

GREENS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY, DIVERSITY AND PARTICIPATION



YES to a democratic Greens party



NO to centralisation of power

The current review of the Australian Greens constitution, structure and processes offers an historic opportunity to further democratise our party. It has, however, also exposed an alarming agenda to centralise power within the party. There is a serious risk of a more hierarchical structure. It is time to defend and enhance party democracy.

For 20 years our Australian Greens constitution has served us well in terms of good party decision-making and electoral success. There is always room for improvement but we must not allow our party to be taken down the same track as the Labor Party where members have been disempowered and ignored, and MPs have been given far too much power.

Members who feel alienated leave political parties.

IMPROVING PARTY DEMOCRACY

Our structure has served us well but there are a number of significant improvements we can make:



More proportional representation at Australian Greens level

The states with the largest membership are vastly underrepresented at National Council/Conference in terms of delegate numbers and decision-making power. Proportional representation needs to be improved while ensuring that small states are not swamped by a few larger states. There is a range of formulae to determine delegate numbers that could improve proportional representation at national meetings.

The Greens quite rightly demand proportional representation in our electoral systems because it more accurately reflects both the range of views among voters and the level of support. If we do not practise PR ourselves, we are in danger of a fair criticism of hypocrisy and we undermine our efforts at electoral reform.



Election of the leader by members (or National Conference/Council or a combination)

The current method of election of the leader by a small Party Room is undemocratic and contrary to principles of grassroots democracy. As far as possible we want to genuinely

IMPROVING PARTY DEMOCRACY...

involve the membership in the party at a national level and have MPs who are responsive to the membership. In a ballot for the leader, if election by the whole membership is a step too far, a combination of voting by Party Room, National Conference/Council and the membership is a possible advance on the current situation, which could gain wide acceptance.



Codifying the powers of the leader and Party Room rules

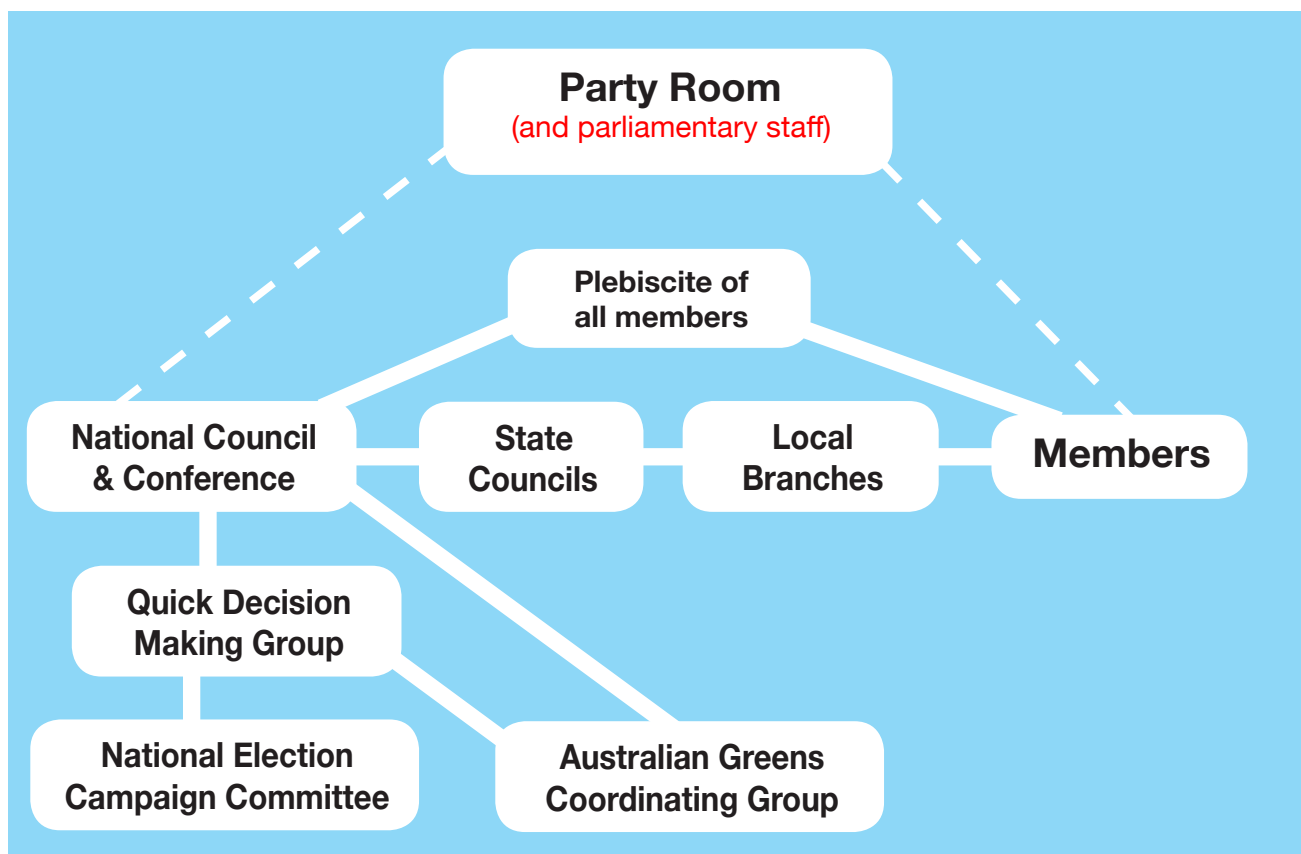
The powers of the national leader are unclear and need to be determined by a national Greens meeting. When the leadership position was created it was not the intention of National Conference to give a leader unrestricted power. If there are to be any powers beyond being the party's main spokesperson, then they need to be defined. Otherwise, we will be in danger of making the mistake of the major parties where their leaders have accrued too much power. Likewise, it would further increase accountability if the Party Room rules were reviewed and endorsed by National Conference.



