

“The people who believe in things...”

**Reclaiming the Progressive Mantle for the
Australian Labor Party.**

“The people who believe in things, who are not going to let good beliefs be put aside for essentially miserable ideas to divide the place up.”

Paul Keating. Prime Minister

13 March 1993

(“This is the sweetest victory of all.”)

Martin Foley. September 2010.

Introduction:

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) achieves success when it is the Party of “...imagination and faith. The people who believe in things, who are not going to let good beliefs be put aside for essentially miserable ideas to divide the place up.”¹

We have, by and large, been successful when we have had a positive story to tell: a narrative around the ends that good, visionary government can deliver rather than a narrow focus on the hollow question of the means alone. The ALP has been at its best when it brings together those Australians who look to government to make their lives better and those who look to government to tackle the great issues of the day.

The failure of the 2010 Federal campaign to engage either of these pillars of support was its defining feature for Labor. Both groups of voters – the working communities and the progressive voters – were let down by a messy, contradictory and visionless campaign that hoped to fly under the radar of a serious policy engagement. By the taking their electoral affections away from the Party in Government, what we witnessed was voters’ commentary on the ALP rather than an endorsement of the alternatives.

This has been some time coming nationally. The ALP needs to both re-engage with its progressive base and deepen its relationship with working communities to reverse this trend. It needs to do so with a consistent and compelling narrative that unifies both pillars of supporters.

The ALP has its credentials intact in order to be able to engage with each pillar of support - just. The problem is these Labor credentials have been deliberately steered clear from. It is not so much a question of what Noel Pearson calls the failure to appreciate what a modern concept of “social justice” looks like through the resolution of the “dialectical tensions” of efficiency and justice to form his notion of the “radical centre”². Rather it is a question of reconciling the two strands of Labor’s support in the one compelling national narrative of justice, fairness, sustainability and an active role for good Government in delivering a better, greater, society.

It is not so much watching what Pearson sees as Banquo’s Ghost hovering over a bloody scene of Labors “lost path”. Rather it is more that we are bound on Lear’s “wheel of fire” by having to deal with the “tears of molten lead” needed to produce a combination of the visionary and the hardnosed political and policy response to re-engage the political ground forsaken.

As the ALP has shown in the past, this synthesis is achievable but it is never a foregone conclusion.

It is achieved through turning aspiration into reality. The easy way out is the low rent, empty approach to politics for solely power’s sake. This approach reached a nadir in the 2010 campaign through abusing the focus group tool to generate lowest common denominator policies that resonated with no one.

The really tough work is to rise to this challenge by protecting working communities from the miserable politics of the conservatives while offering leadership on big policy questions of the time for those who look to Labor as the political agent of enlightenment and progress.

¹ Paul Keating – Prime Minister. Election Victory Speech 13 March 1993 Banks town Sports Club (“This is the sweetest victory of all.”)

² Noel Pearson – John Button Address – The Melbourne Writers Festival September 2010.

It is bringing together the idealists and the pragmatists, the “bleeding hearts” and the “hard men” that has been the basis of Labor’s success in speaking to and for our twin pillars.

Ben Chifley’s “Light on the Hill” and Paul Keating’s “Sweetest Victory” reflect the best marriage of these tendencies.

Labor is able to deliver on Government having a role in building a greater society through engaging with the big social and political debates around the type of country we want to be. But we’ve set our sights too low.

The “hard men” have been cut too much slack. Despite their self serving defences of “whatever it takes”, the real work in the ALP is now to rebuild and expand these two pillars of Labor support by a compelling policy and political framework. The self described “hard men” who need to take responsibility for the National 2010 campaign have been shown to be the “hollow men”.

Fortunately for Labor there are plenty of opportunities, models and good will to be engaged in this process of recovery.

