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The Realities of a Hung Parliament

“If you don’t live in a marginal seat, the next best thing is to have an Independent MP in a hung Parliament.”

By Michele Levine, Gary Morgan & Julian McCrann

Since the Federal election we have seen much discussion and negotiation between the leaders of both major parties and the Independents – to see who could form a Coalition or combined Government.

Today we look at this from the point of view of the electorate(s).

It is easy to forget that each of the Independent participants is there at the negotiating table – not as an individual but as the voice of their constituency – the people who elected them. So what matters in the 4 country seats of Kennedy (QLD), New England and Lyne (NSW) and O’Connor (WA)? And what matters to electors in Melbourne and Denison (Hobart)?

At a very fundamental level, electors in the 4 country areas are older, more likely to be retired, less affluent and more socially conservative than the Australian population as a whole – and are diametrically opposed to most of the socially progressive values and attitudes of electors in Melbourne and policies of the Greens.

If we were looking for the Greens and Independents to form a ‘happy’ Coalition, **that’s not going to happen**, but what about a Coalition of the Independents with Julia Gillard Labor (and the Greens) or Tony Abbot Liberal and National Parties.

The key policy priorities for the voters in the country electorates are:

- Health (34%)
- open and honest Government (18.5%)
- the economy (18.5%)
- needs of families (18%)
- reducing taxes (17.5%)

In these they are not so different from the rest of Australia. But some 12% say the key priority is looking after the **needs of people outside cities**. (This is mentioned by less than 2% in Melbourne and Denison)

The key policy issues for electors in the seat of Melbourne (and the Greens) are global warming (31.5%) and the environment (27.5%) followed by health (24.5%), education (20.5%) and the economy (19%). In Denison health (35%) is the biggest issue (Denison Independent Andrew Wilkie has demanded increased funding for Royal Hobart Hospital as part of his list of demands) ahead of climate change (26%).

Today's Liberal-National Coalition is quintessentially conservative so there is a natural fit with the conservative values of the 4 country electorates. While the Coalition is generally seen as better for looking after the needs of people in the country – today the National Broadband Network (NBN) is a powerful symbol of needs of people outside cities – and Julia Gillard's Labor Government owns that issue – at least for the moment.

The Liberal Party's fundamental 'free market' values are also symbolically and practically deeply opposed by Bob Katter and the others. However if the 'free market' discussion is related to 'jobs' there will be more chance of understanding on both sides.

The Labor Party could more easily be seen to meet the needs of Melbourne and Denison.

Wednesday's announcement (September 1, 2010) of a new pact between the Labor Party and the Greens – with the Greens pledging to support a Labor Government and guaranteeing 'Supply' in return for Labor promises on climate change, dental healthcare, Parliamentary reforms and other issues - is really no surprise given the clear synergies between many Labor and Greens policies.

Andrew Wilkie's decision on Thursday (September 2, 2010) to back a Labor Government after Gillard's pledges to implement poker machine reform and also increase national hospital funding – including the Royal Hobart Hospital in Denison – is also not a surprise given the desires of the Denison electors.

But Labor needs at least two of the three Conservative Independents support as well.

More than 35 years ago, a Roy Morgan Paper, "[A New Look at the Australian Voter](#)" showed the Country Party (today National Party) voter **was in many ways closer to Labor than Liberal** – working class country people were similar to blue collar working class city people – both were inherently conservative and 'identifying with the struggle.'

In the 4 country seats Labor is seen as better for health, education, fair workplace condition, and the ageing population. So there is potential for shared interests.

However today's Labor Party is very different to the Labor Party of 35 years ago – it comprises both the traditional working class family **and** the affluent, socially progressive, small 'l' liberal voter who has a global perspective. This latter group is an important segment of voters that Labor needs to hold. Julia Gillard has already been criticised for having an internal Australian focus – rather than an international focus – so a move toward 'protectionism' that would engage the Independents risks alienating the other group.

