

Environmentalism, conservative politics,
minor parties and
electoral competition in Australia:
The case of the *liberals for forests*

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Abstract

It is known that many Liberal-National voters are environmentally conscious. However, the lack of importance of environmentalism in influencing voter behaviour, compared with socio-economic ideologies and issues, means that such voters are unlikely to find appealing Australia's left-leaning environmental parties. Given the balance of influences on the vote, Liberal-National vulnerability on environmental issues would seem to be most exploitable by a right-of-centre environmental party, were one to emerge. This paper examines the case of the 'liberals for forests', a rare example of just such a party, which had some success in WA State elections in 2001. The paper supports the notion that environmental issues have the potential to influence vote choice, in a positive sense, on the right as well as the left of Australian politics.

Voter interest in the natural environment has for some time been a force shaping Australian political life. Australian Election Study surveys for the four federal elections of the 1990s show that the environment maintained a reasonably steady level of voter engagement throughout this period, as other concerns waxed and waned, and was regularly among voters' top six or seven issues.¹ The electoral salience of environmental values and issues has been an important vehicle for minor party insurgency. But, as McAllister and Studlar have argued, the growth of widespread interest in, and disputation about, environmental issues has not yet succeeded in producing a significant electoral realignment.² Voters remain strongly motivated by Old Politics values, ideologies and issues. Nevertheless, the elites of established parties, perhaps anticipating realigning pressures, have undergone some degree of ideological evolution in response to New Politics concerns.³ This accords with the impression that the major parties have adapted their rhetoric and policies, so far fairly successfully, to meet the electoral challenge posed by environmentalism and the new parties it helps sustain.

But adaptation by the major parties has not been stress-free. They have all experienced internal tensions induced by the need to make choices of different kinds between economic interests and environmental protection. These are often particularly stark in the Labor Party with its institutional linkage to trade unions, the jobs of whose members are often directly threatened by environmental policies such as the restriction of logging in native forests. But it may be that the Liberals and Nationals are more seriously cross-pressured, and potentially more electorally vulnerable, on environmental issues than the ALP. A problem for the Liberal and National parties, confirmed by McAllister and Studlar, is that there is a significant level of hostility among their supporters to an emphasis on the environment over competing concerns, whereas Labor supporters overall are not significantly motivated one way or the other.⁴ In other words, there seems to be an electoral constraint, albeit small, on the ability of Liberal and National elites to adopt environmental priorities which does not exist for the ALP. There are nevertheless large numbers of environmentalists among Liberal-National voters. Around 20 percent of voters regard themselves as sympathisers of the environmental movement, constituting in Studlar and McAllister's words 'a vast pool of potential defectors which could easily

decide the outcome of a closely fought election.' Perhaps as many as a third of these are Liberal-National voters, while larger numbers are Labor voters.⁵

This cross-pressuring of the Liberals and Nationals may explain why, at least at the federal level, Labor seems to have adapted more successfully than its major competitors to appeal to voters motivated by environmental concerns. Through the 1990s, Labor maintained an advantage, at most federal elections a sizable one, in terms of voters' perceptions of the closeness of the major parties' policies on the environment to voters' own views. As well as boosting Labor's primary vote, this advantage has probably been of greater indirect assistance in facilitating a flow of preferences to Labor from small party voters. In the 1998 federal election, even among Liberal-National voters, the margin in favour of their own parties' policies on the environment was only 20 percent (compared with a corresponding figure of 43 percent for Labor voters). This was the joint smallest such margin among the 13 issues canvassed by the Australian Election Study, along with the sale of Telstra where the Coalition parties were equally out of tune with their own voters.⁶

But the lack of importance of environmentalism in influencing voter behaviour, compared with socio-economic ideologies and issues, means that voters are unlikely to desert the Liberals and Nationals in large numbers for parties on the left of Australian politics. McAllister and Studlar have estimated that 'Old Politics ideology is around six times more important in structuring the vote than New Politics ideology'.⁷ While there may be some room for debate about the placement of the Australian Democrats on the left-right scale, it is a reasonable generalisation that, in Australia, environmentalism has been a left cause in party political terms. Given the balance of influences on the vote, Liberal and National vulnerability on environmental issues would seem to be most exploitable by a right of centre environmental party, were one to emerge.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the case of the Western Australian based *liberals for forests* (hereafter LFF)⁸, a rare example of just such a party, which had a considerable measure of success in contesting a number of Liberal seats at the Western Australian general election of 2001 and a subsequent by-election, followed by a much more modest performance at the 2001 federal election. The origins and nature of the party, which created its unique appeal, are discussed, followed by its campaign strategy, constraints on its campaign and the extent to which its electoral objectives were attained. Then, within limits determined by the aggregate data, the paper explores the proposition that the LFF was able to exploit a gap in the political market-place for a right of centre environmental party and that it succeeded in siphoning off a significant share of the Liberal vote. If this could be confirmed, it would provide support for the notion that environmental issues have the potential to be electorally salient, in the positive sense that support for

environmental protection may help determine vote choice, on the right as well as the left of Australian politics. Alternative explanations for the LFF's performance are also examined, in particular that it may have benefited from undifferentiated support for green parties at the state election or that its appeal had little to do with its anti-logging message but instead reflected Liberal voters' disaffection with the Liberal Party.

