

A Turning Point for Australia

Article by Christine Milne

June 2, 2022

The recent federal election in Australia saw big wins for the Australian Green Party who received their best result to date. There was also a notable rise in the number of climate-conscious candidates winning seats. The climate sceptic former Prime Minister Scott Morrison will no longer lead his party nevermind the country. This growing climate-conscious political space could mark the beginning of the end for the two-party system. We interviewed former Australian Green Party Leader, Christine Milne, about what this election means Australia's future.

Green European Journal: Australia held general elections on May 21st. There'll be a new Labor government and it was also a record result for the Greens. Can you give an overall assessment of the election?

Christine Milne: It was a fantastic election for the Greens. To the point that we have picked up seats in Queensland – now dubbed “Greensland” by the media – which is one of Australia’s most conservative states. We picked up three more seats in the Senate to send 12 Greens to the federal Senate. We now have two from each of the states with two First Nations senators amongst them too. Adam Bandt, former leader of the Greens and representative of the seat of Melbourne, preelection held the only Green seat in the House of Representatives. We have now picked up three more lower house seats in Queensland’s capital Brisbane. We were also in close races for the seats of McNamara in Victoria, Richmond in New South Wales. And although ultimately unsuccessful, it augurs well for the next election. People are celebrating this terrific result across the country.

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Were climate issues a major part of the campaign?

In the lead up to the election we had very serious floods. Two years ago, we had terrible fires on the east coast of Australia. I don't think it is coincidental that support for Greens has been strongest in south-east Queensland and in northern New South Wales where flooding has been the heaviest. Greens have been leading the call for stronger climate action.

But still, climate was not a major issue in the election campaign because neither the major parties nor the Murdoch press wanted it to be. The Liberal, Labor and National parties as well as the Murdoch press support expanded coal and gas, and a major role for the fossil

fuel sector.

The focus on climate came from the non-governmental organisations, independent candidates, and the Greens. While the mainstream media focused on the economy, voters were engaged on climate debates that were taking place on social media and at the grassroots. After the election on Saturday night, several of the mainstream Labor people were saying “Oh, there seemed to be a people’s movement on climate.” Well yes, hello, if you’d actually been listening to the people you would have understood that.

Another issue that drives public support and progressive forces campaigned on was integrity in politics. Australia doesn’t have an Independent Commission Against Corruption for the public sector. Consequently, corruption is rampant, especially in the last period of government. We’ve had the revolving door of ministers leaving and going into very high-paid jobs that they obviously got because of connections between those private companies and their parliamentary work.

Another issue is inequality. Australia is experiencing a worsening crisis of inequality. Public services like schools, hospitals, public housing and welfare are on their knees while the wealthy are getting richer and many companies avoid paying any tax. On dental care, Greens campaigned on expanding the Medicare coverage that exists for children to adults. We also campaigned a lot on homelessness and the need for more public housing investments. It worked incredibly well to draw the connections between climate, inequality, and integrity in politics.

Pro-climate independents known as “Teals” also did very well. Who were these candidates?

The Teals belong to the Climate 200 movement which challenged right-leaning Liberals with independent women candidates. Teal became the colour of choice not only for their campaign merchandise but as a symbol of their liberal-green politics. They are blue in terms of their economic conservatism but green on climate and social policy. The Teals did brilliantly in the national elections and unseated several Liberals.

By campaigning strongly on integrity in politics and climate, they helped drive home Green causes. They also legitimised an issue that Greens have campaigned on for years: shared power arrangements. The Green position has been that shared power arrangements invite deliberation of different points of views and more inclusive outcomes. However, the Murdoch press has long sown fear about abolishing the two-party majoritarian model and labelled the green proposal extremist. With the Teals, we saw people who are essentially the centre-right publicly saying that if you want integrity in politics, we can’t have winner takes all; we need shared power and many Australians seem very open to this idea.

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How much influence will the Greens have over the new Labor government?

Labor has won a majority of 77 seats to form Government with just a 32.9 per cent of first preference votes. That means less than a third of the Australian population gave Labor their first preference and yet they will get 100 per cent of the power in the lower house. People are not going to take too kindly to them if they ignore the Greens and Teals in the negotiation of legislation.

