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By masterminding a preference strategy favouring the Greens in five key seats, the Coalition aims to divide and rule the progressive side of politics. By *Chris Wallace*.

Libs tap Greens power



CHRIS WALLACE

is a Canberra journalist and biographer of Germaine Greer.

Political fragmentation that makes it systemically easier for the Liberal-National Coalition to form government than Labor is poised to become an ongoing legacy of the Turnbull government's 2016 federal election strategy.

The Liberals' likely direction of preferences to the Greens in five Melbourne and Sydney seats is designed to divide and rule the progressive side of politics by building up a left-leaning third party rump in the house of representatives.

Undermining Labor's seat count in its own right, it would set the Coalition up to win more seats than the ALP in the lower house on an ongoing basis, conferring the first right to form

government in the event neither side wins a clear majority.

"The government is warning of the dangers of a hung parliament at the same time as they're trying to create one," opposition leader Bill Shorten told *The Saturday Paper* this week.

"I think people who vote for the Greens political party should be very alive to the fact that their vote will actually be a vote for the Liberals and their agenda of \$100,000 uni degrees, cuts to Medicare and cuts to schools."

The strategy, conceived by Victorian Liberal Party president Michael Kroger, is set to be quietly extended to two winnable seats for the Greens in Sydney, giving the Greens the potential to achieve a critical mass in the lower house it would otherwise struggle to achieve.

"What that does is create more likelihood of hung parliaments," a senior Labor election strategist told *The Saturday Paper*. "It's a deal that makes it more likely that Peter Dutton remains immigration minister after the next election."

The dynamic echoes the ongoing advantage the conservative Cameron government in Britain now enjoys because of the Scottish National Party's inroads into Labour's seat count,



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effectively ending Labour's chance of forming government well into the future.

In a successful strategy crafted by Australian political consultant Lynton Crosby for the Conservatives at last year's British election, the idea of a Labour-SNP coalition was simultaneously whipped up and demonised by Conservatives despite Labour's absolute rejection of it.

In a comparable ploy in the 2016 Australian federal election, Coalition MPs and parts of the media – notably News Corp – are propagating and demonising the idea of a Labor-Greens coalition in

Australia, an idea rejected by the ALP as “dreaming”.

At the same time, the Liberals are preparing to direct preferences to the Greens in five seats, ensuring the very fragmentation of which they are ostensibly warning.

One seat, Melbourne, is already held by the Greens' Adam Bandt but is under strong challenge from Labor candidate and Socialist Left faction member Sophie Ismail. The other four – Batman and Wills in Victoria and Sydney and Grayndler in New South Wales – are prospective Greens gains in the context of Liberal preference assistance.

The development has been barely reported outside Melbourne despite its national significance. Those reports have framed it as part of a Liberals-Greens deal that would see the Greens issue “open tickets” that don't direct preferences in a number of vulnerable marginal Liberal seats. While not a “swap”, the preference deal would subtly, but in extremely tight contests potentially decisively, affect the result by shifting the two-party-preferred vote a few vital percentage points.

The Greens' Member for Melbourne Adam Bandt denied the existence of such a deal with the Liberals this week. A spokesperson for Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale reiterated this to *The Saturday Paper*, adding that there were ample precedents for the Greens not directing preferences in some seats.

However, an agreement to provide mutual aid against Labor in Victoria while ensuring preference swap deniability is as good as done, according to Labor strategists.

“We sat down with the Greens as always and asked, ‘Can we talk a national deal?’” a senior Labor negotiator said this

week of recent preference discussions. “They said, ‘No, we can talk to you about every state except Victoria.’”

Victoria is the state where Kroger, unusually enjoying support across the factional spectrum, is driving the preference strategy. *The Australian* reported one right-wing Victorian Liberal MP saying in response to the ploy this week, “I fucking hate the Greens but I am backing Michael Kroger 100 per cent.” Moderate Liberal Jeff Kennett also gave his tacit support, according to the report.

