

20. The Environment in the 2013 Election: Controversies over climate change, the carbon tax and conservation

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The environment has been a major part of the national political debate in Australia since the Franklin Dam dispute in Tasmania became an issue in the 1983 federal election. Labor won that election and subsequently sought to legislate to make good on its campaign promise to stop the Franklin Dam project from proceeding. This decision became the first of a series of conservation-oriented interventions that helped construct the notion that the Australian Labor Party—the party traditionally of blue-collar workers and their trade unions—was also the party most willing to respond to the environmental agenda (Papadakis 1993; Economou 2000). For all the ecological rhetoric employed by both government and environmentalists to rationalise the decision, the real reason for Labor's interest in conservation was electoral. Senior strategists within the Labor secretariat and the caucus were convinced that conservation outcomes could influence the voting choices of electors in marginal seats, especially in the suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney, and that gains in these areas would offset adverse reactions to such decisions amongst the party's traditional blue-collar constituency—after all, Labor failed to win any lower house seats in Tasmania in the 1983 federal election (Warhurst 1983). This electoral outlook drove national Labor environmental policy most of the time during the Hawke Government years.

In the 2013 federal election, Labor was again the party of national government and the environment was again at the forefront of the election campaign, albeit in a form somewhat different from the conservation issues that were around during the Hawke years. This time the matter of climate change was at the fore—an issue that had been dogging the national political debate since the onset of a major national drought, the latter stages of which coincided with the 2007 federal election. In that election the long serving Liberal–National Coalition Government under the prime ministership of John Howard was defeated by the Labor Party and its relatively new leader, Kevin Rudd, who promised to immediately sign Australia up to international agreements on action over climate change (Johnson 2010: 11; Rootes 2008). As part of his approach Rudd sought to reinforce the importance of climate change to his government's policy agenda by

declaring the matter to be one of the 'great moral challenges of our time' (van Onselen 2010)—a rhetorical flourish that would haunt him, his party and his successor as prime minister, Julia Gillard, for years to come.

Kevin Rudd was replaced as Labor leader and prime minister by Julia Gillard (Scott 2010), and the first Gillard Government went to an election in 2010. While a number of matters on the environmental agenda to do with water policy did not change markedly under the new prime ministership, climate change policy was altered quite dramatically (Graetz and Manning 2012: 291–4). As will be argued below, the Gillard Government shifted from Rudd's approach of advocating pricing carbon primarily via a market-based emissions trading scheme (but with a fixed price initial period). The Gillard Government moved to a system based on the government directly putting a price on carbon for an extended period—an approach popularly known as the 'carbon tax'—with the eventual introduction of an emissions trading scheme put off for several years. In so doing, Labor policy makers reasoned that they had instituted a market-based method for incorporating the price of carbon production into the economy in order to make alternative methods of low-emissions energy generation more viable. This had been Labor's intention ever since it had been elected to government at the 2007 election under Kevin Rudd's leadership. In the changed political circumstances in which climate change policy was formulated after the 2010 election, however, environment policy began to figure as a major source of voter disillusion with the Government and its prime minister. The Labor Party's downward slide in the polls began almost as soon as Gillard committed her government to 'putting a price on carbon', yet polling on voter attitudes to issues found a persistent majority of respondents who were concerned about climate change and expected government to do something about it (CSIRO 2011; Pietsch and McAllister 2010).

This may have accounted for the approach of the Coalition in opposition. Leader Tony Abbott had previously been associated with that broad group of doubters about the claims of climate science, known colloquially as 'climate change deniers'. The Liberal approach was to align itself with public opinion displaying concern about climate change, but to come up with an alternative 'direct action' approach based on more practical programs such as re-forestation, carbon sequestration and perhaps specific regulation (Graetz and McAllister 2010: 292). This policy had its critics (see Taylor 2011), but the Opposition's main intention was to capitalise on the decline in popular support for the Government and its so-called 'carbon tax'. Promising to repeal the carbon tax became part of the Opposition's election campaign mantra, and the opinion polls suggested that this message resonated with voters (see Thompson 2011).