The *liberals for forests*: Origins and nature

The origins and nature of the LFF make it an ideal vehicle for exploiting the potential of an environmental issue to stimulate vote change among the politically conservative. Adapting the classificatory scheme proposed by Jaensch and Mathieson, the LFF is perhaps best described as 'single issue environmental', with some secessionist characteristics.⁹ To label the LFF single-issue is relatively uncontroversial, since it was created as a result of dissatisfaction with the management of a single policy area, namely forestry. Whilst many of its candidates did have policies on other issues, some of them environmental, these were particular to each electorate, not well publicised and secondary to forestry. Its area of primary interest makes it an environmental or conservationist party. But, importantly, it has lacked an articulated commitment to broad social transformation, societal value change, or social justice issues. These are the characteristics of other green parties, including to an extent the Australian Democrats, which arguably give them a radical or left hue and reduce their appeal to economic liberals and conservatives. The LFF is secessionist in that its founders were long-term Liberal Party supporters or members who professedly disassociated themselves from that party over its stance on forestry. The LFF aimed to reverse the Liberal Party's forestry policy by causing enough electoral damage to prove that the Liberals had misjudged community opinion. In this sense, the LFF is analogous to other prominent secessionist parties, most notably the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which have parted from the parent party over a key issue and then have sought to use electoral competition to press their point with the parent party at the polls. The emergence of the LFF also appeared to owe something to longstanding internal disagreements about the running of the Liberal Party and the role within the Party of particular individuals.

But the LFF is much more weakly secessionist in character than the DLP. It was not a product of the disaffiliation, or desertion, of parliamentary members, although some individuals active in the LFF, such as John Dallymore and Tom Hurtsford, were former

Liberal Party office bearers. Further, its founders and members continued to profess liberal-conservative beliefs and values consistent with those of mainstream Liberal Party members. The party's name advertised its Liberal affinities, but it may also have been intended to emphasize the liberal as opposed to conservative leanings of its members. Finally, it was communicated to the Liberal Party that if the state election gave the LFF the balance of power, the LFF would assist the Liberals to form government, in return for an end to the logging of old growth forest. The LFF was thus a party of Liberal provenance to whom Liberal voters, unhappy either with the Liberal Party's forestry policy or with its *modus operandi* or leadership, might reasonably turn in the hope of influencing developments in the Liberal Party.

The LFF developed from a lobby group, Doctors For the Preservation of Old Growth Forests (DFPOGF), which had protested in late 1998 and early 1999 against the WA government's policy of permitting the logging of old growth forest in WA's South West. DFPOGF was one of many community groups and environmentally-conscious political parties demanding the reform of the Regional Forestry Agreement to radically reduce logging levels and to ensure the preservation of remnant old growth forest. The issue was heavily publicised, with footage and photographs of the protests appearing regularly in the media. Public figures such as Australian Football League coach Mick Malthouse, fashion designer Liz Davenport and businesswoman Janet Holmes Court lent their names and support to the movement to persuade the government to change its policy. Prestigious figures in and around the Liberal Party, notably 93 year old Liberal Party 'matriarch' Dame Rachel Cleland whose late husband had been one of the founders of the Party, also spoke out against the Party's refusal to guarantee the protection of remaining old growth forests.¹⁰

The Regional Forestry Agreement was announced on 4 May 1999, concluding a three year process of negotiation involving state and federal governments and designed to balance the long-term interests of the timber industry with demands for the conservation of native forests. The Agreement provided for a 12 percent increase in the forest area set aside in conservation reserves and a 24 percent reduction in logging levels, with job losses estimated at 400. But it guaranteed the protection of only 60 to 70 percent (the exact figure was disputed) of WA's remnant old growth forests, which constitute a mere 10 percent of the original South West forests.¹¹ The Coalition government in WA believed it had produced a politically defensible outcome, which met community concerns by ensuring a large reduction in the harvesting of native forests and substantially higher conservation standards. The challenge, from the government's point of view, was to sell the outcome to a public strongly swayed by the environmental movement. To this end, the State and

federal governments allocated over \$300,000 to ensuring the community was informed about the concessions the Agreement made to the environmentalists' case.¹²

Two months after the announcement of the Regional Forest Agreement, the LFF was launched by Dr Keith Woollard (former federal President of the Australian Medical Association) and Dr Arthur Harris, members of DFPOGF who claimed to be Liberal Party supporters of long-standing. The reason given for the creation of the new party was these individuals' disillusionment with the Liberal Party's stance on forestry and its alleged refusal to respond to community concerns in this area. The LFF's stated aims were to protect and restore old growth forests, to stand candidates in the next State election and to direct preferences against pro-logging Members of Parliament.¹³

While the LFF had been launched as a political party, it operated initially as a pressure group and did not finally decide to run candidates until several months before the February 2001 State election. Until this time, there was a view amongst its members that the new party's massive support among Liberal voters¹⁴, together with the public's overwhelming opposition to the government's forestry policy as revealed in opinion polls showing 80-90 percent of Western Australians in favour of an end to the clear-felling of old growth forest, would convince the Liberal Party it had misjudged community attitudes and prompt the policy reversal sought by the LFF.¹⁵

