

# Greens take moral high road – and finish last



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**T**wo days out from the Higgins byelection Malcolm Mackerras, Australia's leading psephologist, predicted a Greens victory. Mackerras not only knew the result, he knew the reason for it, forecasting the Liberal candidate would be defeated because of the "arrogance" of the resigning MP and the elevation of Tony Abbott.

When the poll was declared on Monday, the Liberal vote had in fact increased. Mackerras has moved on to other predictions. But the forecast excited the Greens leader, Bob Brown, enough for him to make a whistlestop tour before the ballot, hoping to associate himself with the victory. He appeared in the Melbourne suburbs to tell the media about the concerns of local voters. Surprisingly, they were all his pet policy projects.

I was with the Liberal candidate, Kelly O'Dwyer, that day. The press smelled a rat. "Haven't you been forced into the electorate to counter Bob Brown?" one journalist asked me. I pointed to my former office nearby, explained I had lived in the area for 20 years and that we were in my local shopping centre. "I don't travel here, I have to travel to get out of here," I replied. It was clear the media momentum was on the side of Brown.

It is hard to think of circumstances more propitious for the Greens: a

sympathetic press, no Labor candidate, a Liberal leadership spill, parliamentary debate on the emissions trading legislation and the media focus on Copenhagen. And Abbott, as new Liberal leader, didn't get time for a visit. Still the Greens fluffed it.

This did not stop Brown declaring a great triumph. As usual, there has been little critical appraisal of his performance. So what went wrong?

In contrast to the Liberal candidate, who was outstanding, the Greens chose a bad candidate. Their central command overrode local supporters to impose someone who lived in Canberra. Most people think an MP should represent locals to Canberra. The Greens had the idea they could represent Canberra back to the locals. And what a representative. When it comes to alarmism, Clive Hamilton is almost without peer.

These days he preaches destruction from climate change. In 2000 Hamilton forecast the GST would kill people on the roads – 65 a year – because it would lead to increased motor vehicle use and pollution. That means the GST has caused well over 500 deaths by now, which is nothing like the body count Hamilton is forecasting from global warming. But it is still a decent set of fatalities he can lay at the feet of the Liberal Party.

Secondly, some Labor voters – particularly among lower-income earners – will not vote for the Greens. To maximise their joint position, the Greens and Labor need to run three-cornered contests, like the Liberals and Nationals do in regional electorates. The Liberal campaign was assisted mightily by Labor's decision

not to run.

Thirdly, the Greens have to scale down the sanctimony. They thrive on a message of impending doom. These days the cataclysm is global warming. Previously it was logging, or nuclear annihilation. Only by repentance and obedience to their doctrine can we escape the wrath to come.

But educated people are a little less credulous than that. They know in political policy, outcomes rarely match the promises, particularly the overblown promises of zealous activists. They know that moral absolutists rarely deliver what they promise.

The Greens have a moral superiority complex. In their mind they are not only right but virtuous, which makes their opponents not only wrong but immoral. This is why Hamilton has compared climate sceptics with Holocaust deniers – if you disagree with his policies you are complicit in, or covering, up mass murder. Robert Manne, who launched the campaign for Hamilton, put it this way: "If the Greens can achieve a breakthrough in the byelections ... [this] might come to be seen as a turning point in the moral history of this country."

In Melbourne on December 5 electors could have turned to good from evil, to Green from Liberal. Instead, by voting Liberal out of concern for their children's education, or for the lack of aged care, or for their job or business, they demonstrated moral inferiority.

One day it might dawn on Brown, Manne and Hamilton that voters do not like moral condescension. Sanctimony can make you feel good, but it rarely appeals to those listening.