There was much more to the national environment debate than climate change, of course, and Prime Minister Gillard sought to cleave the issues by giving

climate change its own ministry and its own minister in the form of former ACTU secretary and fellow Socialist Left factional ally Greg Combet (who remained in the portfolio until the return of Kevin Rudd to the prime ministership ahead of the 2013 election, at which point Combet resigned and was replaced by Mark Butler). The environment minister, meanwhile, was Tony Burke, a member of the powerful Centre Unity faction from New South Wales and strong supporter of Gillard in her seemingly endless battle to fend off the leadership aspirations of Rudd. In the re-organisation of administration after the 2010 election, Combet's ministry was called 'Climate Change and Energy Efficiency' and Burke's became 'Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities', which revealed the extensive array of matters other than climate change that came under the general rubric of 'the environment'. As far as the electorate was concerned, however, the Gillard Government's contribution to environmental politics was primarily about the carbon tax, and, in the aftermath of Labor's substantial defeat and the nature of the result in the Senate, its approach to this aspect of the debate looms large as a major contributor to the outcome.

Labor and the environment debate 2010 to 2013

The climate change debate had been a major part of national politics from 2007. Amidst general approval, one of Rudd's first actions as prime minister was to sign Australia up to the international agreements on reducing greenhouse gas emissions that his predecessor Howard had steadfastly refused to agree to. In domestic policy, the Rudd approach to climate change policy was based on trying to establish an emissions trading scheme. This idea had some support from industry (especially from the financial services sector for whom this scheme would provide work and resources) but was opposed by sections of the environmental movement who argued that such trading schemes would not address the problem of carbon pollution directly. These concerns resonated with the Australian Greens whose support would be required if the Rudd policy was to pass the Senate. Indeed, the Greens refused to support the enabling legislation, thereby presenting Rudd with an opportunity to go to a double dissolution election on the issue.

In the process the then Liberal leader, Malcolm Turnbull, was dumped by his colleagues when he indicated a willingness to have the Liberal Party vote with Labor in the Senate to get the emissions trading scheme past the Greens (Kelly 2010). With the Liberals having replaced Turnbull with hard-line conservative (and not particularly popular) Tony Abbott by the narrowest of margins, the moment for Labor to seek a double dissolution and win an election on the climate

change issue presented itself. For whatever reason, Rudd demurred. This proved to be a disaster for him. His failure to act decisively had the effect of rendering his rhetorical flourishes about climate change as hollow and hypocritical and soon Labor began to slide in the opinion polls. This, in turn, contributed to a destabilising campaign going on within some sections of the Labor caucus to remove him as prime minister. When this eventually happened in 2010, his replacement—Julia Gillard—nominated the need to resolve the problems the Government was having with this policy as one of her three key objectives. As the 2010 election campaign began, Labor remained committed to its emissions trading scheme, the Greens advocated putting a price on carbon production, while the Coalition advocated a 'practical climate change' policy.

The 2010 general election was held and resulted in Labor losing its lower house majority. On the crossbenches now sat an odd collection of political players, including Adam Bandt who had won the previously safe Labor seat of Melbourne on behalf of the Greens, Andrew Wilkie, a Tasmanian independent, and two other independents, Rob Oakeshott (Lyne) and Tony Windsor (New England). Both Oakeshott and Windsor had indicated that they supported the idea that the best way to deal with climate change would be to have a market-based mechanism that would factor the cost of pollution directly into the production process and that resources should be made available to allow for investment in alternative forms of energy generation. There was an additional political interest for the rural independents in the alternative energy debate, as installations like wind farms and the economic opportunities associated with them invariably occurred in regional Australia. The Gillard Government would formulate a complex policy response to climate change, but the commentary tended to focus on the idea of putting a price on carbon production and the term 'carbon tax' was used to describe this initiative (Thompson 2011). This was potentially dangerous for the Government, as Gillard had already used the term during the 2010 election campaign when she was videoed in Brisbane declaring that a carbon tax would never be part of any policy panacea for climate change under a government led by her (see LiberalPartyTV 2011).