One model is the Victorian ALP’s approach to Government. Its approach to sound economic management as the precondition for a fairer and more progressive Victoria, with strong leadership dealing with the big issues of the day serves as an instructive model. It has managed to maintain a sense of vision combined with practical delivery. It is also is one of a few States where Labor managed to maintain a healthy Primary Vote and the only one that took seats off the conservatives in the 2010 election.

There are also specific areas of high level policy development which the returned Federal Labor Government can readily pursue to reengage with these twin pillars of supporters. Amongst many potential issues some of the more productive of these opportunities include the issues of Climate Change, Human Rights and Growth.

The Problem.

The evidence of a number of elections tells us the need for this reassessment federally. With a primary vote now on 38% we are institutionally well behind the Liberal – National Coalition base of 43%. With a growth in the Green Vote Primary to 11.5% we are strongly challenged on the front of the values based voters for the progressive agenda.

Consider the following trends in the breakdown in ALP Primary Vote by State – 1998 to 2010.

PARTY PRIMARY VOTES, FEDERAL ELECTIONS 1998 – 2010. Nationally and by State in % of total Vote

NATIONAL	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	40.10	37.84	37.64	43.38	38.12
COALITION	39.18	42.69	46.36	41.77	43.39
GREENS	2.14	4.96	7.19	7.79	11.55
NSW	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	40.12	36.45	36.70	44.12	37.48
COALITION	38.39	42.80	45.35	40.53	44.71
GREENS	2.66	4.75	8.09	7.88	9.93
VIC	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	44.37	41.65	40.45	44.69	43.05
COALITION	39.8	42.87	46.75	41.11	39.82
GREENS	2.09	5.90	7.45	8.17	12.30
QLD	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	36.11	34.70	34.78	42.19	33.69
COALITION	40.85	45.60	49.16	44.47	47.43
GREENS	2.38	3.49	5.06	5.63	10.87
WA	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	36.21	37.14	34.75	36.80	31.26
COALITION	39.45	42.41	48.76	47.45	50.60
GREENS	5.05	5.99	7.67	8.93	13.04
SA	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	34.48	33.74	36.75	43.18	41.05
COALITION	42.52	45.90	48.42	43.02	39.98
GREENS	0.49	3.64	5.44	6.95	11.91
TAS	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
ALP	48.91	47.17	44.58	42.77	43.97
COALITION	38.17	37.10	41.98	38.22	33.61
GREENS	5.56	7.81	9.88	13.50	16.79

The 2010 Election was a commentary by voters who had previously supported Labor going elsewhere. You don't lose 14 seats, suffer a 5.4% loss in your primary vote and end up with 38% of the primary vote when people stay with you.³

Who are these voters and why are they moving away from the ALP?

Whilst no doubt there were regional and other variations for the results (with South Eastern States being the exception of delivering Labor primaries above 40%) the consistent message in both the House of Representatives and Senate votes is that both pillars of Labor's "twin" constituencies moved away from Labor.

On the side of the progressive voters of the Labor support base that shifted to the Greens it pays to reflect on an outline of the Greens political development. Formed in the early 1990's with a focus on environmental issues and occupying a largely a fringe space in Australian political life they targeted Labor's progressive constituency and eschewed the harder options of pursuing the Liberal Party's base where they had built similar initial levels of support. They have been assisted in breaking beyond these limitations by Labor's own policy positions on two significant political issues of the first decade of the 21st century: Asylum seekers and Climate Change.

The 2001 Federal election was defined by the abandonment of the traditions of non discrimination and decency in handling asylum seekers by the Howard Government. The failing on the ALP's part was to allow itself to be politically drawn down the same path. Rather than avoiding being wedged with some part of its working families voter base that moved to the conservatives, the ALP allowed the creation of the political space to legitimise values based voters to move to the Greens in disappointment with Labor's position on this issue⁴. The ALP managed to slice off a part of its own constituency with no corresponding increase in support elsewhere. In so doing it delivered its lowest primary vote (at that point) since the great depression.