A decision by a new group to field candidates for election is not generally one to inspire optimism about the chances of electoral success. As Richmond observes, the move is rarely profitable: 'for a well managed group the answer to continued success seems to lie in pressure group activity rather than in becoming a minor party.'¹⁶ Jaensch and Mathieson agree that the transition to a political party is usually 'the very last and very unsuccessful resort' of pressure groups that have failed to affect policy in other ways.¹⁷ However, they also note that having an organizational base in a pressure group can be advantageous to a fledgling party, as it can provide structure, resources and a body of committed members.¹⁸ Richmond makes the additional point that a group may rationally choose to become a party in order to win publicity for the cause, whilst having little expectation of electoral success.¹⁹

These observations all apply to the LFF. Its origins in the pressure group Doctors for the Preservation of Old Growth Forests meant that the party had access to people, such as Dr Keith Woollard and Dr Arthur Harris, with experience in the campaign to reform forestry policy. Liz Davenport (Nedlands) recalled attending early meetings where it was argued that forming a party would generate publicity of use in pressure group activities, whether

or not the 'party' decided to compete at the election.²⁰ The founders showed skill in maximizing such publicity, for instance by setting up shop in a brightly repainted landmark building, the former Nedlands post office, on a major western suburbs thoroughfare. Fielding candidates in the 2001 election was a decision the group edged into when it became apparent that its pressure group activities had not achieved the desired level of success.

This is not to say that the LFF was unsuccessful in its interest group phase. Its activities and its strong following among Liberal voters undoubtedly contributed to a major policy reversal by the state government three months after the announcement of the Regional Forest Agreement. Competitive pressure from the Labor Party also played a role. In the wake of the May Agreement, Labor leader Geoff Gallop had moved to persuade his party to adopt a policy of ending all logging in old growth forest. This relocated the Labor Party much closer to mainstream opinion, shaped by green groups including the LFF who were campaigning for an immediate and permanent end to all such logging. The growing pressure on the Coalition front bench led first to a breaking of ranks and then to a major policy shift, involving an immediate ban on the clear felling of Karri forest and the phasing out of wood-chipping in native forests by 2003, by which date there would be no logging in old growth Karri and Tingle forest.

But the government's backdown failed to dowse the issue. In the face of the threatened loss of up to 1500 jobs in the South West, the timber industry was outraged, as were members of the Coalition parties who feared an electoral backlash in a region where the Coalition held all lower house seats. On the other hand, the government had not given enough ground to placate green groups. Unfortunately for the government, the policy change, finalised amidst division in its ranks, ultimately appeared grudging, ad hoc and panic-driven.

The LFF, with some success to its credit already but its objectives still unrealized, was emboldened to take its fight with the Liberal Party to the polls. In addition to the extensive grass roots following its forest campaign drew upon, the LFF could hope as well to tap into a well of generalised, longstanding disaffection among Liberals and former Liberals with the WA Liberal Party's hierarchy. The LFF's prospects of firing a serious shot across the bows of the Liberal Party were thus seemingly enhanced by its right of centre and secessionist characteristics.

The campaign: Strategic choices

LFF-endorsed candidates contested eight heartland Liberal seats in the Legislative Assembly at the February 2001 Western Australian general election, seven of which were held by Liberal ministers. Following the retirement from parliament of former Premier Richard Court, after the Coalition's loss of government, the LFF also contested a by-election for the Legislative Assembly seat of Nedlands. It subsequently fielded candidates at the November 2001 federal election.

It should be noted that in the State electoral contests the LFF's candidates did not officially wear the party's label. The LFF's application to have its name registered was refused on 10 January 2001, on the grounds that the name was too similar to that of the Liberal Party and thus apt to confuse voters.²¹ As a result, the candidates decided to list themselves on the ballot paper as independents (as opposed to appearing without a party label).

The failure to win registration was probably much less of an obstacle for the party than it might seem. Some candidates devised stratagems to assist voters to connect their names with the party. The most creative approach was taken by the candidate for Warren-Blackwood, who changed his name by deed poll to Chris 'Libs for Forests' Davies, which then appeared on the ballot paper. Others relied on placing the party's name and logo in prominent places on their promotional material and 'how to vote' cards. On the other hand, Liz Davenport (Nedlands), the LFF candidate with the highest community profile, was unconcerned by the fact the party was unregistered. She preferred to be recognised as an independent and believed her own name brought her better publicity and recognition than did the party name.²²

With regard to the LFF's campaign, the official situation, whereby the 'party' was no more than a group of independents, reflected the reality of a great variation in resources, techniques and organisation from seat to seat. Financially, candidates covered most of their own needs, although the party did provide each with a small contribution. Some candidates reported real difficulties campaigning, as it involved significant fundraising along with the need to take leave from work. Others had fewer problems. For example, Frank Lindsey (Darling Range) explained that he started fund-raising early and had useful business contacts who contributed to his campaign, enabling him to outspend all other candidates in his electorate.²³ Similarly, Liz Davenport (Nedlands) had the personal and business resources to run a stylish campaign, with matching t-shirts for campaign staff and a Barking Owl logo on her extensive promotional material.

In their campaigns, the majority of candidates relied on the cheap, labour intensive techniques predictable for emergent, community-based parties; namely doorknocking, talking to people in shopping centres, leaflet drops (by hand and by post) and distribution of 'how to vote' cards before and on election day. Candidates received differing levels of support from local LFF branches and other supporters; Davenport (Nedlands) and Janet Woollard (Alfred Cove) appear to have received the most assistance, whilst others struggled to staff all the polling booths on election day.

