

Election 2002

Tax the rich, get a tram: it's the Greens

Serious third force or hopeless idealists? Gay Alcorn reports on the Greens.

Scratch a Greens candidate and find an activist. Sarah Nicholson was a legal observer at the S11 protests two years ago, collecting statements from people who alleged police brutality. The protests turned violent at the margins and Steve Bracks called demonstrators "thugs".

For Nicholson, S11 was "fantastic because there were so many diverse people protesting about globalisation and the frustration of the democratic process". Now, she wants to unseat Planning Minister Mary Delahunty in Northcote.

Pamela Curr wears flowing, red scarves and presents herself as a thoroughly respectable mother of two. Radio shock jock Stan Zemanek asked if she smoked marijuana and she said she was, at 53, "far too old" for that.

But the Brunswick candidate is a crusader for refugees, travelling with asylum seeker Ali Bakhtiyari earlier this year when he tried to meet his two detained sons, who had

escaped from Woomera. Despite evidence that Bakhtiyari is not, as he claims, an Afghan, Curr has no doubts.

"We have to look beyond our suburban fences to the complexity of the lives that persecuted people live."

Dr Richard Di Natale, standing in Melbourne, worked in Aboriginal health services in the Northern Territory before reading Greens leader Bob Brown's book and joining up.

He bought a suit — his only one — for the campaign to unseat Minister for Housing Bronwyn Pike. Richmond Green Gemma Pinnell is an organiser with the National Tertiary Education Union and a "commuter cyclist".

If modern political campaigns are notable for caution and eschewing controversy, the Greens are different. They want to increase taxes. They want an end to the big freeway projects. They want you to turn vegetarian and take the tram to work. Hardly conventional vote-winners, but their ideas have considerable appeal among inner-city dwellers more worried about social issues than stamp duty or employing more police officers.

Now 10 years old in Victoria, the Greens are for the first time having an impact in a state campaign, attracting up to 10 per cent support statewide and even greater support in inner Melbourne. With increasing popularity, particularly among young Victorians, comes greater scrutiny. Do they stand for anything bar a One Nation-style threat to the ALP from its disillusioned Left rump?

After their federal election surge and their Cunningham byelection victory, they are on a roll, but are they a serious third force or hopeless idealists that Labor can bring back into the fold?

Brown argues that the Greens offer a "quantum difference" for voters. "What the big parties say federally and at the state level, and Steve Bracks



National Greens leader Bob Brown, second from left, addresses supporters at the party's official campaign launch yesterday.

PICTURE: NIC KOCHER

Brown puts the colour into low-key launch

Gay Alcorn

The Greens revel in their underdog status, and nothing highlighted it more than their official campaign launch yesterday under a flight of stairs in the foyer of a city office building. No US-style videos of candidates at home, no presidential walkthrough to the beat of rock songs, no photo opportunities with neatly-dressed children. The Greens are low key, or perhaps just broke — the Flagstaff Chambers in Little Lonsdale Street was chosen because it was free.

The crowd — mostly made up of the party's 108 candidates — roared loudest for Bob Brown, the Tasmanian senator who is not standing for election to the Victorian Parliament. The national Greens leader

emphasises this, is that these days the government has to minimise taxes on the big end of town and therefore has to clip the wings of education, health and social services. We believe parliament is there to ensure the wider welfare of the electorate." Brown says the ALP will "bolt it in" on November 30. The only question is: "Will enough voters opt for the Greens to put some spice and interest in the next parliament?"

Dr Nick Economou, a political scientist from Monash University, thinks not. Victoria's preferential voting system favours major parties, he says, and the Greens will poll behind the Liberal Party, meaning that Green preferences will help Labor hold the Greens' targeted seats of Melbourne, Richmond, Brunswick and Northcote, and the upper house seat of Melbourne

stood among pot plants on a make-shift stage and declared this election was all over. "This election will see the Bracks Government returned with a big majority. So the election now is between the Labor Party versus the Greens. Are we going to have three more years of boredom, or are we going to have three years of exciting parliament democracy for Victoria?"

The mood at the launch was mostly buoyant — the Greens still believe they can win one of four targeted inner-city seats from the ALP — although there were hints of frustration that they keep holding policy launches and nobody from the media turns up unless Bob Brown makes the trip from Canberra. Such is life for a minor party whose policies, all uncosted, have a less than

Province. Only their preferences in marginal seats will matter.

Economou also rejects the theory that there is widespread disgust with major parties — their percentage of the vote declined from 92 per cent in the 1980s to less than 85 per cent now. That is because more candidates are running, he says. The Greens are a Labor offshoot and there is no heated asylum seeker-type issue in the state election to cause a serious defection to the Greens.

"The Greens want to kick Labor. It's a tradition in political history. The left like to have a go at each other and they lose track of the real enemy over the other side of the political divide."

