



ACHIEVING POLICY CHANGE IN AUSTRALIA by David Uren

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Australia is capable of embracing considerable policy change. The institutional structure of Australian politics may have stood still: since federation it has comprised a rigid constitution, two political parties with some minority representation in the Senate, the courts and the bureaucracy. However, the past thirty years have seen the eclipse of policy fixtures such as the white Australia policy, centralised wage fixing, and public ownership of utilities. Government has developed policy to advance causes in a wide range of new issues, a small sampling of which includes:

- the environment
- multiculturalism
- gay rights
- savings/retirement policy
- targeted social welfare
- national health system
- native title
- competition policy, and
- freedom of information

As a relatively small nation (about the 38th largest population) Australia has operated in international spheres facilitating change in:

- East Timor
- Kampuchea
- Rhodesia/Zimbabwe

Australia has also driven international agreements for:

- ban on chemical weapons
- environmental protection of the Antarctic
- dismantling of agricultural protectionism in international trade
- the formation of APEC

However the simple presence of an idea for change, and the rallying of public support has not always sufficed. Significant lobby and advocacy groups with some well thought out policy have not succeeded in delivering change on issues including the Republic, population policy, ratification of the Kyoto greenhouse treaty or decriminalisation of minor drugs.

The rights and recognition of Australia's indigenous population have not stood still: witness the 1967 recognition of Aboriginal rights under the constitution, the return of Gurindji lands in 1975 and the passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act a year later, the Mabo decision and the formation of organisations such as the lands councils and ATSIC. However there is a sense that the process of reconciliation has come to a standstill. The current Federal government has ruled out a treaty with Aboriginal people and it has dismissed the notion that an apology is required in the wake of the findings of the 'Bringing Them Home' report. ATSIC resembles Yassar Arafat's compound at Ramallah, held in impotent isolation while the government chooses whom it will deal with.

This paper looks at three campaigns for public policy change – the environment, economic reform and the republic – to identify some of the ingredients of success for the first two and failure for the third. The intent is to seek lessons for the process of reconciliation. Academics have developed models for rational public policy change, which involve establishing a vision, detailing the steps for implementation, assembling a coalition and identifying key agents of change. However, all campaigns for public policy change are unique and there is no simple model that may be replicated. This is not an academic paper: it draws on personal and historic accounts of policy changes and identifies some lessons that leaders and observers of change have drawn from the process.

1. Economic Reform

Public policy outcome

In 1980, the Australian economy was closely regulated by government. Some manifestations of this were:

- high levels of tariff protection for its manufacturing industry
- important corporations, such as the airlines, Qantas and TAA, and the Commonwealth Bank, were government owned
- the government regulated all key interest rates
- the value of the dollar against international currencies was set by the government
- investment by Australian companies abroad was effectively banned
- wage levels and working conditions were determined by a quasi-judicial court, the Arbitration Commission

By 1993, this had changed. Tariffs had been cut, control over interest rates and the dollar had been handed to the market, restrictions on capital movement into and out of the country were removed, industrial relations was shifting from centralised wage fixing to enterprise bargaining and the public sector had started to sell key assets. Some of the most important of these changes – the floating of the dollar and the removal of controls on interest rates and capital movements, occurred within the first two years of the Hawke Government.

The process of economic reform continued throughout the nineties, accelerating under the Howard government. Notwithstanding the fact that the ideas for economic reform came from the conservative side of politics, the key achievements of economic reform came with the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.

Making of the economic revolution

A dominant role for government in the economy had been part of Australia since federation. In particular, the idea that a domestic Australian economy could be built behind walls of tariffs, and that the tussle between labour and capital should be mediated by a quasi legal system were among the foundation stones of Australia.

The first ingredient for reform was the widespread recognition of a problem. The seventies had introduced a phenomenon that the economic architects of the post World War II economics would have thought impossible: the combination of inflation and economic stagnation. It had previously been thought inflation only accompanied an overheated economy growing too fast. By the end of the seventies, Australia was suffering from stubbornly high unemployment and inflation and it was losing competitiveness in world markets. The government of Malcolm Fraser had no clear answers, beyond waiting for the world to lift our economy out of the doldrums.