After the election, where the proponents of a climate change policy that included a direct price on carbon now held the balance of power in both parliamentary chambers, the minority Government altered its policy. As part of a broad suite of programs under the general rubric of seeking to achieve 'sustainability', a carbon 'charge' was to be included as an interim impost to be paid by carbon-producing industrial activity ahead of an emissions trading scheme scheduled for some years hence. (By contrast, Rudd's scheme had only a very brief initial fixed-price period before the market would determine the price of carbon via his cap and trade emissions trading scheme). The policy also included assistance for the development of alternative energy and a commitment to achieve a

5 per cent reduction in emissions. The complexity of the Labor approach failed to prevent significant criticism from a range of sources. Some critics noted that the set carbon price was well above international market prices, and alleged that Australian industry would become internationally uncompetitive as a result. Environmental critics meanwhile argued that the emissions cuts weren't extensive enough, and were very concerned at the compensation payments that the Government intended to make to some industries like the coal-fired electricity sector. This was all in addition to the criticism emanating from those ideologues who were as stridently opposed to the idea that humans created climate change as those who were stridently convinced of humanity's complicity in climate change—which, in turn, led to a public debate of ideologically opposed people yelling abuse at each other (and one of the personal targets of a lot of this abuse was Gillard herself). Meanwhile, the prime minister appeared to have broken an election promise. The Liberal–National opposition was delighted to see the opinion polls indicate a big drop in voter support for Labor and Gillard upon the first declarations that a carbon tax might be coming.

The Gillard Government tried to make a virtue of the difficult political position it found itself in on this matter. This took a number of forms, none of which seemed to succeed in halting the downward trend in the opinion polls. Gillard tried to project the decision to 'price carbon' as a triumph of her negotiating skills and as a positive sign of what a minority government could achieve in terms of policy (*Agreement between the Australian Greens and the Australian Labor Party* 2010). Presumably the televised signing of an agreement of co-operation between Labor and the Greens was supposed to reinforce this notion of a co-operative 'new paradigm'. While Gillard and Combet had initially conceded that this measure was effectively a 'tax' they later backtracked and then assiduously avoided the term 'carbon tax' after public demonstrations labelling Gillard as 'Ju-liar'. Gillard's own rhetoric started to utilise the phrase 'it's the right thing to do' to counter those critics who questioned whether it was politically smart to impose a new tax on a community not favourably disposed to the idea of an increasing tax burden. Just to make sure all the bases were covered, however, the Government also mandated an extensive 'household compensation' package in which welfare payments were to be made to offset the cost to households of the new carbon charge even though the Government was also claiming that the impost would be so minor most people would not notice it (Rawson 2011). The Opposition seized on this as muddle-headed logic and stuck with a simple message that clearly resonated with voters that the charge was a 'big new tax' that, if elected to government, the Liberal and National parties would repeal.

These matters dominated the national debate during the tenure of the Gillard Government and tended to obscure other items on the environmental policy agenda. The matters of climate change and water management were related by

virtue of the drought that had given such impetus to the climate change debate. The issues of water conservation became very important across the country, but the region where the Commonwealth sought to reconcile competing demands between producers and conservationists was in the Murray-Darling Basin. At issue was the allocation of irrigation water, with conservationists arguing that more water was required for environmental needs while producers were anxious to retain access to as much water as possible for irrigation purposes. The Commonwealth looked to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) to deal with the ecological and economic issues relating to (over) allocations, with the underlying assumption being that, for the sake of the health of the river system, producers would have to relinquish some of their entitlements in the name of conservation.

This was a long administrative process that produced an interim report and recommendations not long after Gillard's new ministries were in place following the 2010 election. The task of explaining the report fell to the head of the MDBA, Mike Taylor, who undertook a tour of communities in the region. What happened next revealed much about conservation politics in Australia. Taylor was met with open hostility wherever he went in the region, with everyone from local politicians to local farmers declaring that the MDBA (and, by extension, the federal Government) was trying to close down agricultural activity leading to the decimation of basin communities. At consultative 'town hall' meetings, aggrieved farmer activists and their supporters set fire to copies of the MDBA report (*PM* 2011). Conservationists were no less dismayed and quickly criticised the Commonwealth for not allocating more water to conservation flows.