Those who could afford it adopted more sophisticated techniques. Several ran advertisements in local newspapers and the DFPOGF published full-page advertisements in *The West Australian* newspaper in the last week of the campaign. Woollard (Alfred Cove) employed an advertising agency and Davenport's promotional material was professionally designed and printed. Several candidates (Woollard, Davenport and Robin Collin, a medical practitioner who contested the Nedlands by-election in June 2001) were of considerable interest to the media as individuals, but others struggled to get a mention in local newspapers.

Beyond publishing newspaper advertisements, the party organized meetings at which candidates were given advice about campaigning. The party's secessionist character gave it access to people with experience in organizing election campaigns. John Dallymore had been campaign manager for Independent Liberal Liz Constable and her Liberal predecessor in the Legislative Assembly seat of Churchlands, and Tom Hurtsford was a former Liberal MP and past State Director of the Liberal Party. Party founder, Keith Woollard, also had a number of informal discussions with politically active individuals about minor party campaigning strategies and the strategic use of preferences.²⁴ These connections to the world of political practice were undoubtedly important as none of the candidates had previously stood for Parliament and even many members of the party's executive were politically inexperienced.

Which voters to target was a decision that flowed naturally from the LFF's nature as a conservative-liberal and environmental party. Most of the candidates agreed they were attempting to attract voters who usually would have voted for the Liberal Party but were disillusioned with the Liberal Party's stance on logging. In interviews, several candidates referred specifically to the idea of a party that combined conservative-liberal and environmental values and mentioned the aversion Liberal voters might feel towards supporting the existing environmental parties due to their 'leftist' credentials. But some candidates also talked, in the fashion of all contemporary minor parties and independents, about appealing to voters who had become cynical about the major parties' interest in listening to voters and being responsive to their concerns.

Whilst the majority of the candidates had relatively clear ideas about who their likely supporters were and chose seats in which they believed many such voters could be found, few employed selective means of reaching these voters. This may have been due in part to the fact that mechanisms such as mail-outs, based on information about individuals contained in various databases, are expensive and time consuming. An exception was Frank Lindsey (Darling Range) who door-knocked small samples of households and then letter-boxed intensively in areas where he had received a positive response from householders. Another was Janet Woollard (Alfred Cove), who used electronic databases to send material to teachers and nurses, groups which she felt would be receptive either to her candidature or to her campaign.²⁵

The LFF had little contact with either of the major parties throughout the campaign, but considerable interchange with the Greens (WA) and the Australian Democrats. Janet Woollard (Alfred Cove) was the only candidate contacted by the Liberal Party, which asked her where she was putting the Liberal incumbent (embattled Minister for Fair Trading, Doug Shave) on her 'how to vote' card. Liz Davenport (Nedlands) challenged Richard Court to a debate but he did not return her phone calls. Some Greens (WA) candidates perceived the LFF as a threat because both parties were targeting the environmental vote.²⁶ This seems to have translated into a refusal to cooperate in some electorates. John Daw (Swan Hills) reported that the Greens were not prepared to negotiate preference deals. Frank Lindsey (Darling Range) also commented that the Greens were difficult to deal with, although in his case this seems to have been a result of the Greens' consensus decision-making process.²⁷ Robin Collin (Nedlands by-election) did not find the Greens hostile, but felt disadvantaged by the long-standing preference arrangements that exist between the Greens and the Democrats. He also noted the difficulty of negotiating with the Greens, due to their involvement of grass-roots members in decisions about preferences.²⁸ In other electorates, LFF candidates reported a close and productive relationship with the Greens: Pamela Dell (Kingsley), Liz Davenport and Janet Woollard all said the Greens candidates were approachable and happy to exchange preferences.²⁹

The Australian Democrats claimed to have welcomed the presence of the LFF because it helped focus attention on environmental protection.³⁰ The relationship between the two seems to have been cooperative throughout. Importantly, there were no preference arrangements because the Democrats decided not to recommend second and subsequent preferences for the lower house. But the Australian Democrats' campaign manager, former Senator Jack Evans, spent time advising Keith Woollard on the negotiation of preference arrangements.

For a small party with meagre resources, the choice of seats to contest is obviously crucial. At the WA general election, the LFF contested only lower house seats. This may seem peculiar given the lower threshold for election established by proportional representation in five and seven member constituencies, the electoral system utilized for Legislative Council elections since 1987; and given also the demonstrated balance of power potential of small groups in the WA upper house. But the focus on safe, Liberal lower house seats followed naturally from the party's origins and its objective of demonstrating to the Liberal Party that it was out of touch on forest policy with its core supporters in the electorate. Keith Woollard also argued that shortage of money and volunteers would have made it very difficult to campaign effectively in the larger geographic areas of upper house electorates.³¹ Further, the inability of the LFF to register as a party would have been a liability given the de facto party-list character of the WA Legislative Council's electoral system.

Proportional representation in large multi-member electoral districts is undoubtedly advantageous to minor parties, but only if they can successfully appeal to a geographically widespread constituency. At the November 2001 federal election, its name having been accepted by the Commonwealth Electoral Commission, the LFF hoped that it would be able to establish a sufficiently strong and attractive party image to campaign successfully in a state-wide Senate electoral contest. This was a gamble for the candidate with the strongest community image, clothing designer Liz Davenport, who chose to run for the Senate when she might have chosen the House of Representatives seat of Curtin. The latter was a Liberal seat in which she had already built a sizable base of support during the state election and which in 1996 had returned a former Liberal running as an independent (Alan Rocher) due substantially to local disaffection with the Liberal Party organization. Thus, as well as contesting five WA House of Representatives seats at the 2001 federal election, the LFF also stood candidates for the Senate in Western Australia, Victoria and Tasmania.