It's going to be an interesting time. In the upper house there are the Greens with a block of 12 and Labor with 26. You need 39 to get something through the Senate so now it'll be Labor, the Greens and one independent. Labor will need the Greens in the Senate and that is where the Greens will have a lot of leverage, especially on increasing Labor's climate ambitions. Labor still supports opening 140 new coal mines, gas fracking in the Northern Territory known as the Beetaloo Basin and also opening the Scarborough gas field off northwest Western Australia. They are climate bombs. It's critical that the Greens can leverage their influence in the upper house on global climate negotiations.

What can we expect from a Labor government on climate action?

They have differentiated themselves from the previous Liberal government by saying they are ready to take urgent and strong climate action. They back this up with the support they have given to the transition to renewable energy and higher investments for a faster rollout of electric vehicles. They fail to address the other side of the coin which is all of the fossil fuel emissions that Australia is responsible for making it a major pariah globally. Nor have they talked about their support for logging native forests, which again is another huge emitter and cause of biodiversity loss. At least they have said climate change is real and we've got to address it but they have articulated a view which is about the technical renewable energy side, not the supply side of fossil fuels.

Australia has alienated its Pacific neighbours by refusing to reduce emissions even as rising water and extreme weather hit them. The new Labor government has said it wants to immediately improve dialogue with the Pacific and from the enthusiastic reception of Albanese at the recent Quad meeting in Japan it's clear this is already beginning. Also as the Solomon Islands has just signed a security arrangement with China, it is clear that climate action is now a geopolitical security issue in our relations with Pacific neighbours to counter growing Chinese influence in the region.

The impression Labor is giving to the world is that Australia is keen to get serious about climate but the reality is they refuse to adopt a science-based emissions reduction target and are persisting with a 45% reduction by 2030 which is way below the Paris Agreement goals. They are not prepared to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from coal and gas. Some of the old coal-fired power stations will fall over and Labor won't rescue them so at least there'll be more of a transition in energy generation. But when it comes to extraction and export, Australia is really vulnerable to criticism. The Greens have made it clear that we do not support any new coal mines and gas or an expansion of existing sites. But we are the only people in the parliament who are saying that so we will try and use whatever leverage we've got in the Senate to apply pressure.

We're going to need the rest of the world to put pressure on Australia. It's not enough to

just welcome Australia back into the [UNFCCC](#) with open arms. By all means welcome us back but also make it clear that Australia is expected to contribute its fair share to the global effort.

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Is there a role for the EU here? Australia's inaction on climate change and other troubles have put a free trade agreement with the bloc in the fridge.

Absolutely. Australia was quite terrified by EU discussions about cross border tariffs because it would be vulnerable under those circumstances. It is no coincidence that Australia has put so much effort into OECD appointments. The EU can expect the same level of effort in the World Trade Organisation talks on climate tariffs. The EU needs to have frank conversations about Australia's position on coal and gas in those trade negotiations. Unfortunately, the supply gaps opened by the war in Ukraine has created a short-term opportunity that Australian fossil fuel companies will be looking to seize. If there is one message I would convey to the EU, it is that the EU needs to use every bit of leverage it has, including the free trade agreement negotiations to ensure Australia understands that its ongoing expansion of coal and gas is a huge impediment to restored relations.

Fossil fuels make up a massive part of the Australian economy, including where the Greens did well like Queensland, and you have mentioned that the Greens are the only ones that question whether their continued exploitation is environmentally viable. How have the Greens managed to win support in areas that depend heavily on carbon extraction for their economic wellbeing?

Well, we haven't. We won those seats in Brisbane. It's the capital city of Queensland and we won in the cities, as we also did in Melbourne. The Greens vote is higher the closer you get to the centre of the biggest cities because this is where the universities are, where tertiary education institutions are, where the younger demographic is and where professional women are. Professional women have been very significant in changing the government because they are sick of the misogyny, corruption and lack of action on climate.

It was also the area most affected by the horrendous floods. Greens used our door knocking teams to provide food to flood affected areas and to help with the clean up of people's homes. Greens were seen to be part of the local community ready to help in a practical way in a climate crisis.

The Greens vote – and I suspect this is the same the world over – is always highest in the cities. Once you get to the coal mining and gas exploration regions of Australia, Greens have fewer votes. We have not won seats in those mining areas like in the Pilbara in Western Australia or in the Galilee Basin in Queensland where all these big coal mines are. The reality is we have been well supported by educated people in the cities who want action on climate change. However, people who fear that their jobs are at risk in the regions

continue to vote for the parties that support those jobs.