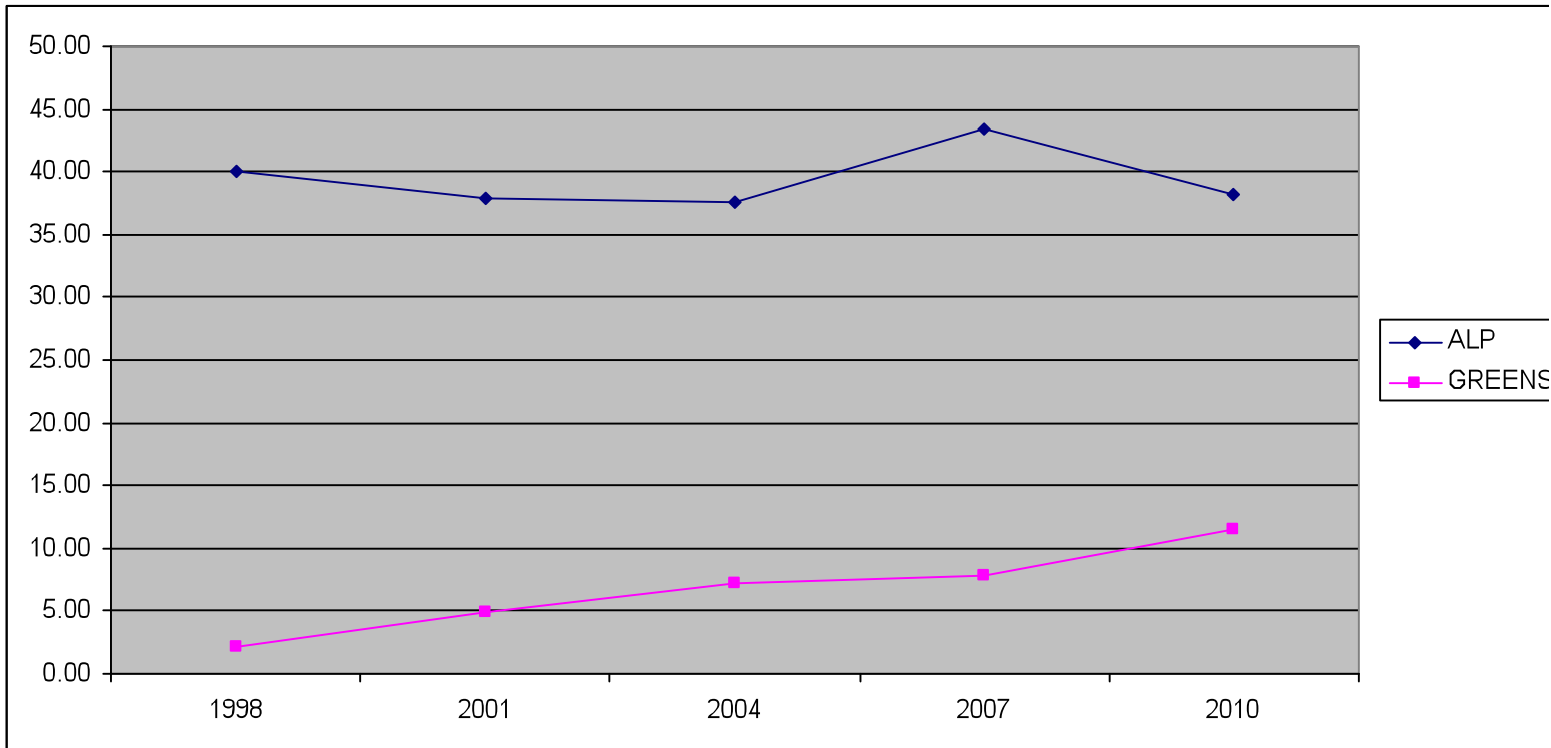
And in 2010, in Government for 3 years after being elected around the issues of decency in the workplace and action on climate change - (a policy narrative that built on both pillars of support), the ALP again vacated the values field on Climate Change. In what until a moment before had been the "greatest moral challenge of our time" there was now a need for a citizen's assembly – presumably with its members getting there in newly replaced clunkers. Added to that was the revisiting of the 2001 issue of asylum seekers and the truly dangerous campaign of the Liberals to "Stop the Boats". We had a coming together of two defining values issues on which Labor was found with no convincing position. The responses to each of these issue⁵ left ALP supporters questioning what Labor believed in.