A critique of government's role in the economy had, however, started to develop in the seventies. The Australian economist, Max Corden, had, in the 1960s, developed a concept of the effective rate of protection that demonstrated the cost which protection had on other sectors of the economy and provided a formula for measuring it. Protection for manufacturing was making other sectors of the economy uncompetitive. Inquiries into the automotive industry and into manufacturing in the mid seventies signalled that there were structural problems in sub-scale industries built to service domestic markets behind tariff walls.

The critique of the status quo was beginning to come from within the walls of the administration. The Tariff Board came under the leadership of a bureaucrat who was persuaded by the work of Corden and began to look critically at requests for tariff protection. The Whitlam government turned the Tariff Board into the Industries Assistance Commission, which began to subject the protection of vested interests to rational analysis.

This critique bubbled away without bringing any fundamental change to policy until a clarion call for reform was issued by a group of academic economists and the economist of Shell Petroleum in 1980. Their book, called *Australia at the Crossroads*, critiqued the prevailing "mercantilist" policies that held that managing trade was the key to economic growth. They proposed instead a "libertarian" alternative under a set of eight principles:

- free international trade
- acceptance of the structural changes wrought by new technology and the removal of protection
- elimination of restrictions on international capital flows and on free competition in the domestic capital markets
- resolute application of anti-monopoly and restrictive trade practices legislation
- deregulation of many markets and other activities, especially in the area of entry by persons and firms that wish to compete
- greater variation in relative occupational wages and of real wages in response to market forces
- reduction of the government's role as a producer of many basic services, including education, health and welfare, and

- expansion of the government's role as a provider of income maintenance and purchasing power for the acquisition by individuals of the basic services they want (through negative income tax, endowment and voucher schemes)

The clarity of their proposition and the strength of their critique were key elements in the success of the economic reform movement.

With the support of Liberal parliamentarian, John Hyde, a "Crossroads" group was established with an inaugural conference held in December 1980. It brought together a wide range of conservative academic, corporate and political figures to develop the application of the ideas. It was a powerful network.

John Hyde says that, had the movement simply drawn upon an academic debate, economic policy would have got nowhere. Instead, it was driven by people who were deeply moved by the ideals of liberalism, enunciated by thinkers such as Friedrich von Hayek, based upon individual freedom of choice, individual responsibility, the primacy of markets and the importance of small government. There was passion involved, and people were prepared to run some risks, advancing ideas that were, in many quarters, deeply unpopular.

Economic reform flew in the face of some vested interests. The National Party had always staunchly defended protectionism while the manufacturing industry had a deep commitment to the status quo. Unions saw tariffs as representing jobs and wages. The rural sector, which had traditionally been bought off by transfer payments and bounties, began to separate from its National Party representative, with the National Farmers' Federation joining the reformers.



An important contributor to the success of reform was the emergence of the mining industry as the most dynamic sector of the economy in the late seventies. It paid a direct price for protection and, being composed of major companies, there was no way politically that it could be bought off. The mining sector helped to finance think tanks, the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne and the Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney to advance the cause of reform. The ascendancy of the mining sector offset the opposition from manufacturing.

The reform movement drew strength from developments internationally in the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who started rolling back state involvement in the economy. It also drew ideas from international think tanks such as the Institute for Economic Affairs in London.

The networks developed by the reformers extended to the media, at least at the elite end with economic commentators such as PP McGuinness, Max Walsh and Alan Wood providing a constant call for deregulation and the dismantling of protection. This helped to extend the network, which by the time the Hawke government was elected included the Treasury and the Reserve Bank. The network of advocates for economic reform was strong in the economics faculties of the leading universities.

It is noteworthy that the cause of economic reform never sought the least traction with the public at large. The benefit of tariff protection has always been an item of faith with the public. Capital controls and the floating of the dollar were not issues over which the public had a view one way or the other. What did matter to the public, however, was employment and inflation. Public opinion about these ends of economic policy weighed much more heavily than its concerns about tariff protection.

