for CCS projects based on unproven technology. The main purpose of this scheme is to reduce criticism of the coal industry,

and opposition to its expansion, by suggesting that it is possible to tackle global warming and still burn coal. Money put into this greenwash propaganda might have been instead directed to renewable energy projects to promote a low carbon economy and boost sustainable jobs.

The Australian Greens have worked to expose the deceptive tactics of the conservative end of the environment movement which has set itself up in partnership with the coal industry. Greens Senator Christine Milne was referring to WWF and the Climate Institute when she stated: 'Calling for the Government to take control of finding carbon dumping sites and carrying liability for leaks, let alone asking for tax incentives and accelerated depreciation for Australia's biggest and richest polluters, is simply untenable' (Milne 2008).

Greens Party – learning how to avoid the conservative trap

Differences between political parties and political movements can become sharp. Contradictions will always exist in such a relationship. The key is how to ensure the differences don't become so deep that they become irreparable, resulting in party leaders who fail to recognise that it is the actions of mass movements that open up the space for many of their own party policies to come to fruition, and the space to bring new members into party activity (Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 2002; Talshir 2002; Doherty 2002)

History is littered with examples of splits between progressive parties and their MPs. Too often the politicians tend to believe that they have the wisdom to take forward their party's platform and disregard the need to develop the synergy between their party and political movements.

While parliament as an institution embodies many important democratic principles it also exerts a conservative influence on the parties and the MPs that pass through the system. The progress of the Australian Labor Party since its creation in 1891 illustrates what happens to political parties that are captured by the parliamentary process.

In NSW 35 Labor MPs were elected to the state parliament in 1891, and Queensland and South Australia gained their first Labor MPs in 1893. But within a few years of this achievement tensions were developing over MPs who did not vote according to their party's policies, particularly with regard to improving on the job conditions for Australian workers (McKinlay 1979a).

The tension within the Labor Party and with wider political movements has become a characteristic of Australian politics. Over decades many activists and members of the public have expressed anger and disappointment because the ALP has not honoured party policy, or what the movement progressives expect should be their policy.

The current round of disaffection with the Rudd government that has taken hold within a year of the defeat of the Howard government is not surprising. The government's failure to abolish the Australian Building and Construction Commission and take meaningful action on climate change has angered many progressive voters. For over a century a pattern of disenchantment has been seen to set-in once Labor is in office – it emerges due to the minimalist approach they take to social change, and these days to environmental protection.

The Australian Greens have largely avoided this, at least for the past two decades that the party has had parliamentary representation. Some argue that this is because the party has not been in government, but considering Greens MPs have held the balance of power in various Australian parliaments, there have been many testing times. While it is a matter of speculation whether Greens MPs in the future will remain true to party policies, actions to date suggest that the Greens are well grounded in how to win seats in parliament while maintaining a radical stance in both policies and political activities (Lohrey 2002).

Greens MPs are developing the art of respecting the institution of parliament while retaining a radical edge in their approach to taking forward their party's agenda, and also

in reforming the functioning of parliament itself. The structure and origins of the Greens plays an important role in helping to maintain a healthy relationship between the party and progressive political movements (Doyle 2001).

The Australian Greens are a confederation of parties reflecting the different origins and approaches taken in the various states and territories (Turnbull and Vromen 2006). The first Greens Party in Australia was registered in Sydney in 1985. The Party policy document emphasised social equality and a just society, with support for a nuclear free, peaceful and sharing world; grassroots democracy; social freedom and equality for all people; a liveable city; and a sustainable and just economy, working in harmony with the natural environment. This document detailed that the members who formed the first Greens Party came from many backgrounds including "environmental and resident activists, nuclear disarmers, dissidents from the Labor Party, feminists, anarchists, those inspired by the German Greens, and Socialists of various kinds" (The Greens 1984).

This history has helped establish a healthy culture of maintaining a balance between parliamentary work and community activity (Dann 2008; Dalton *et al* 2003). The radical approach that the Greens have maintained on issues from refugee rights, to women's fights, to industrial relations and climate change is also reflected in the fact that most of the current crop of state and federal Greens MPs come from an activist background. Senator Bob Brown encapsulates this approach from his Franklin River protests to the famous action in 2003 when he and Senator Kerry Nettle publicly spoke out in the Senate while President George Bush was addressing federal parliamentarians (Kingston 2003).

In speaking about the Greens global view, Senator Brown has articulated the views of many in the progressive movement. In 2004 he stated, "I just think it's absolutely inevitable that there will be a popular movement to oppose market fundamentalism and extreme capitalism, that division we have between wealthy and poor people now. If the Greens don't succeed in doing that, someone else will, but the times will be more dire.

That's the real question – is the world going to move on through intelligence or catastrophe?" (Norman 2004)

Greens MPs maintain a close working relationship with progressive movements and themselves engage in tactics outside the usual parliamentary activities (Vromen and Gauja 2009). An examination of the work of state and federal Greens MPs and most Greens councillors reveals that they take their work far beyond the parliamentary boundaries of debates on legislation and committee work. Many of them spend a lot of time working with communities to achieve important environmental protection, rectify social inequalities and help build mass movements on key concerns.

Also the organisational structure of the Greens with its emphasis on grass roots democracy should help to maintain the party on the progressive end of the political spectrum. In the NSW Greens grass roots democracy delivers enormous power to local Greens groups whose members determine local preselection and preference decisions. All members can be involved in developing and determining policies (NSW Greens 2009).

Conclusion

In Australia there has been little analysis of the relationship between progressive movements and political parties. This needs to be addressed, to better understand the dynamics and possibilities of the relationship. History clearly demonstrates the leading role that movements play in shifting the public agenda, and opening up the space for far-reaching social and environmental reforms. Clearly these advances can be more far-reaching when progressive MPs and political parties work in unison to develop campaigns and effect change.

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