

Greens rob Labor of its inner-city heartland



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The Labor Party held the seat of Melbourne from 1904 to 2010. It held it through the split over conscription and through the split over communism. Over 106 years, it was never troubled by conservative candidates.

The inner city suburbs of Carlton, Fitzroy and Collingwood were solid working class territory. Now the workers can no longer afford to live there; the university-educated professionals and academics have moved in. If anything, they are even more hostile to the Liberal Party. This is a wasteland for Liberal candidates.

The Liberal Party has been wringing its hands in the past few weeks about how to allocate its preferences in such electorates. In Melbourne, in the 2010 federal election, it preferred the Greens before Labor just like it did in the 2007 election.

Some say that, in the coming Victorian election, the Liberals should preference Labor ahead of the Greens to keep the Greens out of these seats and Labor in. John Brumby, the Labor Premier, is urging that.

It is pretty obvious why. He says the Liberals should not preference a far-left party like the Greens – which is precisely what he intends to do – but preference the Greens ahead of Liberals in every seat that Labor contests.

John Howard bought into the argument, saying that because the Greens were worse than Labor, the Liberals should not preference them, which is precisely the reverse of what the Liberal Party did when he was leader.

In 2007, the Liberal candidate in

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Melbourne got about 23 per cent of the vote and directed her preferences to Adam Bandt. Bandt lost because Labor's first preference vote was 49.5 per cent and Lindsay Tanner got across the line.

But in 2010, Labor's first preference vote sank to 38 per cent. Bandt's vote rose to 36 per cent. This time he got home on the Liberal preferences.

The reason Labor lost Melbourne is not because of any change in Liberal preferences. It is because more than a fifth of those who voted Labor in 2007 deserted to the Greens in 2010. These are Labor's heartland seats. If Labor cannot get a vote above 45 per cent it cannot expect to win them.

The case of Bandt illustrates Labor's generational demise. Bandt was a Marxist student leader, who was elected to the national student union. He worked for the labour lawyers Slater & Gordon, but ended up joining the Greens. His CV is almost identical to that of Julia Gillard but she joined the Socialist Left of the ALP.

Gillard is 10 years older. Her generation of left-wing student activists joined Labor. The next generation will join the Greens. The traditional base of Labor's Socialist Left is defecting.

The rise of the Greens now threatens Labor in four inner Melbourne state seats it holds. Suppose the Liberal Party breaks its long-standing practice and decides to preference Labor in those seats. That will save those four inner-city Labor MPs but what will it mean for the Liberal Party?

It will mean Labor can release all of the resources that would otherwise be tied up fighting Greens to campaign against the Liberal Party in the suburbs; in marginals where the Liberal Party really does have a chance of winning.

And free from the need to hold its heartland, Labor would be able to reposition itself with more conservative policies to appeal to the suburban voter; policies that would be death in its struggle with the Greens.

Labor is fighting on two fronts. It wants its enemy on the right to give it a truce on the left. In the tied federal election, the Liberal Party held – indeed, improved – its vote. The rise of the Greens came at the expense of Labor. The Greens are ripping apart Labor's primary vote.

If Greens are unsuccessful, their votes flow to Labor via preferences. If they are elected, as Bandt showed, they help Labor form government.

Inner-city voters have figured out that voting Green is a way to protest against Labor.

The level of protest should worry Labor. It is eating away a base that was once rock-solid. A party that cannot hold its base is headed for long-term decline.

Peter Costello is a former Liberal treasurer.