³ A loss of 14 seats nationally and a gain of 2 seats in Victoria meant a net loss of 12 seats overall to the ALP.

⁴ . See "Dark Victory" David Marr & Marian Wilkinson 2003

⁵ The Citizens Assembly and the Off Shore Regional Processing Centre in East Timor: see www.alp.org.au/election/policy

Relationship Between the Greens and ALP Primary Vote: 1999 – 2010. National Figures as a % of overall Primary Vote.

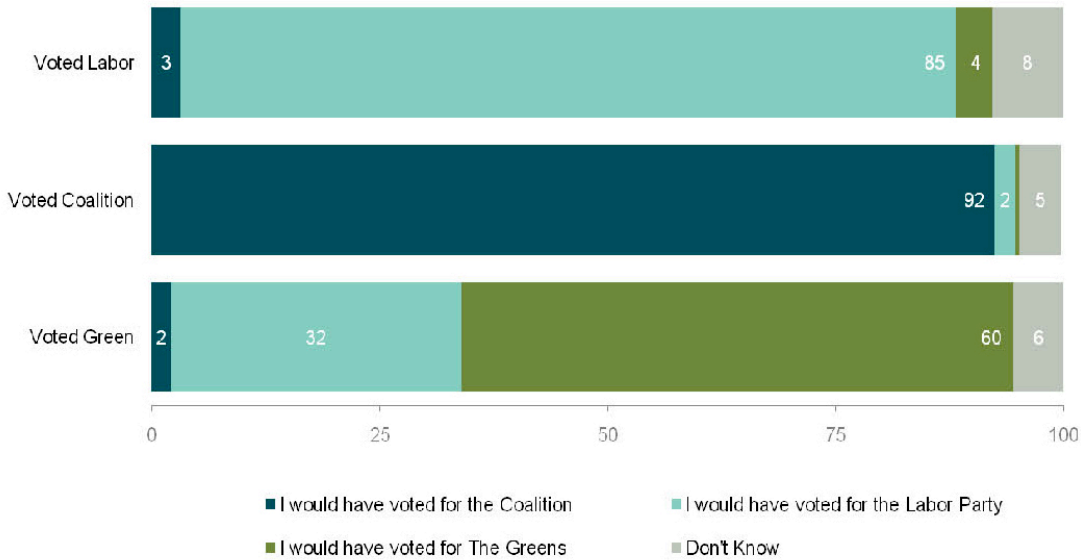


So when these voters are concentrated in inner urban lower house seats it is unsurprising to see these previous ALP seats fall to Greens Party candidates surfing past Labor on the wave of Liberal Party preferences.

But the phenomenon is far from being confined to these inner city enclaves. This alienated Labor constituency spreads across the nation. It now finds itself delivering similar outcomes in the Senate from all States.

The evidence – both internal to the ALP through its own polling and external polling – is consistent in supporting this argument that that these are overwhelming former Labor voters. Consider the Climate Institute and their polling in seats across the country on Election Day 2010. This only confirms what the parties have known for some time – failure of leadership on climate change drove voters away from Labor.

Figure 1: Amongst those people who decided to vote for the Greens, about one third (32%) said they would have voted Labor if it wasn't for Julia Gillard's decision to delay the introduction of a CPRS.



Question 1: Who would you have voted for if Julia Gillard had not delayed the introduction of a carbon pollution reduction scheme?



Such results are consistent with polling data known to the Party campaign Head Quarters in the run up to the Federal Poll. The failure to lead on climate change saw many Labor voters walk to the Greens.