The vehemence of the reaction precipitated major political developments. Environment Minister Burke and the Government seemed to back away from the commitment to addressing ecological needs contained in the MDBA report. Taylor responded to the hostile reception by resigning. The Government foreshadowed a parliamentary inquiry into the methods used by the MDBA to try and attach economic values to environmental inputs. The absurdity of the whole exercise was exacerbated by the weather; in early 2011 the basin received unseasonal rains and state politicians suddenly found themselves dealing not with drought but with floods. By late 2012 a number of dams and catchments in the system were full to overflowing. All this seemed to do was confirm the suspicion of locals that city-based technocrats and scientists did not know what they were talking about.

Burke had two other fights going on at about this time. One was with the newly elected Coalition Government of Victoria which was keen to repay support given to the Nationals campaign in the 2010 state election by allowing the resumption of cattle grazing in the state's alpine national park. The Victorian Government argued that cattle grazing would assist in fire prevention—a claim vehemently

disputed by conservation groups and the Victorian National Parks Association which led an appeal to the federal Government to intervene (Karvelas 2011). The federal Government duly declared that it would seek further investigation into the fire prevention claims made by the state Government but, in the interim, would maintain the ban on alpine grazing. As is usually the case in such disputes, proponents of grazing declared their outrage at the insensitivity of Canberra-based bureaucrats to the needs of the small and remote communities out in Victoria's far east.

The other fight that was unfolding involved the Gillard Government's decision to expedite the formation of a major marine national park. As the press reported at the time, the new marine park involved the establishment of significant conservation zones that, amongst other things, excluded commercial and some recreational fishing activity. Minister Burke was anxious to herald this decision as an example of significant achievement on the part of the Government, notwithstanding criticism from environmentalists that the park and fishing exclusion zones were too small. In regional centres—especially in New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland—however, there was anger at the prospect of commercial and recreational fishers being denied access to fishing grounds. The costs associated with the park were assessed at the regional level to be economic in nature, in that they would threaten the fishing industry which would then undermine local employment (Locke 2012).

Once again there was a very strong regional-versus-metropolitan dynamic at play in the politics of this major piece of conservation policy. In the metropolitan centres there was little interest in this policy or the potential economic consequences of the rather esoteric notion of huge tracts of the seabed being included in a national park. In the regions, however, there was growing anger at the way the Government appeared to be seriously constraining recreational choices for people. From the affected states, organisational activity was discernible as a plethora of political parties with charters declaring support for broader access to national parks, greater opportunities for hunters and fishers, and/or opposition to the carbon tax, were being formed to be registered with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The Gillard Government had made an extensive array of enemies in its management of the environmental debate, and these enemies were clearly of a mind to mobilise against it at the next national election. In this campaign the Senate loomed as a major potential battlefield.

The environment and the 2013 election

While there were many issues at work in the 2013 election campaign, the pricing of carbon was particularly contentious and the Coalition sought to put

the matter at the centre of the campaign by declaring that it would contest the election as a plebiscite on the 'carbon tax'. Interestingly, Labor had complicated the situation somewhat with its last-minute leadership change, which saw the return of Kevin Rudd. One of the first things the resurrected leader did was to declare that the carbon tax would be terminated well ahead of schedule and that, if returned to government, he would seek to reinstate his preferred emissions trading scheme a year earlier than the Gillard Government had envisaged (Scarr 2013). The impression that Labor was walking away from the 'carbon tax' was reinforced by the resignations of those ministers in the Labor Government who had been the public face of the policy, including Combet and Gillard. Tony Burke also offered to resign but Rudd refused to accept it, although the former environment minister was to lose that portfolio and become Minister for Immigration instead. Despite continuing to espouse the virtues of 'pricing carbon', the reconstituted Rudd Labor Government appeared to have abandoned its signature policy before a single vote had been cast.

