Confessions of an amateur political campaigner

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In May and June this year I put aside my usual work and worked flat out unpaid organising a campaign for a political party I had only heard of a month earlier. In this article I attempt to explore why I took this on, what I learnt, whether it was worth doing, and whether I would ever contemplate doing it again.

I was alerted to the existence of the Renewable Energy Party at the beginning of April via emails from a couple of friends saying that the party was looking for candidates in Tasmania.

On 3 May Tasmanian members of REP met with Peter Breen and his wife Dianne. I worked flat out on this campaign from that meeting until election day.

I have been involved in many different campaigns and organisations in my life, but this was the first time I have actually run an election campaign. We had to move quickly from one new experience to the next; finding House of Representatives candidates (we already have members offering to be Senate candidates), organising a launch, helping draft a national policy statement, organising a tour around Tasmania, getting banners and leaflets designed and printed, organising and lodging formal nominations with the AEC, writing briefings for candidates on questions they were likely to be asked, helping establish a web and social media presence, organising placement of our very limited supply of corflute banners in prominent locations throughout Tasmania, establishing contact with organisations planning candidate forums and asking to have our candidates speak, contacting media and putting out media releases, and finally organising printing of how to vote flyers and coordinating people to hand them out.

Why did we do it?

A combination of factors seemed to make this an ideal opportunity to use the electoral process to focus on climate change and renewable energy in Tasmania:

- The Renewable Energy Party had already been established and registered, “all” we needed to do was find candidates.
- The double dissolution election reduced the quota necessary to get a Senate seat.
- The Tasmanian energy crisis had highlighted that Tasmania does not have enough renewable energy capacity to provide for its energy security in electricity.
- The Paris Agreement provided an unprecedented focus on the urgent need to limit warming to well below 2C.

- Tasmania had recently experienced fires and record seawater temperatures which had major environmental and economic impacts and were generally acknowledged to be a result of, or at least exacerbated by, climate change.
- Renewable energy development provides some of the best opportunities to boost jobs and sustainable development in Tasmania.

Why not just support the Greens?

The Renewable Energy Party is set up largely[1] as a single issue party focussing on climate change and renewable energy. The policy position is substantially based on the Homegrown Power Plan developed by Solar Citizens and GetUp. In terms of goals and mechanisms the REP's position is not all that different to the Greens policy on climate change. We were commonly asked why we didn't just support the Greens.

Our analysis was that there is a substantial section of the population that supports action on climate change and renewable energy but was not supportive of the whole Greens policy agenda[2].

This was reinforced by my personal experience of people working in the renewable energy industry who sometime expressed quite strong anti-Green sentiments.

The tour

The team was acutely aware that local communities are given little opportunity to contribute to policy development. So we decided to organise a 'listening tour' which included community meetings in Launceston, Scottsdale, Deloraine, Sheffield, Penguin, Cygnet and Nubeena. The meetings in the first week after the launch were somewhat overshadowed by the floods. We were unable to get local radio coverage (ABC and commercial) because they were flat out reporting on the floods. In addition the floods had an impact on attendances. Some people who wanted to come were either literally cut off from access or had to deal with more urgent priorities at home.

Some practical lesson learnt

Get in early and be proactive if you want to be included on election scorecards put out by other organisations. Sometimes they only wanted to profile the main 2 or 3 parties.

Roadside banners need to be BIG and have very few words on them.

Some state or federally funded community venues refused our bookings because they didn't want to be seen as 'political'.

Although the Senate voting system makes it theoretically easier to get a representative elected from a minor party, contesting lower house seats has several advantages. It provides more of a focus on local community issues and more prominence on the ballot paper due to the lower number of candidates. We were one of only 6 or 7 candidates in Bass, Braddon and Lyons, compared with 21 groups on the Tasmanian Senate ballot. Our House of Representatives candidates all got over 2% of the first preference vote, but we only got 0.4% of the first preference vote in the Senate.

Relationships with other lobby groups

There were a number of progressive lobby groups active in the election that had policies supportive of renewable energy. We had productive ongoing contact with GetUp!, Solar Citizens, the Australian Solar Council and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC).

