24. Environmental Issues and the 2010 Campaign

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The 2010 campaign was notable for its dearth of significant environmental policy announcements and coverage of environmental issues. Despite this, there were pronouncements by the major parties on climate change, the Murray–Darling Basin, population, marine parks, the Queensland Government’s Wild Rivers legislation and forestry and conservation measures. From this list of issues, however, it is difficult to divine a unifying theme; and Bean and McAllister’s chapter in this volume also indicates that the environment trailed bread-and-butter issues such as health and Medicare, the economy and education as significant issues for voters. This all stands in contrast with the 2007 election, in which the government’s response to climate change and management of the nation’s water systems were front-of-mind issues for many voters and thus garnered sustained media attention.

Climate Change Responses

Climate change was one of the two major policy areas that saw Kevin Rudd swept to power in November 2007 (the other being industrial relations). Indeed, as Opposition Leader, Rudd had done much to paint John Howard as a ditherer on the issue. In government, Rudd was initially successful: he quickly ratified the Kyoto Protocol and travelled to the Bali Conference (2007 UN Climate Change Conference) in his first foreign foray as Prime Minister, and the Garnaut Climate Change Review, which he had commissioned while in Opposition, presented its final report in late September 2008. The government also commissioned a Green Paper (later a White Paper) on an emissions trading scheme and released its final report, *Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme: Australia’s low pollution future*, in December 2008. Rudd appeared to be taking action and he enjoyed high public approval ratings. The postponement of the emissions trading scheme, however—announced in April 2010 after several attempts to gain Senate support for the scheme—precipitated a fall in his popularity and his subsequent removal.

Clearly, there were ‘hits and misses’ in the Rudd Government’s approach to climate change. Certainly, failure at Copenhagen and the postponement of the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) abraded Rudd’s public standing and it was against this backdrop that the new Prime Minister went into the 2010
The ‘citizens’ assembly’ was arguably the most derided policy initiative of the campaign, being condemned by the Opposition, Greens MPs, climate activists, scientists, economists and the media. Tony Abbott remarked: ‘We already have a citizens’ assembly; it’s called a parliament. This is a decision for the Parliament. And [the Prime Minister] can’t subcontract out leadership to some kind of giant focus group’ (ABC 2010a). Even the Labor backbencher Steve Gibbons publicly criticised his leader’s policy at a candidates’ forum in his electorate, complaining that caucus had not been consulted and stating his opposition to the proposal (ABC 2010e). To be sure, Gillard had not even consulted her Cabinet over the plan (Tingle and Kitney 2010). Since the election, the ‘citizens’ assembly’, which has been dumped as party policy, has again come under scrutiny, with Karl Bitar, Labor’s serving National Secretary and Campaign Director, lambasting the scheme at his election wash-up speech to the National Press Club (Maher 2010).

Despite this misstep, during the campaign Gillard sought to affirm her climate credentials. She recommitted Labor to an emissions trading scheme and stated her opposition to a carbon tax; however, she upheld the Rudd Government’s decision to delay putting a price on carbon until at least 2013. In a bid to appeal to the environmentally conscious voter, Gillard pledged $1 billion to connect renewable energy developments to the national electricity grid and proposed stricter environmental controls on new coal-fired power stations (Peatling 2010). In addition, Gillard promised $394 million for a ‘cash for clunkers’ scheme. Formally titled the ‘Cleaner Car Rebate’, the policy entailed supporting ‘motorists to purchase new, low-emission, fuel-efficient vehicles’. Households, the policy envisaged, would ‘be able to receive a $2,000 rebate towards a new vehicle by trading in their pre-1995 car for scrapping’ (ALP n.d.). The rebate would be capped at 200,000 vehicles and run from 1 January 2011 to December 2014.