Opinion poll data measuring voting intentions by both primary vote and two-party vote between the 2010 and 2013 elections reveal an overall downward trend that commenced from the moment that Prime Minister Gillard announced her government's intention to institute a carbon price as the centrepiece of its climate change policy. The level of two-party support for the Labor Government measured by Newspoll (see Figure 1) shows the extent to which support for Labor fell over the period. However, it is also the case that the same poll found rising levels of support at various points in the timeline in which the Government expedited the carbon tax, and in the period after the carbon tax was actually applied. On the other hand, it is also the case that, while Labor was able to establish a two-party-preferred lead over the Coalition in the short period immediately after Gillard's declared shift in policy, the passage of the Clean Energy Bill in mid-2011 (in the immediate aftermath of the Greens becoming the holders of the balance of power in the upper house) saw support for Labor fall to its lowest point and thereafter it failed to overtake the Coalition.

The Coalition swept to power with a 30-seat majority in the House of Representatives, having secured 17 formerly Labor seats and regaining the two regional seats formerly held by Oakeshott and Windsor. Labor's national two-party vote at the election was 46.5 per cent—a particularly weak performance and commensurate with the trends being monitored by the national opinion polls. Of the 17 Labor seats won by the Coalition, 10 were regional or non-metropolitan districts, suggesting that the metropolitan-versus-regional dynamic at work in the national environmental debate may have been replicated in the transfer of seats. However, it was equally the case that all of these seats bar one (the Tasmanian seat of Lyons) were marginal anyway and had a long history of swinging from one major party to the other in elections producing a change of government (AEC 2013a).