When Labor was elected in 1983, it had no agenda for market deregulation, but it was mindful of the damage that flowed from the Whitlam government's failure to work with the economic institutions. The treasurer, Paul Keating, appointed a young treasury officer, Tony Cole, into his office and kept John Stone as head of treasury. Other advisers to the new government, including Professor Ross Garnaut, were also influential in advocating deregulation and the opening of markets.

The first radical move was the floating of the dollar and the removal of foreign exchange controls in December 1983 followed by the progressive deregulation of the financial system. Major tariff cuts were introduced in 1991, while enterprise bargaining was introduced, following Keating's replacement of Hawke as Prime Minister in 1992. Keating was able to bring the union movement along by persuading its leader, Bill Kelty, that economic reform meant a better deal for his members. The governments of both Hawke and Keating were aided by the fact that on major issues of economic reform, they were not opposed by the Liberal/National coalition. It is likely that a conservative government attempting such radical reform would have run the gauntlet of fierce parliamentary opposition (as was the case more recently over the introduction of the GST).

Twenty years after the reform process began, there is still a view that there is an unfinished agenda, including international tax reform, more work on competition policy, further deregulation of relationships between employers and employees and further roll-back of public sector involvement in the economy. There is also a sense that public acceptance of reform has hardened into a resistance that has sapped the political will for further change. However no-one disputes the magnitude of the achievements made.

Key takeouts:

- Clarity of the proposition
- Widespread acknowledgment of problem
- Energetic advocates providing leadership
- Drawing ideas and support internationally
- Good use of media
- Development of networks in the bureaucracy, business and academia
- Crossing the political divide
- Encouraging establishment or strengthening of vehicles (think tanks, lobby organisations etc.) to constantly advance ideas
- Did not turn upon popularity: public focused on ends, not the means

2. The Republic

Public policy outcome

The 1999 referendum on a republic required the assent of a majority of the population and a majority of the states. It was rejected with 55% of the population against the proposal and 45% in favour. It did not get a majority of the vote in any state. Majorities in 72% of the federal electoral seats opposed the republic. Those that were in favour were concentrated in inner urban electorates. Election expert Malcolm Mackerras calculated that electorates voting 'no' covered 99.9% of the landmass of Australia, and the seats voting 'yes' covered 0.1% of the area.

Although it is difficult to pluck positives out of so comprehensive a defeat, advocates of a republic emerged having learned some lessons and with a significant organisation intact. It is widely believed that the issue will surface again, particularly if Prime Minister John Howard is succeeded as party leader (whether in government or opposition) by a pro-republican Liberal.

The road to rejection

When the Labor Party included support for a Republic in its policy platform in 1991, it was a minority cause with little traction in the public domain. The roots of the policy for Labor were threefold: there was the simple nationalist idea that Australia should have an Australian head of state, there was dissatisfaction with the arrangements of Constitutional Monarchy that had allowed John Kerr to dismiss Gough Whitlam, and there was probably an element of 'fenian' opposition to Britain as a former imperial power.

When Prime Minister Paul Keating included the republic in his 1993 election speech, with the pledge to "let the Australian people decide by a referendum later in the decade whether Australia should become a republic by the year 2001," the issue began to gain attention.

The issue for Keating was one of national identity. His vision for Australia was posited in the region, engaged in Asia as an independent power subject to no imperial overlord, either the US or Britain. John Button has written that once Keating realised the symbolic power of the republic as an issue, "He held it in his hand like the Welcome Stranger gold nugget. Then he dropped it in the murky waters of acrimonious partisan politics."

The political advantage of Keating was that the opposition parties were divided on the issue and, although its leader John Hewson was suspected of republican leanings, the dominant force within the Liberal party was solidly behind the monarchy. Although not decisive, the Republic issue enabled Keating to present Labor to the electorate as the defender of national identity.

Winning re-election, Keating established a Republican Advisory Committee to chart a way forward. Two specially formed advocacy groups had carriage of the public debate: the Australian Republican Movement, formed in July 1991, and Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy established in June 1992.