I was hopeful that these relationships would contribute significantly to getting voter support. While it is hard to quantify, I suspect they were less important than I had hoped for several reasons:

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[1] The Renewable Energy Party grew out of an earlier political party called the Human Rights Party. As a result it has an extensive list of human rights in its constitution.

[2] 84% of Australians support solar as part of their preferred energy mix and 69% support wind (compared with 13% for coal). Climate of the Nation report, The Climate Institute
http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/climate-of-the-nation-2015.html
In the Senate in 2013, 38% voted for the Liberal/National Coalition, 30% voted for the ALP and 9% voted for the Greens.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_federal_election,_2013#Senate

- Some groups had an explicit policy of not endorsing particular parties.
- Some groups produced how to vote cards that only rated the three main parties.
- GetUp! focussed most of their Tasmanian campaign on Bass and did not actively campaign about Senate voting. Although they identified health, education and renewable energy as their three main campaigning issues, most of their effort went on the first two.
- Solar Citizens also campaigned mainly on the basis of House of Representatives seats, although the day before the election they sent out an email emphasising the importance of the Senate vote including a scorecard which rated the Renewable Energy Party ahead of The Greens on solar and renewable energy policy.

Show me the money

The campaign made me much more aware of the sheer amount of effort and money that goes into election campaigns. A good policy position and good candidates won't win you many votes unless you can get the message out to voters. It's hard to be heard above the noise if you don't have an existing organisational base to draw on, a lot of money, or a nationally recognised name like Pauline Hanson or Derryn Hinch.

GetUp have stated that they spent between $100,000 and $500,000 just on their campaign in Bass. The Renewable Energy Party spent less than $20,000 running three House of Representatives campaigns and a Senate campaign.

Public funding goes to parties that achieve at least 4% of the first preference vote. This provides a guaranteed income for The Greens, Labor and Liberal campaigns. For this federal election the payment is $2.63/vote. So for the Tasmanian Senate campaigns alone this will equate to $270,000 each for Labor and the Coalition, around $90,000 for the Greens and around $70,000 for Jacqui Lambie. So public funding provides a significant advantage to incumbents, especially when added to the staff and office resources available to sitting members. None of the minor parties will get to 4% of first preferences in the Senate in Tasmania.

The election results

How do we judge the success or otherwise of our campaign?

- Our three lower house candidates all got over 2% of the primary vote. Although their preference allocations were not relevant this time around, they certainly could have been.
- We got a creditable vote of over 1300 first preference votes in the Senate. A reasonable showing for a new party without a track record or major funding, although as shown in the figures below, this put us a fair way down the list of minor party results.
- We developed great local connections with communities around Tasmania interested in promoting local renewable energy projects.
- We learnt a lot that would be invaluable if we ever decided to do it again.

The disaffected voter

Many commentators have drawn attention to the disaffection with major political parties, most notably overseas in the Trump and Brexit pushes, but also in Australia. Jacqui Lambie has been the major beneficiary of this disaffection in Tasmania. Pauline Hanson's Tasmanian Senate candidates got over 6 times the vote of the REP.

Surprisingly, at a time when the impacts of climate change and the urgency of action are increasingly evident this has not translated into greatly increased support for the Greens[3].

[3] Without some serious soul searching, the Greens will never move beyond the 10% plateau, Osman Faruqi, The Guardian, 5 Jul 2016
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/05/without-some-serious-soul-searching-the-greens-will-never-move-beyond-the-10-plateau

It is notable that most of the minor party votes have gone to the conservative and populist centre rather than progressives. On votes counted to date[4] the Senate first preferences are as follows:

2016 Federal Election Senate First Preferences By Group By Vote Type By State
[Please Note: These results are not final.]

