

## S.A at the Polls, 2004 Federal Election

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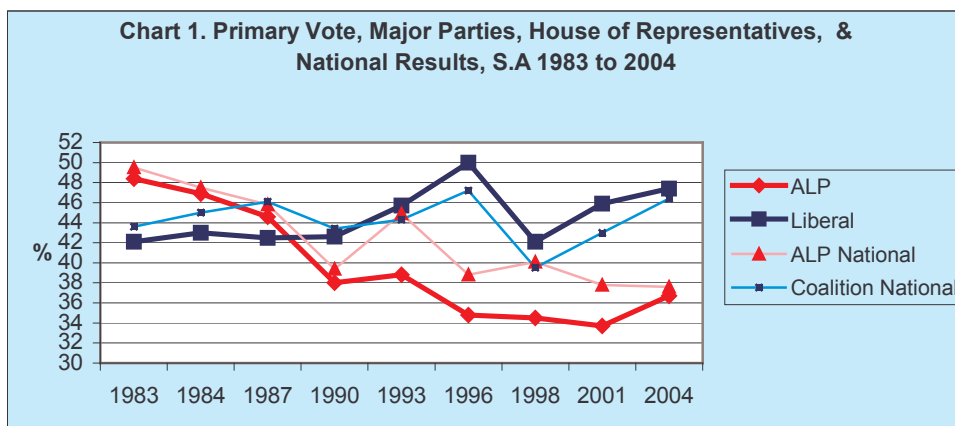
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With more than 95 per cent of the lower house counted, and the Senate count nearing completion, it's possible to comment on some facts, trends and possible ironies to emerge from the 2004 Federal election result in South Australia.

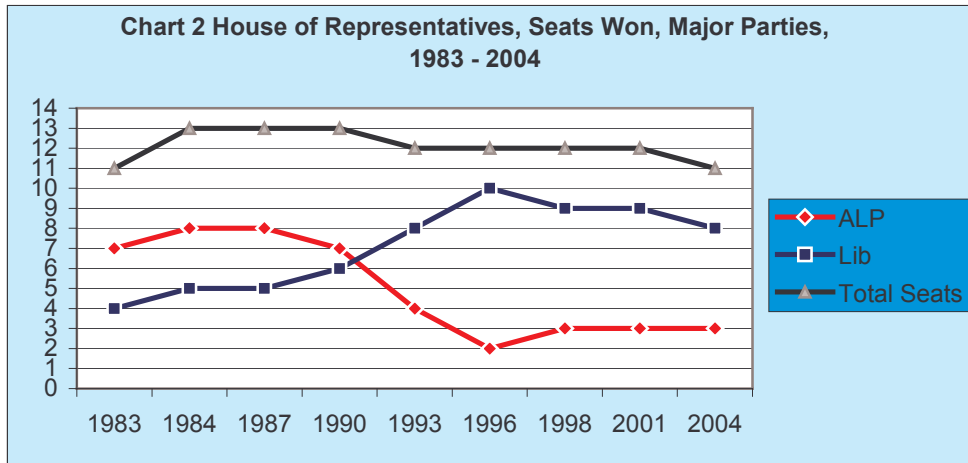
### *Major Parties – House of Representatives Contest*

Chart 1 indicates that for the first time since 1983 Labor's primary vote in the House of Representatives improved in South Australia but, as Chart 2 below shows, Labor failed to make inroads into the Liberals grip upon lower house electorates. Improving its primary vote for the second election in a row, the Liberal Party lost the inner urban seats of Adelaide and Hindmarsh but took from Labor the suburban bookend seats of Kingston and Wakefield.



While the lower house status quo remains intact, the result highlights Labor's failure to attract sufficient support from wage earners and self employed voters in the outer metropolitan mortgage belt seats. The Liberal Party may well derive considerable satisfaction from fielding candidates in Wakefield and Kingston with strong connections within these electorates and Labor rue the apparent failure of its incumbent candidates to work their electorates. On the other hand, the Liberal candidates struggled in Adelaide where incumbent, Trish Worth, may have neglected constituency matters while serving as a ministerial secretary. Without the benefits of incumbency Liberal candidate for Hindmarsh, Simon Birmingham, loss by a handful of votes to Labor candidate, Steve Georganas, who contested the seat for the third time. It is also apparent that in these inner urban seats previous Howard government supporters turned against the government, possibly on issues largely unrelated to the economic concerns which so occupied the attention of outer suburban voters.

Chart 2 indicates that since 1990 Labor steadily lost seats as a consequence of its declining primary vote and this fact undermines Labor Branch President and MLA, Tom Koutsantonas, post election complaint that recent redistributions were unfair to Labor. Labor's primary vote is the problem, not electoral boundaries, and while the gap closed in 2004 S.A Labor's federal vote remains consistently lower than its national primary vote.