Results

For a newly established party, the LFF was arguably successful in the WA election. Its average vote in the eight seats contested was 10.1 percent. Consistent with the decentralised character of the party, the average masks considerable variability: at the upper end of the range candidates polled impressive totals of 20.3 percent (Alfred Cove) and 18.2 percent (Nedlands) of first preference votes, compared with low end results of 1.7

percent (Warren-Blackwood) and 3.6 percent (Kingsley). But four candidates attracted over 10 percent of first preference votes (followed by a fifth at the Nedlands by-election, where the candidate achieved 12.2 percent) and six polled over five percent. Moreover, the LFF achieved the holy grail of a seat in parliament: Janet Woollard won the seat of Alfred Cove, toppling the Liberal Minister for Fair Trading, Doug Shave. Admittedly there was a large element of good fortune here, as must always be the case for a party to win a seat with a fifth of the primary vote: in a field of nine, with the Labor party having withdrawn from the contest to maximize the likelihood of a Liberal loss, marginal advantages in the flow of preferences were crucial in edging Woollard ahead of a rival independent after the sixth and penultimate distribution.

With regard to its objective of inflicting electoral damage on the Liberals, the LFF had thus struck a painful blow by removing one of the Parliamentary Liberal Party's most influential figures. In the other seats, the effectiveness of the LFF's strategy is more difficult to determine. Five of the eight contested seats were held by the Liberal incumbents. But in the three which were lost, LFF preferences³² clearly played a decisive role in one case (Darling Range) and a contributing role in another (Albany).³³ In the other case (Swan Hills), the LFF candidate was eliminated too early in the count to allow his contribution to the result to be estimated.³⁴ Overall, then, the LFF's strategy seems to have been reasonably effective.

The federal election was a different story. The objectives and strategy here were far less clear and the magnitude of the task much greater. Five House of Representatives seats, all in Western Australia, were contested. But this time there was not an exclusive focus on Liberal seats: three of the seats were held by Liberals and two by Labor representatives. These yielded only one strong outcome: Keith Woollard won 11.21 percent of the primary vote in Labor leader Beazley's seat of Brand. Most of this vote seems to have been at the expense of the Liberal Party whose primary vote was down 2.47 percent despite being buoyed by the large drop (5.82 percent) in the vote for Pauline Hanson's One Nation. There was only one other case where the primary vote exceeded two percent (Curtin 2.31 percent); the other totals were around 1.5 percent. All of the incumbent Liberals held their seats. In the Western Australian Senate contest, the LFF had little impact: its primary vote was only 1.42 percent and its effect minimal since the Liberal vote was up and the maximum practicable number of Liberals (three) were elected. Interestingly, the LFF performed better in Victoria, where it attracted a creditable 2.4 percent of the Senate vote without appearing to affect the result in terms of

seats won: again three Liberals were returned. In Tasmania the party seems to have been barely noticed, registering only 0.48 percent of the primary vote.

A conservative environmental vote?

It was hypothesized at the outset that the LFF's success at the Western Australian state election may have been a consequence of its ability to exploit the electoral potential of a liberal-conservative environmental appeal. Unfortunately, in the absence of survey information, it is impossible to be definite about the sorts of electors who were attracted to the LFF. Certainly the Liberal vote fell in 2001 in all of the seats contested by the LFF, in many cases very steeply. But given the depredations visited upon the conservative parties by Pauline Hanson's One Nation at this election (Stone 2001), it is generally not possible to estimate the LFF's contribution to vote losses. However, there is some support in the aggregate data for the ideas that the LFF attracted voters who had not previously been prepared to express an environmental vote and that these voters were casting a strong environmental vote rather than merely voicing generalised disaffection with the Liberals or with both major parties. Simple tests have been used for each of these propositions.

A new environmental vote?

It might be conjectured that voters viewed the LFF as merely another green party and that, as a result, the LFF did not gain support from a new group of voters but instead drew on an existing environmental vote. This can be tested (T1a) by comparing the vote the Greens (WA), undoubtedly the highest profile environmental party in Western Australia, received at the 1996 and 2001 state elections in the seats contested by the LFF. A related test (T1b) is whether the average Greens vote was higher in seats not contested by the LFF in 2001 than in seats contested by both the LFF and the Greens. If either the Greens vote in the relevant seats fell between 1996 and 2001 or the average Greens vote in 2001 proved to be substantially higher in seats not contested by the LFF, this would suggest that the LFF and the Greens might have drawn support from the same group of voters.

There were only four seats contested by the LFF that the Greens also contested in both 1996 and 2001. In three of these (Carine, Darling Range and Swan Hills) its vote stayed roughly the same. In Nedlands it decreased by 4.4 percent, but this might well have been a

consequence of the greater number of candidates who contested Nedlands in 2001. At any rate, these results do not seriously challenge the proposition that the LFF and Greens' votes came from separate sections of the electorate.