The Opposition took a substantively different approach as they aimed for a ‘direct action’ set of measures to lower emissions. Abbott promised $3.2 billion over four years for grants and subsidies to directly cut emissions and proposed to pay farmers to store emissions in their soil, creating ‘carbon sinks’. The Opposition also proposed to pay brown-coal-fired power stations to convert to more environmentally friendly combined-cycle gas generation. In addition, Abbott undertook to plant 20 million trees in urban areas (to act as carbon sinks).
and pledged to reward forestry companies that increased plantation numbers or that practised better forest management (Karvelas 2010a). In a further policy announcement, Abbott stated that the Coalition would axe funding to the Rudd Government’s Global Carbon Capture and Storage Institute to the tune of $300 million, while also announcing plans to scrap Labor’s $39.8 million program to assist small to medium-sized companies ‘green up’, as well as the government’s $5 million fund for green buildings (Alexander 2010).

The Greens made a series of policy announcements on climate change; most notable was their call for an interim carbon tax. In addition, the Greens sought binding targets for emissions reductions in 2012, 2020 and 2050. The party also proposed national energy efficiency targets, a 30 per cent mandatory renewable energy target by 2020 (as opposed to the 20 per cent target that enjoyed support from both the Labor and the Liberal parties) and an end to taxpayer-funded subsidies for fossil-fuel industries (Peatling 2010). One of the Greens’ largest policy announcements came at their campaign launch in early August in the form of a $5 billion loan guarantee scheme, which would provide eligible businesses willing to develop large-scale renewable energy projects with an opportunity to apply for loan guarantees at 100 per cent of the principal (ABC 2010c).

**Water Politics**

The management of Australia’s water resources, particularly those in the Murray–Darling Basin, was also among the list of prominent environmental issues debated during the campaign. While the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) delayed the release of its discussion paper, *Guide to the proposed Basin Plan*, until after the election, citing caretaker provisions—provoking anger among irrigators and regional communities—the major parties made several announcements pertaining to the future of the Basin (Beeby 2010).

Labor promised to continue voluntary water buybacks to return sufficient environmental water to the river system, having already purchased almost $1.4 billion of environmental water since 2008 (Morris 2010). The government also undertook to accept the recommendations of the MDBA regarding cuts to water allocations. In addition, Labor announced that it would commence water-saving works in the Menindee catchment area in October 2010. In contrast, the Coalition promised to strike a balance between the interests of the environment and those of regional communities, by undertaking an assessment of the social and economic consequences of the Basin Plan if it were to form government (Wahlquist 2010). Mick Keogh from the Australian Farm Institute pointed, however, to a potential problem for the Opposition with regard to this pledge:
the MDBA is ‘required by legislation’, introduced by the Howard Government in 2007, ‘to consider only the environment’ and not the interests of communities, industry or the economic consequences of its proposals (Wahlquist 2010).

Further to its pledge to balance the interests of the environment and regional communities, the Coalition announced $730 million for water-saving infrastructure to assist communities to change their irrigation practices. Part of the package included $300 million for improving on-farm water-efficiency measures. It also included funding for the Menindee Lakes region. Furthermore, the Coalition pledged to purchase 150 billion litres of water for South Australia’s stricken Lower Lakes and Coorong region at a cost of $20 million (Arup and Welch 2010; Berkovic 2010). In a separate policy announcement, the Opposition Leader promised to hold a referendum on Commonwealth control of water if States refused to implement the reforms needed to restore the river system to health (Berkovic 2010).

In a different area of water policy, the Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong, undertook during the election to pay the water debts owed to the Snowy Hydro electricity scheme for the years 2002–05, which was part of an agreement with the NSW and Victorian governments to return water to the river. In announcing the policy, Wong stated that it would result in 56 billion litres of additional water for the river over the following two years and would remove environmental water flow caps earlier than had been envisaged. The cost of the proposal came to $13.7 million (Arup and Welch 2010).