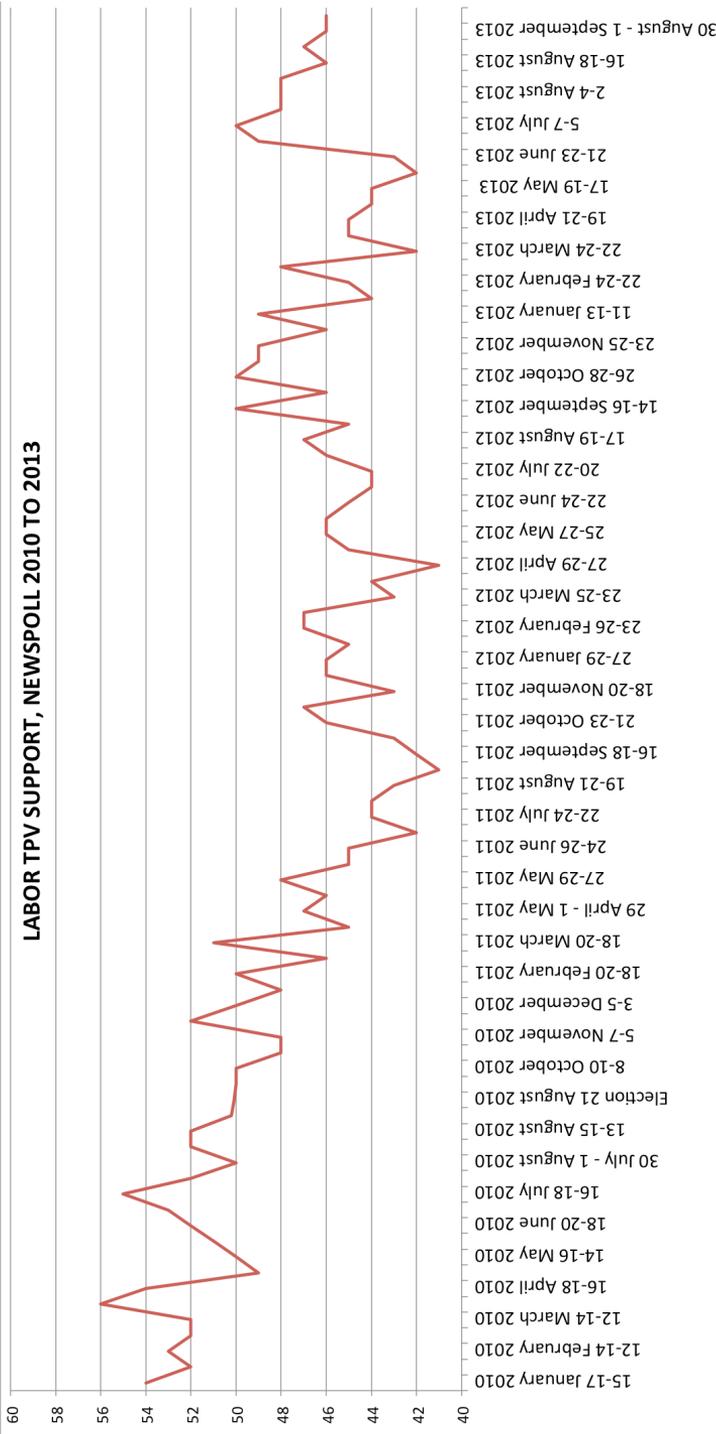


Figure 1: Total primary vote for the ALP, 2010 to 2013

Source: Newspoll.

The result of the half-Senate election, however, was much more complex and provided a little more insight into the strong reaction of the electorate to the nature of the political debate of the previous three years. In the lower house contest, the electoral system allowed the anti-Labor swing to be channelled to the Coalition in most cases (but not all, as the defeat of sitting Liberal Sophie Mirabella in the rural Victorian division of Indi indicated). The Senate contest, with its transferable vote-based proportional system, provided non-major parties with more of an opportunity to make an impact on representational outcomes. This clearly had occurred to a number of political actors who saw the Senate election as an opportunity to exert leverage on the political debate, presumably in opposition to the Labor-Green-Oakeshott-Windsor approach to such contentious policies as climate change (although interestingly Andrew Wilkie survived in the House of Representatives seat of Denison). By the time the deadline for registering parties for the 2013 election had passed, the AEC reported that a record number of parties would be contesting the half-Senate election. In 2010, the total number of registered parties, excluding the various forms of Liberal, National and Labor parties, was 26. In 2013, this number had increased to 50 (AEC 2013b).

Table 1: Anti-Labor/Green minor parties, 2013 half-Senate election

Right-populist, social conservativelmplicit anti-environmental	Explicitly anti-environmental	Others, GTV preferences directed away from Labor-Greens
Democratic Labor Party (DLP) Family First (FF) Country Alliance (CA) Katter Australia Party (KAP) Palmer United Party (PUP) One Nation (ON) Christian Democratic Party (CDP) Citizens Electoral Council (CEC)	Australian Fishing and Lifestyle Party (AFLP) Australian Motoring Enthusiasts Party (AMEP) Shooters and Fishers Party (SFP) Stop the Greens (STG) Stable Population Party (SPP) Australian Sports Party (SPORT)	Australian Independents (AI) Australian Sex Party (SEX) Rise Up Australia Party (RUAP) Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Smokers Rights Party (SRP) Senators On Line (SOL) Australian Voice Party (AVP) Pirate Party (PP) Australian Republicans (AR) Uniting Australian Party (UAP) WikiLeaks Party (WP) Australia First (AF) Australian Protectionist Party (AP) Carers' Alliance Party (CAP)

Source: Australian Electoral Commission data: <results.aec.gov.au/17496/Website/Default.htm>.

Table 1 lists all those parties (other than the major parties) registered for the 2013 half-Senate election which lodged group ticket votes (GTV) with preferences directed to each other (that is, they were part of a cross-preference arrangement these days referred to in the press as 'preference harvesting') before being