Keating understood that the issue had public support. The exact level depended upon how the question was framed: simply asked "should Australia become a republic" generated an evenly divided yes/no, but asked "Should Australia remain a monarchy within the British Commonwealth, become a republic within the Commonwealth, or a republic outside the Commonwealth" generated 66% support for the republic.

When the 1996 election rolled around, the avowedly pro-monarchist John Howard removed the issue from the election campaign by committing to hold a constitutional convention and a referendum. Republicans had favoured a plebiscite to determine whether a republic should be chosen or the constitutional monarchy retained, followed by a constitutional convention that would determine the model to be put to a referendum. The view was that this would make it less likely that pro-monarchists would block the referendum. However the republicans were outmanoeuvred by Howard who went straight to a constitutional convention.

The constitutional convention, held in 1998, was a curious affair, with half its members appointed by the government and half elected under an optional postal ballot. It included television and sport personalities, musicians, and business people, as well as people with more familiar political interests. The convention resolved the first question, of whether to support a republic, but then divided over the mechanical question of how this should be effected.

The preferred model was that which had been promoted by Keating in the previous government of a 'minimalist' shift from a Governor General, nominated by the Prime Minister and ratified by the Queen, to a President, who would be appointed in a three stage process. First, the public would nominate candidates to a nominations committee that would prepare a short-list. The Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition would select a candidate who would then go before both houses of parliament where a two-thirds majority would be required for ratification.

This approach was opposed by those favouring the direct election of a President. They attacked the minimalist model with the pithy slogan: "Vote no to the politicians' republic".

The reason for the convoluted "minimalist" model was that direct election would provide a President with a legitimacy independent of the Prime Minister and parliament. There would be nothing besides convention to stop a popularly elected President from refusing to sign a bill proposed by the parliament and Prime Minister, effectively exercising the power of veto enjoyed in the US presidential system.

The Australian Republican Movement tried to head off the criticism that the minimalist system was set up to preserve the powers of privileged politicians by arguing that the directly elected President would be more powerful than the Prime Minister, and that only political parties or very wealthy individuals would have the money, experience and organisation to run a national campaign for President. This would result in a politician becoming President, something less likely to occur under the minimalist proposal. The referendum result demonstrated that this argument was too clever and intellectual to persuade voters who remained unconvinced of the mechanics of the minimalist



model and who seem to have a large degree of cynicism about the political process and most politicians.

The “no” campaign run by Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy made no effort to emphasise the virtues of the Queen as Australia’s head of state. Rather, it focused on the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” argument that constitutional monarchy had served Australia well, and that the republic argument was being pushed by ‘chardonnay swilling’ elites.

The fact that the referendum was only supported in inner city electorates lent support to this claim. It is notable that the ‘quality’ press strongly supported the ‘yes’ vote. An analysis of the editorial coverage of *The Age* and *The Australian* in the three months leading up to the referendum found that news and comment pieces lending support to the ‘Yes’ vote outnumbered articles lending support to a ‘No’ vote by a margin of three to one in *The Australian* and five to one in *The Age*. The balance of opinion pieces in both papers ran two to one in favour of the referendum. However, these papers did not reach the voters who decided the outcome of the referendum.

Howard’s success in the 1996 election was due, in large measure, to the support he won from traditional working class voters who felt economically vulnerable and alienated by Keating’s policies – his embrace of Asia, multiculturalism and economic reform – as much as by the cut of his suits. The personalities leading the Australian Republic Movement, such as Malcolm Turnbull and Steve Vizard, made it easier to tar the Republic as an elitist issue.

Howard’s opposition to the referendum was based in his deep support for the monarchy. It has also become evident, in the wake of the

Hollingworth affair, how much power the current system vests in the Prime Minister. The choice of Governor General is at the Prime Minister’s sole discretion, with no obligation to so much as consult with anyone else. The Queen’s ratification of the Prime Minister’s choice has been a formality, ever since Scullin forced King George VI to accept the first Australian as Governor General, former High Court Judge Isaac Isaacs, in 1930. Since the Governor-General has the power to dismiss a government, all Prime Ministers want someone in whom they have confidence in the position. Even the ‘minimalist’ Republic proposal involved dividing this power with the Leader of the Opposition. It has been noted that no referendum has ever been passed without bipartisan support, including the backing of the Prime Minister.

