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Greens get practical but will cost be too great?



JOSH GORDON

From a ruthlessly pragmatic view, a tryst between the Greens and the Liberals seems likely, but won't benefit either party.

Arthur Underwood, the fictional protagonist from *House of Cards*, manipulates, schemes, cajoles and murders his way to the White House, practising a political doctrine he sometimes refers to as "ruthless pragmatism".

Australian politics is not immune, albeit on a less dramatic scale. Right now in Victoria, for example, the Greens and the Liberal Party are quietly wrangling over a deal that is both ruthless and pragmatic.

Under an agreement being brokered by Victorian Liberal Party president Michael Kroger that has infuriated many conservatives, the Liberal Party would direct voters to preference Greens candidates in the Labor seats of Batman and Wills.

Both electorates, formerly Labor strongholds with traditional working class bases, have been subject to demo-

graphic change in recent years, with a flood of well-to-do inner city progressive voters and hipsters slowly shifting the balance the Greens' way.

In exchange for Liberal preferences in Batman and Wills, the Greens would probably run open tickets in further-flung key seats, including the Labor electorates of Bruce and Chisholm, and the Liberal seats of Corangamite and Dunkley.

Both sides are insisting there is no deal. Which is true – at this point. But from a ruthlessly pragmatic viewpoint, a tryst between the two parties seems likely, with strategists claiming it would represent a win-win outcome.

The Greens would mop up Liberal preferences in suburbs like Clifton Hill, Northcote, Preston, Brunswick and Coburg.

And in a major advantage for the Liberal Party, Labor would be forced to fight on its left flank (as well as its right), soaking up scarce campaign resources while fuelling a growing sense of existential nervousness internally.

At the same time, the thinking is that if the Greens were to run an open ticket in Liberal marginal seats like Dunkley and Corangamite, it would do the Coalition no harm and may even provide a slight benefit if the race was close.

All the while, the Greens are madly trying to reassure progressive voters that if circumstances permit, a deal will be done with Labor to form a progressive minority government.

The Liberal Party may be a strange bedfellow for the Greens, but the ultimate objective is to gain political power and influence by increasing the probability of a hung parliament, which is now seen as a real possibility.

As the Greens MP for Melbourne Adam Bandt put it in a chapter for the upcoming book *How to Vote Progressive*

in Australia: Labor or Green? progressive voters actively want the Greens and Labor to share power.

"Until we govern in our own right, we must get ready to be in balance of power in both houses, not just one," Bandt writes.

"Everything should be on the table, from taking ministries to staying on the crossbench, from detailed policy changes to parliamentary reform, from guaranteeing supply sight unseen to wanting to help craft budgets."

You get the idea. All of this provides an interesting case study in political game theory, where two parties with irreconcilably opposed political views are contemplating entering into an arrangement to further their political objectives.

Labor, too, has been sucked into the game, with Bill Shorten desperately attempting to warn progressive voters

against the deal because there is "absolutely no chance" of a deal with the Greens to form a minority government in the event of a hung parliament.

You can't blame either side for these sorts of shenanigans. It's just politics. The objective is to win. Even so, I think such an arrangement would be folly for both sides. Here's why.

First, it is not clear that entering into preference deals actually produces that many extra votes. Alan Griffin, who is retiring as Labor's MP for the marginal federal seat of Bruce, undertook a review of Labor's unsuccessful 2010 state election that analysed the impact of various preference deals between Labor and the Greens.

It found that Labor gained an average of 45 to 51 votes in seats where the Greens recommended voters preference Labor, compared to those in which the Greens ran open tickets. Griffin's



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conclusion? The deals were of “extremely limited value” in terms of the extra votes.

An analysis of the 2010 federal election result by psephologist Antony Green also suggests Greens preference recommendations have a fairly small impact for the big parties, although, interestingly, Liberal preference recommendations directed against the Greens seem to have a major negative impact for the Green vote.

Second, for many voters, such deals are just a bad look, particularly when two political parties on the opposite ends of the political spectrum are climbing into bed. As one senior Liberal strategist put it, conservative branch members are “deeply uncomfortable” with the optics.

“You damage your own brand, and there is no guarantee that branch members would even hand out how-to-vote cards putting the Greens ahead (of Labor).”

For the Greens, the risk is that progressive voters would be so turned off they may vote Labor. This risk is heightened if you believe Shorten when he says he would not form a minority government with the Greens. (Personally, I don’t.)

And third, the Liberal Party should be careful what it wishes for. The conventional wisdom is that the Greens are

more a threat to Labor in the inner city. This is understandable, given the Greens are now well established in the federal seat of Melbourne and have taken a variety of seats away from Labor at the state level.

But history would also say once the Greens get a foothold in the inner city, they also expand into traditional Liberal territory. The state seat of Prahran, formerly held by the Liberal Party, fell to the Greens at the last state election. The federal Liberal seat of Higgins, held by assistant treasurer Kelly O’Dwyer, could be next on the list.

Beyond all of this, after so much scrappiness in Australian politics, voters are surely desperate for political parties to stand on principle. Ultimately, one would hope, policy, rather than shabby deals, will prevail.

Josh Gordon is *The Age’s* state political editor.



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**Greens MP Adam
Bandt says
progressive voters
actively want the
Greens and Labor
to share power.**

Photo: Michael
Clayton-Jones