Labor says the pattern of statements and behaviour evident in preference discussions mirrors those held behind the scenes during negotiations

over changes to senate electoral laws last month. Labor long knew of the secret deal to secure passage of the senate electoral law changes because the government had offered it the same deal at the same time but was rebuffed. The Greens denied a deal until the last moment, then backed the government.

Kroger is pushing the preference strategy aggressively, despite repeated public statements over years that it should be an “article of faith” for Liberals to put the Greens last when it comes to preferences. “I don't think the Liberal Party should ever do a deal with the Greens,” he told *Sky News* in 2013, “because they're a poisonous and insidious influence on Australian politics.”

The prospect is a deep concern for former Liberal prime minister John Howard, who told ABC TV's *7.30* in March of his fears that the deal between the Turnbull government and the Greens to get changes to senate electoral laws through parliament might signal further joint political manoeuvres. “I hope,” he said, “this doesn't presage some kind of understanding about preferences in house of representatives elections between the Coalition and the Greens.”

But a number of disparate, unexpected factors are emerging early in the 2016 campaign which, while each of modest size, may provide a significant cumulative boost to the federal Labor vote as the campaign unfolds.

The first is a potential spillover from the catastrophic fall in the popularity of the Western Australian Liberal state government led by Colin Barnett, with the two-party-preferred vote showing Labor ahead 54-46 points in the latest Newspoll – a strong lead despite the perceived



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unexceptional leadership quality of Labor leader Mark McGowan.

There are also fears the debate raging in the election campaign's first week over the retrospective superannuation tax policy changes announced in the budget earlier this month may bite extra hard in WA. Latent memories of retrospective tax law changes made by John Howard when treasurer in the Fraser government, in response to the bottom-of-the-harbour tax schemes, caused particular animosity in Perth in the early 1980s and linger.

These factors, combined with negative atmospherics surrounding the end of the mining boom, have Liberal strategists worried about the potential loss of up to four seats in WA.

In Queensland, the election of a new state Liberal National Party opposition leader, Tim Nicholls, a leading proponent of former LNP premier Campbell Newman's politically disastrous privatisation agenda, holds the potential to remind Queensland voters of the nasty policy surprises electing Liberal governments can hold.

Tony Abbott's muscularity was perceived to be a better political fit with ordinary Queenslanders than prime minister Malcolm Turnbull's softer personal style. It remains to be seen whether that translates into softer support for the Coalition in a state where Labor must win a swag of seats to have a hope of winning national office.

In contrast, the prime minister is perceived as a vote-saver in Adelaide, where seats such as Sturt, held by industry minister Christopher Pyne, are considered natural Turnbull territory by local Liberals.

"Malcolm has been embraced by South Australians," Pyne told *The Saturday Paper*, "because as a more progressive state than perhaps others, we like what he believes in and who he is."

With the decision to build the next-generation fleet of Australian submarines in Adelaide – instead of Japan, as Abbott planned – Turnbull "has delivered in spades" for South Australia, says Pyne, who is featuring the prime minister prominently in his local campaign.

However, even Turnbull's Adelaide-friendly persona may not save Liberal MP Jamie Briggs in Mayo, where the strongest of the Nick Xenophon Team's lower house candidates, Rebekha Sharkie, coincidentally, and briefly, a former Jamie

Briggs staffer, is a real chance to defeat him in the wake of his Hong Kong scandal.

Another sleeper issue is the shadow Abbott loyalists are casting over some seats, including the Liberal marginal Eden-Monaro in NSW, where sitting member Peter Hendy faces shovel-leaning by the Abbott-aligned among his local rank-and-file branch members. Turnbull's on-the-ground agenda in the NSW marginal seat of Lindsay had to be changed after he and Liberal MP Fiona Scott were intensively questioned by journalists about her switch from Abbott to Turnbull in last year's leadership ballot.

Whether Abbott himself will make election interventions the way Kevin Rudd did against Julia Gillard in the 2010 federal campaign remains an open and intriguing question.

At the end of week one, it is clear the election will be much tighter than initially expected, with little room for error. ●



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Richard Di
Natale talks
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Square last
Saturday
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Melbourne MP
Adam Bandt.