directed to the Liberal and/or National parties. These parties could be thought of as being anti-Labor/Green. The table categorises these parties under three sub-headings: first, general right-populist or socially conservative parties that had either contested previous Senate elections or, in the case of the Palmer United Party (PUP), had been receiving significant media attention during the campaign. Opposition to the 'carbon tax' was a policy position commonly taken by these parties. The second heading lists those parties whose nomenclature made specific reference to their opposition to aspects of Labor's environmental policies including the various sporting, shooters and fishers parties, the Australian Motor Enthusiasts Party (AMEP), the No Carbon Tax Party and the Stable Population Party. The third heading lists all the other parties whose GTVs directed preferences to each other and thereafter to anti-Labor/Green candidates. This list includes some minor parties that might generally have been identified with the left of politics, including the libertarian Sex Party and the WikiLeaks Party. Table 1, thus, lists a total of 28 out of the 50 minor parties aligned against Labor. In terms of GTV allocations Labor's only allies in the Senate contest were the Greens and a handful of parties (six in total) like the Animal Rights and Justice Party and doctrinaire parties such as the Socialist Equity Party.

Table 2: Anti-Labor/Green minor party performance by state, 2013 half-Senate election

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA [#]	Tas
Number of anti-left minor parties	25	24	25	19	20	19
Explicit anti-environment party vote %	20.4	8.9	17.8	18.5	10.1	12.1
Total explicit and implicit anti-environment vote	27.7	14.3	21.4	22.3	15.4	17.9
Right minor party elected	LDP	AMEP	PUP	SPORT*	FF	PUP

#Result here excludes Nick Xenophon Group.

*Result here at original declaration. At a re-count, this seat was won by the PUP. The result was later voided by the High Court after which a by-election was held.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission data: <results.aec.gov.au/17496/Website/Default.htm>.

The significance of the nature of the party system for the Senate contest only becomes apparent when the total vote for the plethora of minor parties is aggregated. Table 2 presents Senate results for each state by recording the number of parties directing their GTV preferences away from Labor and the Greens. It then shows the total vote won by those minor parties that were explicitly branded as anti-environmental and those right-populist and socially

conservative parties whose opposition to the carbon tax was well known. The table indicates the total right-of-centre minor party vote which demonstrates quite clearly the impact the surge in party registrations had on voter behaviour. While it is true that on their own none of these minor parties achieved a significant primary vote, with only the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in New South Wales and the PUP candidate in Queensland winning a primary vote greater than 4 per cent (the threshold for public funding and for regaining the candidate deposit), their accumulated vote was very large. The combined effect of the large number of parties was a total primary vote that was big enough in all states except Victoria to exceed the 14.4 per cent required to secure a seat (in Victoria the total vote of 14.3 per cent was only just under quota). Given the nature of the Senate voting system, this meant that instead of assisting the Coalition in winning an extra seat, the total right-of-centre minor party vote was strong enough to get one of their number returned, and Table 2 lists those minor parties that won the sixth seat in each of the state contests.

Table 3: Left versus right-of-centre contests, half Senate election 2013

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA [#]	Tas
Left-of-centre vote %	40.2	44.9	36.9	38.3	31.9	45.0
Quota	2.79	3.1	2.5	2.6	2.2	3.1
Seats	2.0	3.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.0
Right-of-centre vote %	58.0	54.4	62.7	61.5	42.8	55.4
Quota	4.0	3.7	4.3	4.2	2.9	3.8
Seats	4.0	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0

#SA result excludes Nick Xenophon Group.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission data: <results.aec.gov.au/17496/Website/Default.htm>.

Table 2 disaggregates the total primary vote won by explicitly and implicitly anti-environmental and anti-carbon tax minor parties from the rest of the minor parties whose motives for contesting the election were not immediately clear but which still directed their preferences away from Labor and the Greens. The table shows that anti-environmental and anti-carbon tax parties achieved an accumulated primary vote in excess of the quota in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. In Tasmania the vote won was 0.84 of a quota and in South Australia 0.70 of a quota. The weakest anti-environment performance was in Victoria, yet one of the anti-environmental parties, the AMEP, secured a seat nonetheless. In addition to the AMEP, the LDP secured a seat in New South Wales while the PUP and Family First won seats in the other states.

