



Is it better to vote for an Independent or a Green?

BY LOUISE CROSSLEY

The idea of politicians thinking and acting independently, rather than as mindless cogs in a political machine, is appealing to many people.

As a Greens member, I am active in a seat with a sitting Independent MP and sometimes have to justify my membership of a political party to progressive and environmentally aware friends. Younger people especially often feel that organising in groups somehow makes politics cynical and unworthy. Even the Greens are accused of being 'greedy for power', simply by running for election.

This view can undermine our democratic process by discouraging people from voting at all. But mostly it can influence political outcomes by making Independents seem a more attractive option – perhaps removed from the 'taint' of political parties?

Recently in Australia, John Ralston Saul made his view known. He urged people to join and influence democratic political parties, particularly young people. He asserts that political party organisations are the most direct path for social reform: "change is made by the people who hold power...if you don't take power in the legislature, you can't change policy."

This is a refreshing message for Australia, where we regularly hear about the trend to keep 'politics' at arm's length. A drip feed of media reports expand on the theme that "political parties have a bad name; they've become a turn-off for the young, many of whom want to engage only on an ad hoc issue-by-issue basis."

But where's the substance behind this negative perception? Is there any evidence that an Independent delivers more for his/her electorate than a representative from a political party? And what about the reform and change that environmentally aware voters want – who can best deliver that?

To find out, I compared the Parliamentary performance of Adam Bandt, Green Party MP for Melbourne, with Andrew Wilkie, Independent MP for Denison. In September 2010, they were both elected for the first time as members of the House of Representatives in the 43rd Federal Parliament.

On several measures, I found significant differences in their Parliamentary performance from September 2010 to June 2012:

- Total number of speeches made in Parliament: Bandt 120, Wilkie 49
- Number of Second Reading speeches (the main opportunity for MPs to make policy statements on proposed legislation): Bandt 42, Wilkie 6
- Number of amendments to legislation proposed: Bandt proposed 16 packages of amendments – including Greens' changes to social security laws, work health and safety laws, a coal seam gas bill, and improvements to the coverage and impact of the mining tax; Wilkie proposed two packages of amendments – one of which was to reduce the number of mining companies that have to pay the mining tax, even though there are no mining companies in his electorate.
- Number of motions proposed: Bandt 21, Wilkie 2
- Adjournment debates: Bandt 8, Wilkie 3
- Constituency and Member's Statements: Bandt 16, Wilkie 10
- Private Members Bills (proposed new laws sponsored by the MP): Bandt 12, Wilkie 4

These figures suggest that in terms of Parliamentary work, the Independent is totally out-performed by the Greens MP.

Importantly, the figures also indicate that the Independent has a narrower policy scope, and a reduced ability to influence a range of national discussions in the Parliament. Of Wilkie's six Second Reading speeches, half were simply to utter a sentence in support of amendments by others.

In contrast, the scope of Bandt's 42 Second Reading contributions is very broad – the topics covered his Greens party portfolio areas, and also debates around climate change, social security, schools assistance, telecommunications, migration, higher education, cybercrime, and family assistance.

In some of the major Parliamentary debates where many MPs spoke, Wilkie chose not to speak at all. For example, 140 MPs spoke about the historic Clean Energy Bill, yet Wilkie made no speech to express the

views of his constituency about any of Australia's new climate change policy. In a green-leaning seat like Denison, this would be extremely disappointing to his electorate.

The content of Constituency and Member's Statements makes it clear that Bandt consults widely in his electorate to address issues such as withdrawal of funding for adult education and neighbourhood houses, the needs of migrant groups for recognition and support, the local impact of high voltage transformers, and employment issues.

Wilkie on the other hand appears less concerned with issues in his own electorate, but rather refers to more general Tasmania-wide issues such as health care or the pulp mill; and conspicuously uses his Federal platform to criticize the State government.

The quantitative and qualitative data suggest that an electorate may be better served by a hard-working MP who is part of an active democratic party, than by an Independent (no matter how hard-working) with no parliamentary team or party structure as support.

Resourcing of individual MPs is not at issue – all have the same number of staff. However, a Greens MP has access to party room discussions and the ability to share the expert knowledge and wide experience of another nine Greens parliamentarians.

This is by no means a comprehensive analysis – other Independents compared to other party representatives in other jurisdictions may reveal a different story. However, these data do suggest that an Independent representative may be significantly less able to cover not only the electorate's specific concerns, but also a wide range of issues at the national level. Both measures should be regarded as important indicators of democratic health.

This in turn suggests that voters, our democracy and

our chance of creating reform for a more sustainable Australia, will be better served by electing a Green than an Independent where the choice is available.

Those who romanticise the role of Independents are in danger of endorsing an 'anti-party' political system which would have no policies apart from trying to get a candidate elected, and favouring issues with simplistic popular appeal.

Political parties are easy to blame for a range of ills, but they actually perform the essential democratic function of creating the connection between politics and society. They pick

up demands from society, evaluate the issues, and shape them into policy alternatives through a process of extensive discussion by party members and their representatives. This ensures there are different choices in the political 'marketplace' – an essential characteristic of democracy.

Of course, Independents also make an important contribution to the marketplace of political ideas, but are less able to provide democratic input to their work and create robust policy alternatives. In the next Parliament, where it is likely that Independents will no longer hold the balance of power, they could easily be excluded from legislative power and decision-making.

Green-minded voters want their MPs to implement progressive and ecologically sustainable policies, and counter-balance the group-think of the major parties. Their choice is clear. Expanding the Greens team in our Federal Parliament will deliver more than an assortment of isolated Independents ever could. ▲

Louise Crossley was a founding member of the Tasmanian and Australian Greens; the first Convenor of the former and the second Convenor of the latter. She ran for the Senate in Tasmania in 1998, and coordinated the Global Greens Charter in 2001.

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