The average Greens vote in 2001 in the four seats contested by the LFF and the Greens was 8.48 percent. The average Green vote in seats not contested by the Greens but not the LFF (41 seats) was only marginally higher at 8.64 percent. It cannot be concluded that the presence of the LFF lowered the Greens vote, as would be expected if the two parties were drawing votes from the one source.

A second test (T2) involves examining the combined environmental vote, that is, the sum of the votes received by the Greens and the LFF in seats contested by the LFF. If LFF and Greens voters came from one group, rather than two distinguishable groups, then their combined vote in each seat in 2001 might be expected to be roughly similar to the vote the Greens received in that seat in 1996. The evidence is that the combined environmental vote in each seat in 2001 was very much higher than the Greens vote in that seat in 1996. The average Greens vote in the four seats in 1996 was 9.25 percent; the average LFF plus Greens vote in those seats in 2001 was 20.07 percent. Even in the other four seats, those not contested by the Greens in 1996 but by both parties in 2001, the average combined environmental vote in 2001 (17.04 percent) greatly exceeded the average Greens vote in seats contested in 1996 (8.41 percent). This test is certainly not conclusive as the environmental vote can fluctuate considerably between elections. Equally, the test does not disprove the hypothesis that the LFF and the Greens attracted different types of voters.

But did the LFF take votes which would otherwise have gone to the Australian Democrats, the other small party in the contest with an environmental image? This certainly plausible *priori*, but it is not supported by the aggregate data. The Democrats vote certainly dropped in 2001 (from 5.08 percent in 1996 to 2.64 percent), but the decline was fairly uniform across the seats contested. Of the Liberal seats they contested, the Democrats averaged 3.46 percent in the six seats where they ran alongside an LFF candidate and 3.15 percent in the other 15 seats.

The analysis above offers some, albeit not conclusive, support for the contention that the LFF did not merely draw upon an existing pool of environmental voters, but was able to mobilise voters unwilling to support the leftist Greens (WA) or the Australian Democrats.

Environmental vote or generalised protest?

It is possible that the LFF did not attract voters wishing to express strong support for its environmental cause, but that it acted instead, together with other minor parties, as a vehicle for a generalised protest against one or both of the major parties. If so, the pattern of support for the LFF across the seats it contested could be expected to mirror that of other minor parties; that is, the LFF vote would be strong or weak as other minor parties were strongly or weakly supported. This conjecture was tested (T3) by correlating the LFF vote with the remainder of the minor party vote across the nine State electoral districts (including the Nedlands by-election). The result was a weak coefficient of 0.08, indicating the lack of a relationship between the LFF vote and that of other minor parties.

Furthermore, the LFF vote often constituted a high percentage of the minor party vote in the relevant electorates: more than 30 percent in five out of the nine cases. If voters were merely voicing a protest against the major parties, one would expect a more even distribution between the minor parties.

To the extent that those voting for the LFF had a strong commitment to the cause championed by the LFF, they should have been prepared to support that party even where, or perhaps especially where, their support was most likely to result in the Liberal incumbent losing his or her seat. If, on the other hand, the LFF's Liberal-oriented voters were simply interested in expressing diffuse dissatisfaction with the Liberal Party or the Coalition government, they might be expected to show a greater reluctance to press their protest the closer the contest for the seat. (The same should have been true for any Labor identifiers supporting the LFF: the closer the contest the more likely such protesters would presumably be to assist the Labor Party to win the seat.)³⁵ These alternatives were tested (T4) by correlating two measures of safeness for the Liberal Party of seats contested by the LFF with the LFF vote in those seats. The two measures of safeness used were (i) the margin between the two party preferred vote for the major parties, divided by two, and (ii) the size of the Liberal Party vote. For either measure, a strong, positive correlation would seem to indicate a protest effect rather than a commitment to the LFF's cause. However, the correlation between the size of the margin and the LFF vote is actually -0.46 . The correlation between the Liberal Party primary vote and the LFF vote is -0.45 .³⁶ These are moderate strength *negative* coefficients, which indicate that the safer the seat, the lower the LFF vote tended to be. Rather than suggesting a protest vote, this indicates that LFF voters were energised in proportion to their capacity to influence the outcome of the contest for a seat.

In assessing the character of the LFF vote – that is, whether protest or committed – it would be useful to know where LFF voters placed their preferences. Again, the aggregate

data gives little more than a broad indication about this, as information is available about the preference distribution of LFF votes only at the point where the LFF candidate was eliminated from the count in any seat. The earlier the candidate is eliminated in the count the more information there is about the second preferences of those who gave the LFF their first preference; those eliminated later in the count will have accumulated votes from a range of other candidates. In several seats in the WA election where the candidate was eliminated early no more than a quarter of the second preferences, perhaps considerably less, flowed to the Liberal Party.³⁷ This strengthens the idea that the LFF vote tended to be a committed one. It is tempting to extrapolate to the other seats contested, but because the LFF operated in many ways as a collection of independents it is possible that the preference distribution was very different from one seat to another.

What of the idea that the LFF vote was a conservative one, specifically that it drew heavily on previous supporters of the Liberal Party? We have provided some evidence that the LFF vote was not part of an undifferentiated green or minor party vote. Further, it seems fairly safe to assume that the LFF's well-known Liberal Party links, even advertised in its name, would have made it unattractive to Labor identifiers who, after all, had other environmental parties to turn to if they were tempted in this direction. It is likely that the LFF received disproportionate support from previous Liberal voters.