The Population Debate

One of the more interesting policy issues to be discussed during the campaign was Australia’s population trajectory. Population had grown to be a prominent issue in the months prior to the election because of Kevin Rudd’s comments in October 2009 that he welcomed the prospect of a ‘big Australia’, after Treasury’s Intergenerational Report projected a population of 36 million by 2050 (7.30 Report, 22 October 2010, ABC TV). Rudd’s articulation of his vision for Australia—growing, prosperous, forward-looking, educated and globally engaged—failed to find favour with focus groups and he faced dissent within his own party. Recognising community anxiety over a growing population, and with the Opposition exploiting and further exacerbating the issue by tying population growth to the arrival of asylum-seekers by boat, Rudd created a new ministerial position within Cabinet in April 2010: the Ministry for Population.

In an interview with the Nine Network’s Laurie Oakes just days after becoming Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, however, rejected her predecessor’s vision, saying, ‘I don’t believe in a big Australia. Kevin Rudd indicated that he had a view about
a big Australia. I’m indicating a different approach. I think we want an Australia that is sustainable’ (Symons-Brown 2010). Under Gillard, ‘sustainability’ became the catchphrase of the campaign. In her ministerial reshuffle after assuming the prime ministership, she added ‘Sustainable’ to the title of the Minister for Population, Tony Burke, rendering him the Minister for Sustainable Population.

Gillard directed her words to voters in outer-metropolitan areas who were concerned about the impact of increased numbers of residents on service delivery and infrastructure capability, thus framing the debate in terms of maintaining Australians’ unique lifestyle (Gordon 2010). But she also appealed to green voters with her emphasis on sustainability. Gillard’s departure from the ‘growth is good’ mantra marked an end to the historical bipartisan consensus that held that Australians needed to populate or we would perish. But Gillard was not alone. Abbott and Opposition immigration spokesman, Scott Morrison, had abandoned the consensus position earlier in the year, and during the campaign called for the immigration intake to be reduced to 170,000 per year. Ironically, the Coalition’s position is forecast to be achieved naturally as a result of normal immigration push/pull factors (van Onselen 2010).

The parties were responding to a shift in public opinion on the issue. Under the Howard Government, Australia had substantially increased its immigration intake, and the electorate had generally supported this program. But under the Rudd Government, the perception emerged, and was fostered by the Opposition, that the government had lost control of Australia’s borders. Of course, this was a nonsense not supported by the facts, but the issue became more acute with cost-of-living pressures and shock jocks bemoaning infrastructure bottlenecks. A survey of Australians’ attitudes to social issues, released during the campaign, found that three-quarters of Australians opposed the idea of a bigger Australia, with the figure reaching 86 per cent in regional Queensland. Blue-collar workers were most opposed to population growth (81 per cent), while social professionals were the least resistant (57 per cent) (Curtin 2010).

The media split over the issue, with the ABC airing during the campaign the controversial documentary Dick Smith’s Population Puzzle. The broadcast was followed by a live Q&A population debate, which featured a number of prominent anti-population-growth campaigners. Smith argued that Australia needed to place a moratorium on population growth, stabilise the population at 26 million people, and reduce the immigration intake to 70,000 per annum, while doubling the humanitarian resettlement program to 25,000 (Meacham 2010).

The Australian took a different line and dedicated numerous pages throughout the campaign to pro-growth arguments. Political columnist George Megalogenis accused Gillard of ‘dog whistling’, while economics columnist Michael
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Stutchbury denounced Dick Smith’s position as rank protectionism and decried the retreat from Rudd’s vision as ‘zero-growth environmentalism’ (Megalogenis 2010; Stutchbury 2010). Oliver Hartwich (2010) argued ‘there is only one thing that’s more unpleasant than dealing with the side-effects of growth. It’s dealing with the side-effects of decline.’ The Australian’s editorial column (26 July 2010) argued that Abbott and Gillard were engaged in an intellectually dishonest campaign and warned that imposing a cap on population growth ‘will erode our economic prosperity’.

