

Opinion

Upper house control influences agenda

Green vote power



The greening of Victorian politics is being driven by what might happen at the next state election, argues PETER HUNT

THE December 2006 Victorian election may seem eons away.

But its impact has already hit country Victoria.

During this term of Government, Labor has passed legislation dramatically reducing the conservative parties' chances of regaining control of the upper house.

But in doing so, Labor gave the Greens the chance to hold the balance of power in the upper house after the next election.

This has major implications for country Victorians, who are witnessing the loss of access to their land, water and forests as Labor responds to Green demands.

After the 2002 election, Labor gained control of both the upper and lower houses. It was a landslide win, which Premier Steve Bracks and his ministers knew they were unlikely to repeat.

Prior to that election Labor had only held a working majority in the upper house for three months in its history.

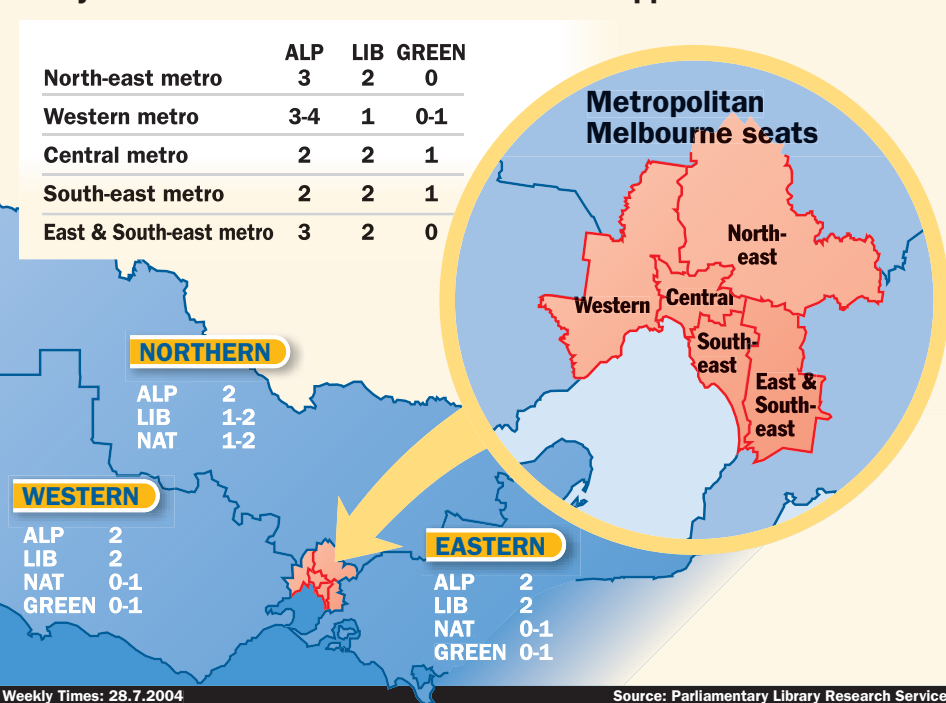
Steve Bracks knew the former Cain and Kirner Labor Governments had been dogged by Liberal and National Party MPs, who used their upper house majorities to frustrate Labor and weaken its legislative reforms.

So Mr Bracks and his ministers grabbed the opportunity to weaken the power of the conservatives and introduce proportional representation in the upper house, which delivers a seat to any candidate who can gain 16.7 per cent of the vote.

Instead of just one MP elected from each of 44 electorates, proportional representation

Upper hand

Likely distribution of seats under Victorian Upper House reforms



allows Victorians to elect five MPs in each of eight electorates (a total of 40 MPs).

Analysis by Monash University academic Brian Costar and researcher Greg Gardiner has shown that under these reforms Labor would win 19-20 seats in the upper house, the Liberals 14-15, the Nationals one to four and the Greens two to five (based on the 2002 election result).

No party would hold a majority in its own right.

But the Greens are likely to hold the balance of power.