In a 'funny' way the Independents may give Labor the 'wriggle room' they need to make changes to proposed policies that they wish they hadn't proposed. We have already seen the Citizens Assembly on climate change dropped as part of a pact with the Greens. The Mining Tax is opposed by WA and QLD electors in mining areas, and reducing taxation is an important issue for all country electors.

The proposed Epping – Parramatta railway in Sydney clearly is not a good symbol of concern for the needs of people outside the cities.

Whichever party truly embraces the needs of the Independents and their country electorates will naturally create a 'gap' for the Greens and small 'I' liberals.

If Julia Gillard Labor is the final outcome – the big challenge will be 'the environment and climate change,' managing an electorate comprised of city 'Greens' and rural electors who prima facie have diametrically opposed views on climate change.

Although Julia Gillard's proposed citizens assembly on climate change was greeted with disdain by all sides of politics, and was dropped last Wednesday, it will be crucial to find shared ground on the issue of the environment, and to create a shared language.

The current language of the 'environment' is very 'socially aware' and global – ranging from carbon prices, alternative energy sources, preservation of parks, and wilderness and eco-tourism. It is not the language of country people. Yet for country electors, the issue of the environment is perhaps even more important to country electors – but is described in terms of – sustainable land-use, water management, and discussed in terms of the very practical problems associated with the degradation of farming and agricultural land.

If a shared language can be found to discuss the care of Australia's environment, it will be a major step forward for any Coalition of a major Party with Independents and/or the Greens.

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Most Important Issues for Electors in Six Key Seats

Electors were asked: “Which three issues are the most important to you (Mark the three most important issues)”

	All Australians	TOTAL 4 Country seats	Country Electorates				City Electorates	
			Kennedy	New England	Lyne	O’Connor	Denison	Melbourne
			QLD	NSW	NSW	WA	TAS	VIC
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Improving health services and hospitals	30	34	37.5	31.5	34.5	31.5	35	24.5
Managing the economy	21.5	18.5	18.5	17.5	23	16	20	19
Reducing the taxes you and your family pay	17.5	17.5	22	18	14	16.5	13	8
Open and honest government	16	18.5	21.5	20.5	18	15	18.5	13
The needs of families	16	18	17.5	19.5	18.5	16.5	14.5	2.5
Improving education	14.5	12.5	13	13.5	13	10.5	21	20.5
Global warming and climate change	14	9.5	6.5	9	13.5	9.5	26	31.5
Fair workplace and unemployment regulations	14	13.5	14.5	12	16	11	12.5	12
Looking after the environment	13.5	12	10	13	13	11.5	18	27.5
Australia’s aging population	12	15	13.5	15.5	16	14.5	11	6.5
Reducing crime and maintaining law	11.5	11	10	9	12	13	9	4.5
Making decisions based on principle & integrity	10.5	10	9	9.5	11.5	10.5	9.5	16
Reducing unemployment	9	8.5	9.5	10.5	10.5	3.5	9.5	5.5
Innovative approaches to solving Australia’s problems	7.5	6.5	3.5	7.5	8	5.5	7.5	10.5
Defence and national security	7	7.5	10	5.5	7.5	7	5	4.5
The needs of people outside cities	4	12	11.5	11.5	12	12.5	2	0.5
Improving business in Australia	5.5	5	6	4	7.5	2.5	4	7.5

Note: Respondents were able to nominate up to three issues.

5,146 electors were interviewed in these 6 electorates between January 2008 – June 2010. 1,145 electors in Kennedy (QLD), 763 electors in New England (NSW), 775 electors in Lyne (NSW), 929 electors in O’Connor (WA), 849 electors in Denison (TAS) and 685 electors in Melbourne (VIC).

Bob Katter (IND) is the Member for Kennedy (QLD), Tony Windsor (IND) is the Member for New England (NSW), Rob Oakeshott (IND) is the Member for Lyne (NSW), Tony Crook (WA-NAT) is the Member for O’Connor (WA), Andrew Wilkie (IND) is the Member for Denison (TAS) and Adam Bandt (GRN) is the Member for Melbourne (VIC).