The Australian Greens know a just transition is critical and we have always supported it. Australia has some of the best renewable energy resources in the world. Some of the mining regions have excellent wind and solar resources and so the Greens have been working to try to convert some of those areas from fossil fuel extraction to generating renewable energy. Where that's happening, we're seeing a shift in people's focus and future vision. Some unions are also recognising that there's no future in fossil fuel extraction and they are looking at just transition packages to transform those regions into renewable energy hubs.

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Scott Morrison, who has been ousted, was often spoken about in the same breath as Bolsonaro and Trump. Like the UK and US, the Murdoch press spends a lot of time on culture wars and climate-sceptic news coverage. How will this election change the political conversation in Australia?

Murdoch enjoys a media ownership monopoly in Australia. He owns the main newspaper outlets in capital cities. In Hobart, where I live, and in Brisbane, he owns the only newspaper. We also have Sky News, a Fox News equivalent that parrots the same lines as you would find in any of Murdoch's UK or US outlets. These outlets share advisors, messaging, even the same people running the campaigns travel the world of conservative parties. There are also the think tanks – the Heartland Institute and the Koch Brother Institute for example.

This is what we're up against. A silver lining is that one of the most outrageous of the right-wingers, Clive Palmer, spent 100 million Australian dollars on right-wing advertising at this election, not only all through the Murdoch press but everywhere else right down to text messages on election day etc, and didn't get anyone elected. That is the first time I've ever seen a major spend not buy seats. It's quite extraordinary. People have become incredibly cynical about the mainstream media in Australia because of Murdoch.

We've also seen our national broadcaster – the ABC – which people have long revered, cowed by the previous government. They changed the board and the ABC has become quite conservative and doesn't run stories for fear of government and corporate retribution. With the change of government, we're hoping that they can return to more independent journalism. I'm quite hopeful that this election has made a government inquiry into media ownership in Australia and misleading advertising a priority. I think media reforms will follow and the media will begin to rethink what constitutes journalism and a free press.

In this divisive climate, Morrison happily engaged in culture wars. In addition to expressing extreme views on Pentecostalism particularly, he appointed several Pentecostals to his cabinet. When they thought it would win votes for them, they attacked transgender people

for example. Then when it looked like all was lost, suddenly, on election day of all days, they announced that two boats from Sri Lanka carrying asylum seekers had arrived on Australia's shores. Text messages went out to everybody's phones across the country saying these boats have been apprehended off Australia's coast and if you vote Labor the boats are going to start again.

They became so desperate that they would invoke turn back the asylum seekers as a last-ditch effort! They tried everything: from religious culture wars, to attacks on refugees and sexual minorities. I think Australians are completely over it. When people got those text messages saying the boats had arrived, people at the polling stations I visited called it "pathetic, absolutely pathetic." People even began to question whether the Australian government had set up these boats to leave Sri Lanka to arrive in time for the election. That's how cynical the public is and has a right to be. The new government has said it will investigate the case. Should it uncover Australia's involvement, that would show you just how low Australian politics has sunk.

Where next for the Green Party and movement that is behind it?

The electoral success is a means to an end and the end is, of course, to address inequality in Australia and to address global warming because if we don't address that the rest of it is a pyrrhic victory. What's next for the Greens? I think continuing to improve the integrity of the parliament as we pursue an end to fossil fuel extraction during this period of government and consolidating the new opportunities that an end to the old two-party system will bring.

We also need to continue to build the base in cities while getting out to the regions. My advice has always been to hold the inner city, go out and get the bush, then come back for the suburbs. The bush has a lot in common with the Greens because they are directly impacted by climate-induced fire, floods, droughts, and economic transition. There is a tremendous movement of progressive people, the Farmers for Climate Action for example, who desperately want serious action on climate and biodiversity. I think that our job will be to expand that level, to win more seats in the inner cities, but also work with the Climate 200 movement – to drive momentum for climate action.



Christine Milne AO is the Global Greens Ambassador. She was appointed following a long career in Green politics in Australia (1989-2015) serving in the national Parliament as Senator for Tasmania and Leader of the Australian Greens. She is Patron of the Smart Energy Council of Australia, Ambassador for the Invasive Species Council, Board Member of The Climate Mobilization and Advisory Board Member of Solar Heads of State, Climate Accountability Institute.

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