These results were the clearest expression of voter reaction to Labor's approach to the environmental policy debate. The sense of a rightward shift in the

electorate as a whole is reinforced when the Coalition vote is factored into the result. The commonly held view amongst Senate election analysts is that the equal allocation of seats between the collective left-of-centre and right-of-centre is the norm and that any variation from this is significant (see Economou 2006; Bowler and Denmark 1993; Mackerras 1993). Table 3 outlines the Senate contest as a left-of-centre (that is, Labor, Greens and those directing their GTV preferences to these two parties) versus right-of-centre contest by way of aggregated primary vote, quota won and seats won. The table is quite clear in what it reveals: in four states the right-of-centre won four out of a possible six seats. In two states—South Australia and Western Australia—Labor could win only one seat. The significance of this for post-election politics in Australia was delayed by the constitutional provision that new Senators wait until 1 July the following year to take their seats.

Conclusion

Election outcomes are rarely the result of voters responding to a single issue or even a small number of issues gathered under a single rubric such as ‘the environment’. On the other hand, the environment (if the climate change debate is included) loomed large in national politics between the 2010 and 2013 elections, and the way in which the Gillard Government dealt with it was something voters reflected upon when they went to the polls in 2013. The election result suggests that voters rejected the Gillard Government’s approach to the issue even though opinion polling indicated that a majority of Australians still saw climate change as an important issue that the Australian Government needed to address. Indeed, a Lowy Institute poll outlined the problem for the Government and its crossbench parliamentary supporters when it found that, while support for doing something about climate change was still strong, 58 per cent of respondents rejected the Gillard Government’s carbon pricing scheme, and 57 per cent said they agreed with the Coalition’s policy of abolishing the program (Lowy Institute 2013). In short, the Government had saddled itself with an unpopular policy.

The problems did not end there. In addition to being an unpopular program, the way in which the Gillard Government had reached its decision also contributed to its declining support. Here, Gillard’s promise not to introduce a carbon tax during the campaign and what looked like a breaking of an election promise hurt the standing of both the Government and the Prime Minister. The election result indicated that no amount of rhetoric about doing the right thing and no attempt at sophistry by calling the scheme a ‘price on carbon’ rather than a ‘carbon tax’ was able to ameliorate the electorate’s hostile response to the Gillard Government’s decision to run with the carbon price/tax option. As if

all of this was not deleterious enough, by at least appearing to have adopted an approach previously associated with the Greens, the Gillard Government gave the very strong impression that it had handed leadership of the climate change debate to the minority interests in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Given this, a voter could choose from an array of reasons why she or he would be opposed to the Gillard Government's approach to climate change policy but still think that climate change was happening and that government should do something about it.

The other items on the national environmental policy agenda played out in ways that students of environmental policy politics would be very familiar with (Stewart 2010: 536–7; Downs 1972). The Government would find itself trying to mediate between polarised sectional interest groups, and any decision was bound to alienate at least one side of the ecology-development divide. In the case of the Murray-Darling Basin, both conservationists and producers were dissatisfied with outcomes, although the producers tended to be more hyperbolic in venting their outrage. The marine park decision was also criticised by both sides. For a Labor Government, such matters do not usually have a major electoral impact. These conservation or resource management controversies generally occur in remote communities in electoral districts that tend to be safe for the Coalition parties and involve a small number of constituents, the majority of whom would not vote for the ALP anyway.

The difference this time, however, was that the Gillard Government had found a way through its approach to climate change to universalise the politics of environmentalism to the extent that swinging voters in marginal urban electorates had become involved. This also allowed the otherwise marginalised players in other land use and resource use disputes to have their campaigns resonate in the national debate. The next thing that happened was that these dynamics impacted on the national election, especially in the Senate where the anti-Gillard forces beyond the mainstream centre-right had a lot of success at the expense of the collective left-of-centre which had been in the unfamiliar position of having a majority in the upper house. The Labor caucus knew its approach to climate change was a political disaster—that was one of the reasons why Gillard was removed as leader ahead of the 2013 election. By then it was all too late.

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This text taken from *Abbott's Gambit: The 2013 Australian Federal Election*,
edited by Carol Johnson and John Wanna, published 2015 by
ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.