This fact has driven Labor to try to regain control of the green agenda, rather than let more votes slip further into the Greens' hands.

Some Liberals have argued Labor may even be negotiating a preference swap with the Greens, but this seems unlikely since the majority of preferences already flow to Labor.

It also seems, at this stage, that the Greens are unwilling to preference Liberal ahead of Labor.

This means the influence of green politics will continue to rise.

That has serious consequences for country Victoria.

Many of the Greens' primary demands are based on locking up the state's resources — water, land and vegetation.

And that is exactly what Labor is doing.

There is the creation of new national and marine parks, the ban on even conducting co-existence trials on genetically modified crops, the decision to review the future of alpine grazing, and the claw-back of water from irrigators for the Gippsland Lakes, the Murray and other northern rivers.

And there's more to come, with the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council preparing to assess the future of logging in East Gippsland's Goolengook old-growth forests as well as grazing, and forestry in the Barmah and other red gum forests along the Murray.

But it's not all bad news for country Victoria when it comes to Labor's upper house reforms.

The Constitution (Parliamentary Reform) Act 2003 could finally lead to the upper house developing a

committee system similar to that in the federal Senate, which offers the community real input into reviewing Government legislation.

While the Liberals and Greens may not agree on policy, they may agree to form a committee to review Labor legislation.

Lobby groups and the general public would then have an opportunity to argue for bills to be amended or rejected.

The federal Senate committee system is proof of that fact and is a powerful means of, as the Democrats used to say, "Keeping the bastards honest".

Many Australians vote for a major party in the lower house (House of Representatives) at the federal election, but then support a minor party (Democrats or Greens) in the Senate.

It will be interesting to see if Victorians develop a similar view, in a bid to establish an upper house that is a real house of review.

• Peter Hunt is *The Weekly Times* state political reporter.

Sustainability is election priority

THE Victorian Farmers Federation's recent attack on green policies is confirmation the Greens have made sustainability an election issue.

The Greens believe sustainability should be as central to this election as it is to our future.

The ability to sustain our environment, maintain employment, stop families and their farms being driven into the ground, secure adequate water supplies, maintain the integrity of our quarantine and obtain decent farm gate prices for produce are central to a safe, stable and secure future.

As are dealing realistically with drought caused by climate change, and supporting struggling rural communities and medical and telephone services in rural and regional areas.

It was not the Greens who made the decisions that concern most regional Victorians.

The Greens did not decide to introduce the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement, to deregulate the dairy industry, to place a toxic waste dump in Nowingi or to sell Telstra.

These and many other decisions that have divided rural communities were made by Labor or Coalition governments and strongly opposed by the Greens.

Why then has VFF president Paul Weller not stood up to Labor or the Coalition for Victorian farmers and rural Victorian communities?

More recently, Mr Weller attacked the Greens as a threat to farmers' lifestyles, while endorsing an irresponsible \$14 billion dollar tax cut giveaway reserved for people earning over \$52,000 a year.

How many people in rural and regional Victoria earn that sort of money?

There is little doubt the



The Greens will make sustainability an election issue, writes DAVID RISSTROM

Greens' political influence is growing.

Many Australians respect the fact the Greens stand up for what we believe in and offer an optimistic future.

We are constantly sold the mantra by the VFF and the major parties that an anything-goes free market approach will benefit us all.

While it may benefit some, especially multinational conglomerations, many others, like the family farm, are often sacrificed.

The deregulation of the dairy industry is an example.

The ones who benefited most are the large supermarket chains.

As farmers have recognised for many years, Australia needs a sustainable future.

We need to acknowledge our environment is a fragile and limited resource.

We need to think about the heritage we leave our children and take action to secure it.

The Greens believe a sustainable future is possible but needs the will and courage of our leaders.

The challenge for the VFF is to have the courage to recognise what the future requires and make the choice of a long-term sustainable future for all Victorians.

• David Risstrom is a Greens Senate candidate for Victoria.

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