Ending the undemocratic MP conscience vote (and learning from New Zealand)

Greens MPs should not automatically be allowed a conscience vote in Parliament. It is unacceptable for MPs to reject democratic decisions of the Party and adopted policy — our parliamentary representatives are elected as members of the Greens and on account of the policies and efforts of party members. We are not a party of Green Independents. With

CURRENT POWER STRUCTURE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GREENS



almost every MP in the Greens Party Room now having a right to a conscience vote, effectively the Greens Party Room is not strictly accountable to the party. It is in this way above the party.

If the current situation persists, sooner or later, the result of a Greens MP exercising a conscience vote, will be bad legislation, or a good bill being defeated, with consequent damage to the party's reputation. Members do accept that if there is insufficient support from other parties for the Greens policy position on a bill, then our MPs are able to exercise discretion in negotiations in order to achieve an outcome that is the best in the circumstances. That is a different situation to a conscience vote.

Our constitution is silent on whether the federal Party Room is accountable to the party. The Party Room and its members have made some huge decisions without consulting with the party — the items contained in the agreement with Labor to form government in 2010 come to mind. This undesirable situation needs to be remedied — and the Kiwis provide an example of how this can be achieved.

Before the New Zealand Greens can enter a coalition government their constitution requires membership involvement in negotiations and an endorsement of any agreement by a 75% majority at a special national conference.

THREATS TO PARTY DEMOCRACY

Some of the options proposed in the Australian Greens constitutional discussion paper are disturbing and so divisive that, if implemented, they could severely damage the party. They will not lead to a more satisfactory party for members or greater electoral success:



More MPs on party decision-making bodies

It is being proposed that the Party Room treble its number of delegates to National Conference and Council. In other words, 10 MPs would have as many delegates as the 3000+ members of the Greens in NSW. This has nothing to do with grassroots democracy. The Party Room and MPs already have significant power and influence within the party, but it is delegates elected by Greens members who should be making the decisions. We do not want centralised power like the Labor Party where MPs tend to run the party and members are just donors and booth workers. The collective wisdom of delegates at National Conference/Council is the method by which good national decisions will most often be made.



Electoral funding controlled by national level of Australian Greens

If our aim is to give genuine power and influence to members, then having financial means at their disposal is important. However, if AEC election funding were to go to the national level of the Greens rather than to state parties and local groups — and this is one of the options canvassed in the constitutional issues paper — it would significantly undermine the autonomy and influence of state parties and local groups and branches. They would become dependent on the national organisation rather than enjoy a measure of independence and real power.

The Party Room submission even advocates that state parties' federal registrations be scrapped, a measure that would ensure that funding went to the national level of the party and deprive states and local branches of rights to it. State parties already fund the Australian Greens according to their capacity to contribute.

THREATS TO PARTY DEMOCRACY...



Direct individual national membership

This option is dressed up as allowing members greater participation in decision-making. It will lead, however, to an accrual of influence and power at the national and parliamentary level of the party at the expense of ordinary members, local branches and state parties. It is an obvious truth that in big national organisations, the individual can feel overwhelmed and of little significance. On these grounds alone, direct national membership runs counter to both the principle of grassroots democracy and the aim of maximising the power and participation of members. Nor will it improve our electoral success because that ultimately depends on locally organised members and community engagement.

Money from funding appeals to members would no doubt go to the Australian Greens — further weakening other levels of the party. If communication channels to members were centralised, there would be inadequate checks and balances to prevent communications to members that contained content that breached Greens protocols, such as unauthorised appeals for money, preselection propaganda, and one-sided accounts of controversial internal party issues.

Not even the Labor or Liberal parties have a structure with such centralised control as is being proposed.

We are already a truly national party and are recognised as such by the media and the public. Under the centralisation proposals members will be no more able than they are now to participate in decision-making at the level of activity they choose. Suggestions to the contrary are simply hollow enticements.

Genuinely improving involvement of members can be achieved through a range of measures, and not by direct national membership that will empower a hierarchy. We are sympathetic to the proposals for expanded cross-border and issue-based working groups that can be represented at national meetings -initially as observers with full speaking rights but with a review of their status down the track. As for member-initiated plebiscites, provision already exists in the constitution.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

If those who are driving the centralisation of power within the Greens do not get their way at National Conference in November it is being predicted that they will bring on plebiscites of members. Any three state/territory parties can initiate a national plebiscite and determine the wording of the question put to members, no matter how loaded.

If that course of action is followed, the plebiscite campaigns could well be divisive and bitterly fought battles. Given that we are facing an unprecedented assault on the environment, unions, working conditions and our basic freedoms by an array of reactionary federal and state governments, serious internal party conflict would be a diversion of energies. Better to rely on consensus to enhance our national cooperation while retaining grassroots democracy.

Besides, it is unethical to impose a reduction

in the level of autonomy of state parties and branches/local groups without each constituent state party agreeing to it. They joined the Australian Greens on the understanding of what the division of power would be. To change the constitutional rules without their agreement after they have joined is hardly acceptable process.

Genuine democratic reform that enhances our signature grassroots democracy is how we can best continue building a progressive party and avoid becoming like the Labor Party.

We welcome your feedback on the views expressed in this paper. Our motivation is to strengthen democracy in the Australian Greens.

Authorised by Hall Greenland, Sylvia Hale (former NSW MP) and Lee Rhiannon (Senator), on behalf of many concerned Greens.

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