In summary, only tentative conclusions can be drawn from the analyses of the aggregate data reported here. The data is simply not adequate to allow us to say with confidence that the electoral base of the LFF contained substantial numbers of Liberal identifiers who were strongly committed to using their vote to advance the protection of WA forests, regardless of the possibility that their voting behaviour might lead to a loss of seats for the Liberal Party. But the evidence accumulated here does provide this proposition with a modest level of support.

Conclusion

The LFF's emergence and performance are manifestations of the changing character of Australian politics: the weakening of party identification, the growing salience of issues in electoral politics, the consolidation of environmental values in the electorate. Support for the environment now clearly exists across the social and political spectrum; it is no longer (if it ever was) the exclusive domain of young, urban, tertiary educated citizens or

confined to the politics of radical protest.³⁸ In WA, the groups calling for an end to logging in old growth forest ranged from the Wilderness Society and forest-occupying green protesters to groups of middle and upper class professionals, such as Doctors for the Preservation of Old Growth Forests and Men & Women In Suits For Old Growth Forests. Yet over time the parties that have been the most successful in campaigning on environmental issues are to the left of the political spectrum. The lack of a conservative party willing to cultivate in a sustained way an image of concern with environmental protection means that there is arguably a gap in the political market which will be more or less exploitable depending on the issue context at a given election and the general appeal of the major parties. At the WA state election in 2001, the LFF was plausibly able to exploit such a gap; its secessionist characteristics providing it with liberal-conservative credibility, the prominence of the forestry issue giving it a popular cause, and disaffection with the Coalition government³⁹ and the Liberal Party encouraging Liberal identifiers to consider their alternatives. At the federal election later in the same year there was less opportunity, as the task was greater and the circumstances were less favourable.

Environmentalism is undoubtedly a complex political phenomenon. It has been suggested that voters motivated by an interest in environmental protection form distinct clusters. Crook and Pakulski have identified a 'brown' cluster of those most concerned with pollution and waste disposal and a 'green' cluster of those most concerned with logging and wildlife.⁴⁰ This distinction has been held to have political significance. McAllister and Studlar have found that 'green' problems generate greater activism than 'brown' problems.⁴¹ Crook and Pakulski's analysis of 1993 Australian Electoral Study survey data demonstrated a link between the 'green' cluster and support for the Labor Party, Democrats or Greens and between the 'brown' cluster and support for the Coalition parties.⁴² A concern with logging was found to be particularly strongly associated with 'left' self-identification.⁴³

Nothing in the present paper refutes the existence of a 'green-left syndrome'⁴⁴ in Australian electoral behaviour, just as it is apparent in the party system. But there seems to be no compelling reason why individuals concerned with logging and wildlife should be more likely to be left than right leaning in their partisan orientation. Neither the suggestion of Crook and Pakulski that 'green' concerns are abstract while 'brown' concerns are pragmatic, nor that of McAllister and Studlar that 'green' concerns are more universalistic ('broadly defined, long-term concerns which affect large groups of people') while 'brown' concerns (including pollution, waste disposal and overpopulation) are more 'limited', or 'more particularized or localized', seems at all convincing.⁴⁵ The relationship revealed in previous research between the two categories of environmental concern and partisanship or activism may well have been contingent rather than logically entailed in

any way. The issue of logging, hitherto seen as strongly linked to left partisanship, clearly concerned voters across the political spectrum in WA. This was evident from opinion poll data well before the WA election in early 2001. Fear among the Liberal leadership about the potential haemorrhage of votes from the Liberal Party's base led the government to an embarrassing set of major changes to the Regional Forest Agreement. While it is not possible conclusively to determine the composition and motivation of the LFF vote from the aggregate data, it is a fact that a new environmental party, emphasizing its liberal-conservative credentials, captured a significant share of the vote in the core Liberal seats it contested. We have argued that it is reasonable to conclude that a sizable share of these votes were cast in a committed way by right-leaning rather than left-leaning electors.

If there is a lesson to be drawn, it is perhaps mainly one for the Liberal Party. The LFF is unlikely to have much staying power in WA politics, let alone on the national scene. Aside from the obstacles which confront all minor parties, the narrowness of the LFF's issue base, while a strength in the short-term, would seem to be a critical long-term weakness. Upon its election, the Gallop Labor government brought an end to the logging of old growth forest in WA. While this policy shift can be attributed in part to the success of the LFF and the Greens(WA) in mobilizing public opinion and bringing pressure to bear directly on the electoral contest between the major parties, it has largely robbed the LFF of its platform. But the environment can be expected to be the source of a growing stream of issues, which individually and collectively have the potential to be electorally salient. The Liberal Party of the early Twenty First century would be unwise to place too much faith in the apparent implication of some previous research that only parties of the left need take a serious interest in 'green' issues.