The major parties — particularly the ALP — use ridicule against the Greens, although they don't seem quite so sure that there won't be an upset or two in the inner city because

slim chance of implementation. The Greens are desperate to be seen as more than a "preference machine" and a protest vote for inner city lefties. Richard Di Natale, candidate for the seat of Melbourne, spoke of policies on illness prevention and health promotion. Gemma Pinnell, candidate for Richmond, said the Greens wanted a \$1.1 billion injection into education to bring class sizes back to 20 and to employ more than 7000 new teachers. Labor and the Liberals offer a rebate to install water tanks? Well, that's pinched from Greens policy, they say. Every Victorian household would get a free water-saving shower head under Greens policy and watertanks would be mandatory in new buildings. The Greens would "end the Victorian Government's addiction to

the Liberal vote may have all but collapsed. Labor figures say — anonymously, of course — that the Greens are hopelessly disorganised, impossible to deal with over preferences, and that they're a bunch of Trots, anarchists and student radicals. Yet they are still talking to them about preferences in crucial marginal seats such as Macedon, Burwood and Seymour.

There is a mystical side to the Greens: the candidate for Melbourne Province, Robyn Evans, speaks of the Green triangle symbol representing the "interconnectedness of all things". There is also a tough side. The candidate for Macedon, Marcus Ward, leads a group of 11 candidates threatening to offer a split ticket to voters — Labor would get Greens preferences on one side of the card and the Liberals on the other — unless Labor

gambling", said Brown. Most political analysts give the Greens little chance of winning a seat in this election. But Victorian Labor is being forced to spend money in "safe" seats it has held for decades and is wooing potential Greens supporters with announcements about saving water and new television ads on the environment.

It might be enough to hold off the Greens challenge, but there are always people like singer Cindy Boste, who picked up her guitar at yesterday's launch and sang *Living in the Neighbourhood*. "I'm an ex-Labor supporter and voted Greens in the last federal election, and it was so much fun, I think I'll do it again," she said, which was the kind of sweet music the audience wanted to hear.

bans all logging in old-growth forests.

He concedes that the ALP is "a bit" better on forests than the Liberals, but Ward says Steve Bracks once promised to end all old-growth logging, and has reneged.

"Labor is cranky because they consider Macedon crucial, but they have shat on our face for three years and they're surprised that we're holding our ground?" says Ward.

"I'm annoyed when people say we are bargaining our preferences. You bet we are. We are in it to change policies, we're not like the Democrats keeping the bastards honest."

The Greens don't do deals on preferences (you give me yours if I give you mine) except to extract policy concessions. They have put great effort into policy in the past six months,

and some, says Monash University economist Dr Phillip Adams, are "way out there".

The *Australian Financial Review* published an editorial recently that far from being a "harmless indulgence", a vote for the Greens in Victoria was now dangerous given the slim prospect of victory in some seats.

"Behind the reassuring stuff about sustainability and old-growth forests lurks a comprehensive manifesto of soft socialism that would take us back to the 1970s, the undisputed low point of post-war economic performance," said the editorial.

Those sentiments are shared by many economists, who argue that some of the Green agenda is irresponsible.

"I applaud them, I think they're great in the environment area," said Dr Adams, "but they have to understand about the realities, whether they like it or not. We are part of the global economy, capital markets do matter, perceptions are important and that's why they have to be much more moderate than they currently are."

The Greens scoff at the suggestion that they are 1970s socialists.

"We're more like Denmark 2002, thank you," said Brown. "Of course the big end of town belt us around the head, but the battlers have only got us left."

Nationally, the Greens want the GST to be abolished and they are unapologetic about wanting to increase taxes, particularly for corporations and high-income earners. They want a "guaranteed adequate income" and a "socially responsible society where people contribute in proportion to their ability and resources".

Locally, their policy documents say they would "call a halt to the construction of all new freeways", and put "more emphasis on walking, cycling, public transport and rail freight". They want an end to new brown-coal developments. They want to spend an extra \$1.1 billion on education. They want planning decisions based on what the community, not developers, want. They want the number of poker machines in Victoria reduced from 27,500 to 15,000.

None of the policies are costed because, the Greens say, they don't have the resources to do it. Social researcher Hugh Mackay says the specifics of Green policies are less important than what the Greens offer: a "moral context on economic questions" versus the major parties' poor leadership and narrow agenda.

As the party grows, it is showing signs of strain. Campaign coordinator Gurm Sekhon says 50 new Victorians are joining each week. For some, forests are the only issue; for others, social justice is the new Green mission.

Some supporters want candidates to wear suits, so that they appear respectable. Others loathe it when they look respectable. They can hold it together, says Sekhon, but to win a seat in Victoria will be hellishly hard. "It's an audacious thing that we're attempting, but this is the best chance we've ever had."