And working communities received no coherent message of support or reassurance for either their jobs or their concerns for the future. Even though there was a good story to be told – Labor having delivered record jobs growth and infrastructure investment through the Global Financial Crisis that saw Australia’s performance as a world beater. Instead we saw this group of Labor supporters left susceptible to the campaigning of the Coalition and their dark promises to turn back boats (that weren’t coming in great numbers and wouldn’t be turned back even if they were), to stop the debt (which wasn’t there in any serious amount and with return to economic growth and near full employment was heading South regardless), and to stop the taxes (which were not much more than a moderate economic resource rent arrangement).

Nature abhors a vacuum and faced with this opportunity both the Greens and the Liberal Parties ruthlessly exploited and filled the space Labor had provided for them. From both major groups of Labor voters’ perspective the Party gave them permission to drop their support from Labor and shift to variously the Greens and the Conservatives.

The end result was the tightest electoral outcome in 70 years, a hung parliament and Tony Abbott – the most extreme leader of a mainstream political party in Australian history -within a heart beat or two of the Office of Prime Minister.

The Response.

The ALP must re-engage in the field of ideals and aspirations with those it has neglected. It must look to different models and to new policy approaches. This is a necessary precondition for electoral success – but not of itself enough. Both of Labor’s core constituencies demand serious policy and political responses from Federal Labor to show it that it is sophisticated political organisation rather than a hollow focus group obsessed organisation concerned only with the empty pursuit of power.

Rather than pointlessly alienate the Labor base built up since the time of the Whitlam era in a quixotic quest for western Sydney’s affections, the ALP is better served to look to models to re-engage with its twin pillars of support. In so doing it needs to reposition itself as the progressive party of Australian Politics. A Party that champions and delivers on the big policy questions that defines us. And it needs equally to demonstrate its well earned credentials as competent and responsible manager of the economy and then to apply the outcomes of this as a means to secure jobs, build the services and deliver the infrastructure and opportunities that working communities demand.

To retain Government the ALP federally has to once again recognise the need to reconcile the aspirations of those who want to see a progressive agenda bound to those who rely on Government intervention to maintain a decent life. To bring together those who see there is no tension between the needs of our environment, its sustainable management or our responsibility to the global climate with the building of renewable energy and the jobs for working people for the future. To lock in those who see the protection of the rights of those seeking asylum with the proud traditions of openness and multiculturalism. To bind those who recognise a human rights framework as the basis of equal participation in society regardless of their disability, parental or care provider status, sexuality or gender identity with those who see these but as the latest manifestation of the tradition of the “Fair Go.” This is the real hard work of politics and policy.

In looking for models of how to achieve this National ALP would be well served to look to how the Victorian ALP has managed this process. Set against the backdrop of responsible economic management, the ALP State Government has sought to bring these two Labor support groups together whilst others have sought to drive them apart.

The Federal ALP would be equally well served in bringing this approach to a number of key high level issues: Climate Change, a Human Rights framework and a new approach to the opportunities of economic growth to both new jobs and to the re-building of new types of cities and communities.

The Victorian Experience.

Creating fairer communities and jobs through responsible economic management has provided the base of Labor’s model of experience in Victoria

The jobs growth in Victoria has been a stand out of the non resource States. It has achieved this across diverse sectors of the economy. With support for the manufacturing, financial and service sectors, stronger than national growth in tourism, its events calendar full and diverse, its emphasis on innovation

and new economy and renewable energy jobs, the confidence this provides to the broadening of the economic base of the State is the enduring achievement of the State Labor Government.

From this stronger economic base have come the opportunities for investment in policy development around Labor's twin constituencies whilst ensuring the needs of the State as a whole are addressed.

The only State with a Human Rights Charter which is recasting the relationship between government services, individuals and communities, Victoria has:

- passed Assisted Reproduction Technology Legislation that recognises the rights of loving families to be formed regardless of sexual preference;
- removed abortion from the Crimes Act,
- introduced ground breaking Human Rights and Equal Opportunity reforms to pursue systematic discriminations and rights issues rather than a complaint based model and supported same sex couples rights across a host of issues;
- and recast the Justice System and policing to deliver both the safest state in the nation and to position policing as part of the community rather than as something separate from it.