Endnotes

1. I. McAllister and C. Bean, 'Short-Term Influences on Voting Behaviour,' in C. Bean, M. Simms, S. Bennett and J. Warhurst eds., *The Politics of Retribution: The 1996 Federal Election*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1997, p. 197; C. Bean and I. McAllister, 'Voting Behaviour', in M. Simms and J. Warhurst eds., *Howard's Agenda*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2000, p. 187.
2. I. McAllister and D. Studlar, 'New Politics and Partisan Alignment: Values, Ideology and Elites in Australia,' *Party Politics* 1, 2, 1995, pp. 197-220.
3. McAllister and Studlar, 1995, pp. 211-214.
4. McAllister and Studlar, 1995, p. 208.
5. D. Studlar and I. McAllister, 'The Australian Environmental Movement: The Role of Values, Cognition and the Media,' Conference on Environmentalism, Public Opinion and the Media, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1-2 December, 1995.
6. Bean and McAllister, 2000.
7. McAllister and Studlar, 1995, p. 210.
8. The lower case version of the name, which appears a little affected and silly, was presumably adopted as part of the effort, ultimately unsuccessful, to persuade the WA Electoral Commission that the name was sufficiently differentiated from the names of other parties to satisfy the conditions for registration.
9. D. Jaensch and D. Mathieson, *A Plague on Both Your Houses*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1998, pp. 27-28.
10. V. Laurie, 'The Axeman Cometh,' *The Australian Magazine*, 21-22 November 1998, p. 22.
11. *The West Australian*, 5 May 1999.
12. *The West Australian*, 7 May 1999.
13. *The West Australian*, 2 July 1999.
14. In one poll 47 percent of self-described Coalition voters expressed support for the LFF (*The West Australian*, 3 July 1999).
15. Interview, Dr Keith Woollard, LFF President, 10 April 2001.
16. K. Richmond, 'Minor Parties in Australia,' in G. Starr, K. Richmond and G. Maddox eds., *Political Parties in Australia*, Richmond, Vic.: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1978, p. 328.
17. Jaensch and Mathieson, 1998, p. 188.
18. Jaensch and Mathieson, 1998, p. 21.
19. Richmond, 1978, p. 319.
20. Interview, Ms Liz Davenport, LFF candidate, Nedlands, 2001 State Election, 22 August 2001.
21. *The West Australian*, 11 January 2001.
22. Interview, Davenport.
23. Interview, Mr Frank Lindsey, LFF candidate, Darling Range, 2001 State Election, 20 August 2001.
24. Interview, Keith Woollard.
25. Janet Woollard has been a practicing nurse, holds a PhD in nursing and is an ex-President of the Australian Nursing Federation (WA Division).

26. Interviews, Lindsey and Mr John Daw, LFF candidate, Swan Hills, 2001 State Election, 30 August 2001.
27. Details about preference negotiations in the Greens (WA) are provided by N. Miragliotta, *Trading Party Preferences: the Greens, Small Parties and Representation in the Australian Senate*, PhD Thesis, UWA, 1999.
28. Interview, Dr Robin Collin, LFF candidate, 2001 Nedlands by-election, 3 September 2001.
29. Interviews, Davenport; Ms Pamela Dell, LFF candidate, Kingsley, 2001 State Election, 17 August 2001; Dr Janet Woollard, Member for Alfred Cove, 9 July 2001.
30. Interview, Mr Jack Evans, Campaign Manager and ex-Senator, Australian Democrats, 21 August 2001.
31. Interview, Keith Woollard.
32. Our reference here to LFF preferences includes both the second preference of those who gave their first preference to the LFF candidate, as well as the next preference of votes which flowed to the LFF as other candidates were eliminated. The data available from the WA Electoral Commission does not allow the two groups of votes to be separated.
33. In Albany, the Labor candidate's approximately 900 vote margin was composed of roughly equal numbers of preferences from Pauline Hanson's One Nation and from the LFF candidate.
34. While the LFF candidate for Swan Hills polled some 40 percent more primary votes than comprised the final winning margin, around half of his preferences went to the strongly supported Greens candidate, who then survived a further substantial distribution.
35. The analysis here follows the logic of I. McAllister, 'The Australian Democrats: Protest Vote or Portent of Realignment?', *Politics* 17, 1, 1982. In attempting to determine the character of early support for the Australian Democrats, McAllister examined, inter alia, the relationship between the strength of the Democrats vote and the safeness of the seat. He found that voters were more likely to support the Democrats the safer the seat for the Liberal Party, which he interpreted as evidence of a protest vote; a means of alerting the Liberal Party to voter disaffection rather than an expression of positive support for the Democrats, or a 'portent of dealignment'.
36. The correlations were calculated using the Pearson formula. The Kendall and Spearman formulae give a slightly weaker correlation.
37. In two other cases (including the Nedlands by-election) the best we can say is that something less, perhaps very much less, than about 40 percent of preferences in one case and about 30 percent in the other went to the Liberals.
38. S. Crook and J. Pakulski, 'The End of the Green Cultural Revolution?', in S. Crook and J. Pakulski eds., *The Ebbing of the Green Tide? Environmentalism, Public Opinion and the Media in Australia*, Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1998, p. 9.
39. B. Stone, 'The Western Australian Election of 10 February 2001: More a Case of Protracted Suicide than of Assassination,' *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 16, 1, 2001, pp. 26-33.
40. S. Crook and J. Pakulski. 1995. 'Shades of Green: Public Opinion on Environmental Issues in Australia,' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 30, 1, 1995, pp. 41-42.
41. I. McAllister and D. Studlar, 'Green versus Brown: Explaining Environmental Commitment in Australia,' *Social Science Quarterly* 80, 4, 1999, pp. 787-788.
42. Crook and Pakulski, 1995, pp. 47-48.
43. Crook and Pakulski, p. 51.
44. Crook and Pakulski, p. 51.
45. Crook and Pakulski, p. 51; McAllister and Studlar, 1999, p. 788.