Business groups also voiced their concerns about the content and tenor of the public discourse on population. Heather Ridout, Chief Executive of the Australian Industry Group, said the ‘hot-house atmosphere of the election campaign is not a proper one [in which] to have an analytical [debate] about population’, while Chief Economist of the WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry, John Nicolau, submitted: ‘It’s a real concern…that we are looking at a more populist approach to the population debate’ (Hewett 2010). Also throwing their support behind a big Australia were National Seniors Chairman, Everald Compton, a member of the government’s demographic change and liveability advisory committee, and National Farmers’ Federation President David Crombie (Karvelas 2010b). The wealth management (retirement savings) and property industries’ lobbies also called for a bigger Australia (Charles 2010; Symons-Brown 2010).

In contrast, the Australian Conservation Foundation’s Chuck Berger welcomed Gillard’s nod to sustainability, and called on her to convert her commitment into a ‘practical national population strategy’. Greens leader Bob Brown also called for a renewed focus on training local workers, as opposed to continued reliance on the skilled-migration program (Symons-Brown 2010).

It is worth pausing to reflect for a moment on the paradigmatic shift that has taken place in discussions about population. Continuous population growth driven by immigration has underpinned Australia’s prosperity, and it is interesting to observe the shift in public sentiment in favour of the limits-to-growth thesis, which is so apparent in Dick Smith’s public utterances. That significant sections of the Australian community now support lower growth is easily explained: politicians and anti-growth campaigners are not being truthful about the consequences of lower population growth on voters’ standards of living. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the same voters who succumbed to Abbott’s scare campaign on the CPRS because of concerns about cost-of-living increases will accept lower standards of living as a consequence of lower and continually declining economic growth. We need only look to Japan and Europe to see the ramifications of such an approach. Hartwich (2010) made a fundamental observation is his column for The Australian: ‘Growth is not everything, but without growth everything is more difficult.’
Marine Parks

The issue of marine parks also received attention during the campaign, with the so-called ‘tinny lobby’ joining forces with Liberal and National party candidates and the Fishing and Lifestyle Party to target 13 Labor-held seats in New South Wales and Queensland that were likely to be affected by the plan of the then Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, to create a network of marine parks covering more than 5 million sq km (Cleary 2010a, 2010b). The issue, which was followed closely by The Australian's Paul Cleary, ‘sparked an underground political movement driven by blogs and social media pages’ and led to a number of protests (Cleary 2010a).

Under the Howard Government, marine parks were successfully established off the coast of Victoria and Tasmania, and when the Rudd Government came to power, Garrett continued the program and identified new areas for protection. Garrett, however, came under sustained criticism from professional and recreational fishers for his failure to adequately consult affected communities and business operators, as well as his stance on compensation for those who were negatively affected by the conservation measures. Recognising that sentiment was turning against Labor, the Coalition argued for an additional period of consultation, and promised that operators who could provide proof of negative impact would be compensated (Cleary 2010c).

During the Coalition’s campaign launch, Tony Abbott declared that one of his first acts as prime minister would be to stop Labor’s proposed marine parks (Parnell 2010). Abbott did not promise, however, to abandon the marine parks plan altogether, merely to suspend the current process and to consult more widely. But the Coalition’s position drew the ire of Minister Garrett, who dismissed the party’s ‘appeal to the fishing vote as a populist pitch that was inconsistent with past policy’ (Cleary 2010b). For his part, Garrett postponed his final decision on the creation of a 1 million sq km conservation park in the Coral Sea until after the election, citing the need to engage with a wider section of the community before banning all fishing in the region, thus reneging on his promise of May 2009 to release a final schedule of proposed parks by the end of 2010 (Cleary 2010a).