The list goes on.

It is a Government that has woven its commitment to social justice together through its "A Fairer Victoria" framework which focuses all programs and agencies to the goals of ensuring that the fruits of economic success are targeted to those most in need and who look to Government for assistance. The investment in social and community housing is seeing a generational high increase in new and renovated affordable housing. The commitment to community health services and agencies to improve the health and well being of communities, the neighbourhood renewal programs, the educational infrastructure investment and learning priorities, the homelessness strategies, the mental health reform and the building of better health and hospital services are all critical to this vision.

It has also addressed the regional development and isolated communities needs more than any conservative government by recognising the benefits that sustainable growth brings across the whole State.

In environment and sustainability the record is one of national leadership on Climate Change. The State has set nation leading achievable goals for a 20% reduction in Green house gas emissions on 2000 levels, the phased closure of the nation's worst carbon polluting energy generator, extending the nations first renewable energy targets and now the next step of delivering industrial scale renewable energy projects together with community based schemes to drive community and industry support to the inevitability of a national and international price on carbon. Add to this the new national parks, the introduction of the first marine parks, sustainable management of water resources, the protection of the High Country and the development of the network of urban and regional parks dedicated to a healthier community with access to quality services and it is an impressive record.

In delivering services that whilst always under pressure from a thriving community the State has seen record investment in both the infrastructure and people in public education, in a health system consistently held out as the national leader, in the safest state in the nation with lowest crime rates and

now with the majority of budget transport infrastructure investment into public transport – reversing a generational neglect- rebuilding and extending the Public transport system.

All the while delivering across Victoria an engaged and liveable community that is tolerant, diverse, welcoming and proudly multicultural. Add to that its vibrant artistic, cultural, intellectual and sporting communities and Victoria is a genuinely interesting place to live. Its politics has both contributed to and reflects that. This is the result of genuine progressive government that has perhaps if anything undersold its many achievements.

A critical element to this has been a unified caucus and strong, inclusive leadership and the periodic efforts to reinvigorate the political and policy basis of the Government. Again a model for the Federal Party.

Of course the model is not without challenges. They abound and there remains much to do across government as to how the ALP can again engage with enough Victorians to achieve the renewal of this Labor vision.

The point is that the Victorian ALP political structures and processes do allow it the ability to respond to the demands and to attend to the diverse political base of the ALP whilst ensuring the broader community interests are served.

The Federal ALP could do a lot worse than look to the model of Victoria to being the task of rebuilding.

Policy Front

The Federal ALP's complex and more difficult political circumstances make the adoption of issues that it chooses to engage with its twin pillars of support critical to success. The need to move cautiously from a minority status to boldly on the policy front is not impossible. Indeed it will be impossible to avoid if it wants to reclaim lost ground to both the Conservatives and the Greens.

Amongst a host of issues and options open to it the ALP should consider adopting policy frameworks that would lead to the political recovery in at least the following areas:

- Climate Change
- Human Rights
- Growth.

Climate Change was seen as a touchstone issue for disappointment in Federal Labor. Having done so much in the first part of its term the failure to press home the issues of a price on carbon⁶ was disturbing to many Labor supporters.