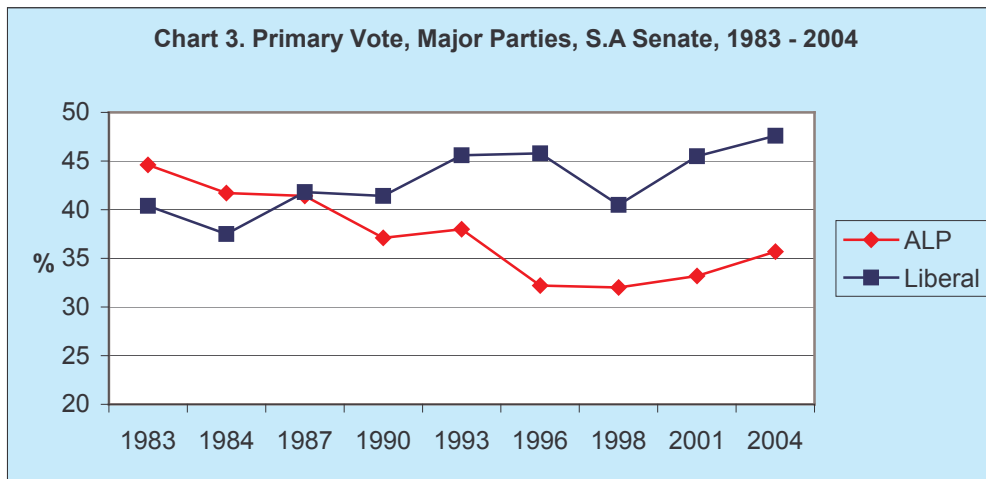


The role that preferences played in the outcome of the closely fought seats is interesting but must await Australian Electoral Commission review of the count. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that Green voters' preference for Labor candidates were, for the most part, largely cancelled out by Family First voters' preferencing Liberal candidates (see Chart 5 below). On this assumption it is evident that Family First preferences probably assisted Trish Draper retain Makin, whereas Green preferences helped Labor's, Steve Georganas, win Hindmarsh.

### *The Senate Contest*

The Senate result will not be known until 28 October but it is quite possible that for the first time since 1977 the major parties will win all S.A seats. Chart 3 traces the major parties vote in the Senate since 1983. The strength of the Liberals primary vote sees three Senators elected consistently, whereas for Labor it would be the first time in seven elections that its managed to win half the Senate positions. Before the election expectations were that the Greens, Family First and the Democrats would fight it out for the sixth Senate seat – since 1980 the Democrats have denied the majors a clean sweep. As it transpires, the preference deal between the Greens and

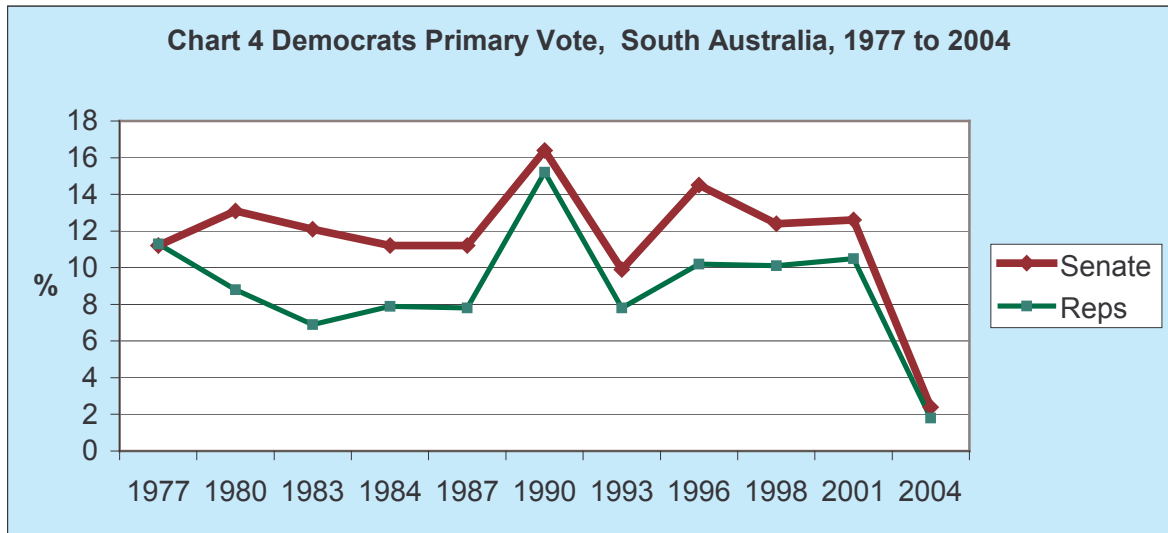
Labor, combined with the Greens rather poor primary vote (6.4 per cent), may see the Greens candidate, Brian Noone, eliminated from the count before Labor, thus assisting Labor in taking the seat. Family First gained some favourable preference support from the Democrats, Meg Lees and other micro parties but its 3.9 per cent primary vote is probably insufficient to see it survive to the count's last stages.



