

Book review

**The Australian Greens:
From Activism to Australia's Third Party.
Stewart Jackson (2016).
Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.**

Reviewed by Geoff Robinson (Deakin University)

An excellent book, *The Australian Greens: From Activism to Australia's Third Party*, is based on solid research and analysis. It provides an indispensable guide to the Australian Greens. Stewart Jackson sets a clear research problem: to explain how the Greens as a political party have developed out of the small-g 'green' social movement. The author's consideration of this question provides a firm foundation for future work on the Greens, such as 'bigger picture' questions of what the party's rise reveals about Australian politics and society. Jackson eschews these questions. A consequence of Jackson's focus on the Greens as a party is that that The Australian Greens at times verges on a 'Whig history': a narrative of progress.

Jackson provides a clear summary of the Greens' history in the third chapter. He pulls together the complex history of the various state branches. It is a narrative that is very much focused on the emergence of the Greens as a national political party.

Jackson does not situate the Greens in the context of the crisis of the Australian old left in the eighties. Although Jackson is a veteran of Green politics his narrative mode is one of detachment. Personalities are largely absent. Individuals in Jackson's account function largely as bearers of an inexorable trend towards professionalism and electoralism. Here Jackson stands in the tradition of scholarship on political parties that goes back to Robert Michels (1911), but unlike Michels he views this future with equanimity. Jackson's account in Chapter Four of the Greens' ideological positioning continues this theme. He describes how the Greens rejected both dreams of a politics

'beyond left and right' or the goal of providing a radical left alternative. Instead the Greens evolved to espouse a moderate leftism with post-materialist inflections.

This image of the Greens is reinforced by the later chapters of the book. Here Jackson demonstrates methodological innovation. Past scholarship on Australian political parties has tended to combine narrative political history with survey-based quantitative electoral analysis. Jackson digs deeper to distinguish between party members, activists and staff, and he further distinguishes between staff employed by the party and staff that work for members of parliament. In Chapter Six he analyses the role of policy within the Greens and the differing responses of members, activists and staff. Again the pattern identified is largely one of ideological uniformity and a convergence on a position that combines environmental and social justice concerns.

Jackson identifies a tendency towards ideological moderation over time, particularly among those who joined the party after the 2001 Tampa election as the Greens' identity as a political party became clearer. In this book it is 2001 that appears as the birth date of the modern Greens. The dismissal of Whitlam in 1975 inspired the Hawke-Keating Labor generation, but Labor's retreat in 2001 shaped the consciousness of Richard Di Natale and his cohorts.

Jackson's description of the Greens' membership does challenge some preconceptions. The average age of party members and activists is in the fifties and staff tends to be in their forties, but his analysis does confirm the stereotype of the Greens as a party of the educated moral middle class.

The maturity of the Green's membership is significant for another reason. Many Greens lived through the experience of Hawke-Keating Labor. Many of those who came together in the early nineties to form the Greens were inspired by opposition to Labor's neo-liberal turn. Their story is told in Tony Harris' *Basketweavers and true believers* from the perspective of a former member of the Sydney Labor left. Jackson however describes a party in which these members have been swamped by the generation of 2001.

For most Greens today the problem with Labor is not neo-liberalism but the party's complicity in John Howard's cultural conservatism. In Jackson's narrative Howard looms as large as Bob Brown. As Howard reshaped Liberalism in his image the Greens came to define themselves as the anti-Howard party. One result of this is the

marginalization of radical positions. Jackson shows how old ‘dark green’ concerns, such as opposition to genetic engineering, are much less central to current activists, but this moderation is most apparent on economic policy. Only a small minority of Green activists prioritise the fight against economic globalisation. Thus Jackson gives little attention to critics of the Greens from the left or even Lee Rhiannon’s cautious misgivings about the vision of coalition with Labor. Jackson hastily passes over the history of the Tasmanian Greens in alliance with Labor as ‘not entirely successful’.

The Australian Greens is an indispensable work for analysts of contemporary Australian party politics. In addition to its content it provides an insight into the ethos of the Greens’ ruling group.

Reviewer

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