⁶ Even allowing for the fact that today we would have had a National price on Carbon if the Greens Senators had crossed the floor and voted with Labor and the 2 rebel Liberals, the failure to tackle the issue and build

A new approach to the issue creates opportunities across all areas of government policy. It is an entry into the debates around the future of the earth's capacity to support its natural and human communities through to how those human communities will work and exist in the future. It is about the new jobs and the energy sources that will be part of that future. It is about collecting the investment and support for the transition. It is grabbing the opportunities for those companies, nations and communities that invest and move first to make the changes. It is about the building on the preparedness of communities' right across all sectors of the economy and all regions who want to participate and to contribute to making this transition. It is about protecting and securing those communities that are already at risk in our community and who would continue to be at risk in the low carbon future but for active Government intervention in the transition: the poor, the homeless, those in old and inadequate housing, those in trade and resource exposed industries and whose jobs are at risk and who look to Labor to make the transition to new sectors of employment – that is Labor's base. It is about engaging with those exposed to the vagaries of the market on energy prices and who look to us for investment in issues from managing the transition to a carbon price on their budgets, through to better and more efficient public transport options.

These are all Labor approaches that speak to both of Labor's constituencies. The policy opportunities are limited only by our political imagination.

Human Rights:

Australians see themselves as the nation of the "Fair Go." In a diverse and thriving community how this idea is expressed in the modern context is an opportunity for Labor. It is a position Labor historically has built and sustained and should once again lead on.

That is why the failure to adopt a national human rights framework by the Rudd Government was an opportunity missed. To have an approach that focuses on protecting and ensuring notions of equality, decency and non discrimination in the relationship of government to its citizens – including those who seek refugee here- is to provide the framework for extending and deepening social justice outcomes in the community. To seek to promote the same outcomes between citizens is only a sign of a civilised society.

The deepening and broadening of the notion of rights that we all are entitled to and which we collectively enjoy is capable of working through as underpinning a Labor approach to issues of housing, education, those discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity, workers in the construction industry, those in the corrections system wanting to return to mainstream life, those enduring mental health problems and indeed just about any aspect of life in our complex society. Not the least of these is to extend the obligation of rights to those seeking asylum in our Nation.

Labor has been the Party of building and defending rights. To enshrine a vehicle that ensures they are protected and extended in the face of changing community values is core Labor business. It should be revisited.

Growth:

community, industry and political support was the time that the Polls began to turn – a clear signal that policy does matter to the electorate.

Growth – as both an economic necessity and a means to social good – has somehow been seen as a negative in recent political assessments. How the driver of our jobs and the provider of resources needed to transition the economy and community onto a sustainable, low carbon basis which just also happens to be the basis of our successful multicultural society have come to be seen as a bad thing is puzzling. Such an approach needs challenging by the Party that stands for hope, not fear.

Economic growth - that provides investment for transitioning to a sustainable economy, the resources for a fairer community and the basis for building community infrastructure and better higher density cities– is not only a defensible goal, it is a necessary prerequisite for a progressive governments.

That it involves shouldering a responsible portion of the population growth in a world of 9 Billion people where we continue to be a tiny portion of that figure not only a good domestic policy. It is a responsible position of an engaged international citizen.

That it allows engagement with and promotion our ethnic communities that we would expect civilised communities to have to promote diversity and tolerance is a further advantage. Providing the resources and ability to engage in conversations about the types of cities and communities we want – with increased densities and increased quality buildings, services and infrastructure- all of which have to be delivered in both an environmentally and economically sustainable manner is yet a further advantage. In approaching this issue we can reshape the debate as one about the opportunities to lessen the impact that traditional notions of growth has on our diminishing natural resources and the type of investments we need to know promote to build our social and human capital base. Greed never was good. But growth for the purposes of sustaining transition to a sustainable social and natural world is.

The resources properly and fairly collected from a growing economy provide the basis for enduring investment in all of Labor’s policy areas. Labor needs to promote its approach to growth as a positive. Ours is not an antediluvian approach that panders to fear. Nor is it one that seeks a community that is anti international in focus. Labor’s path is to proudly promote sustainable growth and to distribute its benefits to build a better community that is open and accessible to the benefits as well as the challenges of the global community.

These suggestions are but a contribution to the need for the changes the Federal ALP needs to make. The direction is one that promotes the ALP as the Party of progressive values. The sooner the conversation starts, the debates are had and the direction set, the better will be Federal Labors chances of recovery.