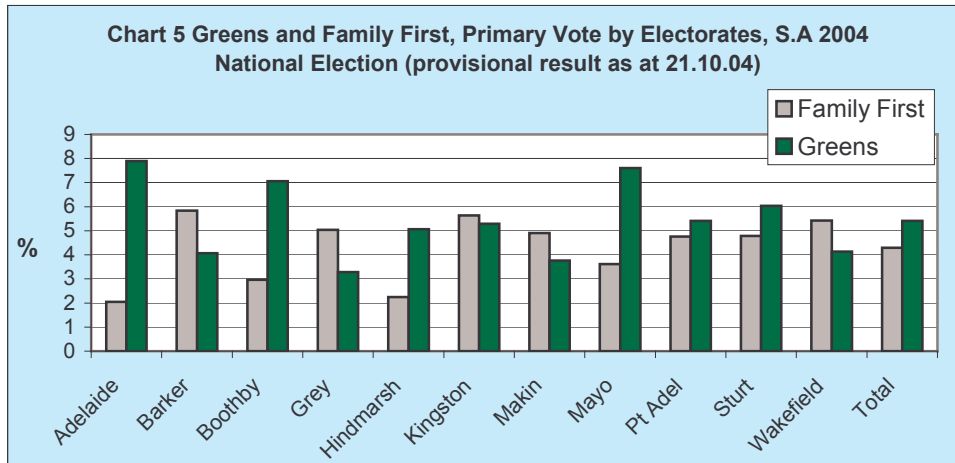
### *Minor Parties*

Historically the Australian Democrats could claim S.A as their strongest state, and with 2.3 per cent in the Senate vote they may still do so but, as Chart 4 highlights, with little cause for joy. The decimation of the Democrats in S.A, and across the nation, bodes ill for the future of their four remaining Senators who face re-election in 2007. Most commentators believe the result points to terminal decline but possibly one of the great ironies of the 2004 election result resides with the likelihood the Government will control of the Senate. The Democrats *raison d'être* may come to the fore again should voters become disgruntled with the Howard Government, but this assumes the Democrats they can unite as a team, forcefully prosecute their 'keep the bastards honest' maxim and, importantly, reposition the party back toward the middle

ground it once so firmly occupied. Of course, such postulation assumes the Government will upset voters and generate a 'protest vote' in 2007. In my view, Prime Minister Howard's conservative inclination will probably deny such a path.



For the Greens the result is disappointing but with Family First they may take some solace in winning public funding for electoral expenses. Under electoral law once a party gains 4 per cent in any lower house electorate and/or the Senate it qualifies for \$1.94 per vote. Chart 5 highlights the electorates where Greens and FFP qualify. Over the threshold in all bar the seat of Grey and with 6.4 per cent primary vote support in the Senate, the Greens should reap about \$312,000. Family First will be hoping their 3.9 per cent Senate vote rises a little by the end of counting to add to their qualifying for public funding in eight lower house seats.



Not unlike their 2002 State election experience, Family First ran an well financed and organised campaign – something the Greens could learn from – but in the end their vote did not improve much upon 2002 and given expenditure of over \$1million on prime time television advertising is well short of what they would have hoped for. Should Family First miss out on the Senate it’s not unreasonable to conclude that voters are uncertain, and possibly wary, of the party’s links with evangelical Christian congregations. Australian political culture is particularly secular with only 15 per cent of the population attending church weekly, compared with around 60 per cent in the United States. FFP struggled during the campaign to distance itself from accusations that it was a church based party. Its vote did not exceed 10 per cent in any booths and, as a result, the idea that ‘bible belts’ exist in metropolitan Adelaide ought now be dismissed as fallacy.

Should the SA Greens just miss a Senate position, they may well blame their Eastern State colleagues. After the 2001 poll the Greens qualified for about \$1.5 million in public funds, with over \$1 million going to the NSW and Victorian branches compared with about \$30,000 to the S.A branch. Given the Greens affinity

to socialist politics, a certain irony surrounds the fact that neither branch was prepared to assist their S.A colleagues. While television advertisements ran in other States, none were earmarked for the South Australian campaign. Arguably this was a mistake and, given the closeness of the count, probably cost the Greens dearly.