Wild Rivers

In 2005, the Queensland Parliament passed the Wild Rivers Act 2005, designed to place limitations (environmental controls) on the kinds of developments that could occur in the declared high-preservation areas (wild river regions) of the Cape York Peninsula. The Act has been in force for several years now and
has also been endorsed by Queensland electors at subsequent State elections. Protection of Queensland’s ‘wild rivers’ came to prominence nationally, however, only recently after outspoken Indigenous leader and Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson, launched a campaign against the Queensland Government and the Wilderness Society, which had supported the Act, arguing that it abrogated the rights of Indigenous peoples living on the Cape.

Tony Abbott has been a vocal critic of the Act since the legislation first came to his attention, and in early 2010 he signalled his intention to introduce legislation into the federal Parliament to overturn what he perceived as particularly odious aspects of the Act. His criticism of Wild Rivers grew stronger throughout the year and continued into the election campaign, when he again promised to introduce a Private Member’s Bill into federal Parliament. In contrast, the federal Labor Party expressed support for its State Labor colleagues during the campaign.

Tasmanian Forests and Conservation Issues

During the 2004 election, John Howard had deftly outmanoeuvred Labor leader, Mark Latham, on forests policy and received the backing of the Forestry and Furnishing Products Division of the powerful Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). Forestry was thus pivotal to the campaign. In 2010, however, the management of Tasmania’s forests and conservation issues more broadly barely rated a mention. Labor restricted its policy pronouncements to new bans on illegal timber imports, with Forestry Minister, Tony Burke, promising to introduce a ‘mandatory code of conduct, requiring timber suppliers who place imports on the Australian market to check they are from a legal source’. The announcement came on the back of strong lobbying from Greenpeace and the corporate heavyweights Bunnings and Ikea, who warned of the impacts for the Australian timber industry of illegally logged imported timbers (Morris and Skulley 2010). The promise received widespread applause from green groups (ABC 2010d).

The focus of the Opposition differed from the government and concerned changes to managed forest investment schemes. Deputy leader, Julie Bishop, argued that there were problems with the current tax scheme that had resulted in the failure of some companies, and she flagged improvements to legislation governing tax arrangements (ABC 2010b). Taking the heat out of this issue were the groundbreaking talks on the future of the Tasmanian timber industry involving Timber Communities Australia, the National Association of Forest Industries, the CFMEU, Environment Tasmania, the Wilderness Society and the
Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) that preceded the campaign. During the campaign, Coalition spokesman Eric Abetz said that the Opposition would oppose any deal that resulted in significant job losses even if the deal had the backing of industry representatives, while the Prime Minister expressed support for the negotiations and hinted that her government would consider funding an agreement if one were to transpire (Denholm 2010). While no agreement was struck during the campaign, a landmark deal was reached in October 2010 (Franklin 2010), and Regional Development Minister, Simon Crean, pledged to provide affected industry members with compensation (ABC 2010f).

Conclusion

The environmental issues that received attention during the 2010 election campaign were disparate and included climate change, the future of the Murray–Darling Basin, Australia’s population, marine parks, Queensland’s Wild Rivers Act and forestry and conservation. In its campaign evaluation of the major parties’ environmental policies, the ACF, not surprisingly, awarded the Greens the highest mark, with a score of 90 per cent across four areas of focus: 1) the party’s policies on reducing pollution; 2) making cleaner energy cheaper; 3) investing in cleaner, more sustainable cities and transport; and 4) protecting and restoring a healthy environment (ACF 2010). They awarded the Labor Party second position, with a score of 50 per cent, while the Liberal Party—the last of the major parties surveyed—scored only 22 per cent.

The issues that we have highlighted will be front of mind for the minority Gillard Government as it struggles to deal with community anxiety over climate change, increased living costs, the nation’s water assets, infrastructure bottlenecks and a growing population, and in Queensland, threats to the commercial and recreational fishing industry. All of these issues are likely to reappear in the next campaign, but Tasmanian forest preservation—after so many campaigns on centre stage—looks like it will no longer feature so prominently.

References


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