Group Name	OrdinaryVotes	Percentage	
Unendorsed/Ungrouped Amalgamated	345	0.14	
Nick Xenophon Team	3,451	1.40	
unaligned / centre Total			**1.54**
The Arts Party	535	0.22	
VOTEFLUX.ORG | Upgrade Democracy!	796	0.32	
Science Party	937	0.38	
Renewable Energy Party	942	0.38	
Animal Justice Party	1,671	0.68	
Australian Recreational Fishers Party	1,792	0.73	
Australian Sex Party/Marijuana (HEMP) Party	3,321	1.35	
minor progressive parties Total			**4.06**
Citizens Electoral Council	145	0.06	
Australian Liberty Alliance	791	0.32	
Derryn Hinch's Justice Party	994	0.40	
Liberal Democrats	1,158	0.47	
Palmer United Party	1,843	0.75	
Christian Democratic Party (Fred Nile Group)	2,126	0.86	
Shooters, Fishers and Farmers	3,349	1.36	
Family First	4,882	1.98	
Pauline Hanson's One Nation	6,403	2.60	
Jacqui Lambie Network	21,317	8.64	
minor conservative parties Total			**17.44**
The Greens	27,052	10.97	10.97
Australian Labor Party	84,429	34.23	34.23
Liberal	78,399	31.78	31.78
	246,678	**100.02**	**100.02**

[note: Original table lost. Recreated from raw data 11 Feb 2025]

Make your own assumptions of where different parties stand on the political spectrum, but on my allocation above, conservative minor parties got twice[5] the vote of the combined progressive groups (excluding the Greens).

It is never going to be easy to compete with the simplistic populism of the right in appealing to disaffected voters. If it is possible at all, we would need to offer a vision of the benefits that address people's immediate practical concerns about energy costs, employment for themselves and their children and local economic development. This message will need to be delivered by trusted local candidates who can be seen to be genuinely 'walking the talk' in their community.

[4] Downloaded from http://vtr.aec.gov.au/SenateStateFirstPrefsByGroup-20499-TAS.htm 25 July 2016

[5] Actually on this recreated analysis, conservative minor parties got four times the vote of progressive minor parties but it depends very much where one puts the Jacqui Lambie Network on the political spectrum.

What next

The closeness of the election result and the decisive role of independent and minor party members makes Australian politics very unpredictable in the near future. I was struck by something Greens candidate Scott Jordan said he had learnt from Christine Milne about the importance of being prepared for any eventuality. Climate change and renewable energy were not prominent issues in the recent campaign but we don't know how soon we might be facing another election and we don't know when political machinations or external circumstances might put these issues at the top of the agenda. But we should be ready for these opportunities. Being ready includes having detailed policy positions including practical proposals that could be implemented quickly. It also involves having the ability to mobilise people rapidly in support of these policies, whether it is by supporting candidates or lobbying existing politicians.

Much of this is already in place at a national level, but it needs to be matched by a Tasmania specific effort. The Homegrown Power Plan in particular has excellent detailed policy proposals. Organisations such as the Australian Solar Council, Solar Citizens, GetUp and the AYCC have extensive contact lists and lobbying expertise.

There is lots of national and international research and policy which spells out the mechanisms and benefits of a transition to renewable energy but most voters will not connect with this level of abstraction.

I think much of the population is already aware of the dangers of climate change, but translating this awareness into political support requires an articulated positive vision of what can be done about it at the local level. We need to make concrete to local communities what a decentralised and sustainable renewable energy future would look like to them in their community in terms of jobs, infrastructure, energy security and energy costs.

So for me the answer to what next? consists of:

- Spelling out a concrete renewable energy transition plan for Tasmania (covering all energy not just electricity).
- Modelling what this would do for job creation, energy security and regional economic development.
- Working with communities to explore what they could do at a local level to move to greater energy self-sufficiency.
- Using this to create a supporter base that can be mobilised quickly.
- Working on better links with other lobby groups in preparation for future campaigns.

All of these things are important and worth doing in their own right. Whether the next election is in 3 months or 3 years and whether we decide to run candidates again, there is plenty to do in the meantime.

Jack Gilding *was the volunteer campaign manager for the Renewable Energy Party in Tasmania. This article is his personal reflections, not the view of the Party.*