The ranks of the “No” campaign were swelled by those who wanted a direct election. Opinion polls showed that a direct election was the public’s preferred choice. As a result, the pro-republic movement remained fundamentally split and contributed to the failure of the pro-republic campaign. The minimalist model was too much of an abstraction to connect with the public at large.

Key takeouts:

- Internal division invites defeat
- The vision for a republic, argued on nationalist grounds, did not ignite the passions of the electorate
- If you give people what you know they don’t want (the minimalist model) they will reject it
- Arguments for public support need to go to the heart of the public’s interest: intellectual and logical merit alone will not suffice
- Bipartisan leadership is required to achieve major change

- The engagement of political leadership is needed: however much politicians may be distrusted, they are often a better reflection of the people than self-appointed interest groups
- If powerful forces oppose you (like the Prime Minister), it is important to understand why
- Tactical defeats, such as the failure to get a plebiscite before the referendum, can matter
- Good media coverage is not enough to turn the public at large, particularly if it is only in the up-market media

3. Environment

Public policy outcome

Through the efforts of a large number of non-government organisations, the environment has shifted from an issue of concern to a tiny minority of the population in the early seventies to one of the most pressing priorities for all Australians.

The environment movement can chalk up a large number of successes, among them:

- the banning of old growth logging in Western Australia and New South Wales and its phasing out in Victoria
- the expansion of national parks throughout the country
- the banning of oil exploration in the Great Barrier Reef
- the introduction of compulsory reporting on environmental performance for publicly listed companies
- the establishment of environment protection bureaucracies in all state and federal governments, with controls on industrial emissions and discharges, and
- the requirement for environmental impact statements in major projects

Environmentalists have many outstanding items on their agenda: some say the victories to date have been peripheral to the major issue of degradation of the environment through the over-exploitation of natural resources and the pollution of the land, waterways and atmosphere.

Australia's refusal (along with the United States) to ratify the Kyoto Treaty is held to demonstrate a lack of will to tackle difficult environmental issues, as is its failure to date to develop a meaningful policy for restoring the Murray Darling waterways.

However, the political impact of environmentalists is continuing to increase, with greater representation in Federal and State Parliaments. All political parties now see the importance of presenting strong environmental credentials to the electorate as vital to their success.

All aboard the green bandwagon

Concern for the environment has a long history, going back to the establishment of the first national parks in 1916 and to the formation of natural history societies in the 1890s. The Liberals and the Nationals both called for the preservation of forests in the 1940s and 1950s. Labor called for a coordinated system of National Parks in 1965. The Australian Conservation Foundation was established in 1964, partly prodded by the Duke of Edinburgh who was patron of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature.

In the late sixties, a new political wind began to propel the environment movement. The Vietnam War bred a new culture of student activism, much of it motivated by various shades of Marxist critique of capitalism, and believing in the power of effecting change through "direct action" rather than through electoral politics. These university-educated activists were highly effective organisers.

An international environmental group, the Friends of the Earth, that channelled this energy, was established in 1971.

A new environmental critique of capitalism appeared in 1968 with the book by Paul Erlich, the "Population Bomb", that connected population growth with resource exploitation and the environment. It was in the same year, 1968, that the Club of Rome was formed, bringing together industrialists, economists and scientists to review the impact of industrial development. It sponsored computer based modelling, which was very innovative for the time, to analyse the inputs and outputs of the world economy. The result, the book *The Limits to Growth*, was published in 1972. It forecast a world of mass misery unless economic growth rates were curtailed.

There were a number of environmental campaigns conducted in the sixties. Conservationists successfully opposed a proposal to mine the Great Barrier Reef for agricultural lime in 1967. What began as a one-woman campaign stopped the Little Desert in Victoria's Mallee district from being opened to farming in 1969 and showed the political potential of the cause, with the Victorian Minister for Lands, Sir William McDonald, losing his seat at the next election.

The bitterest campaign of the late sixties and early seventies concerned a proposal by the Tasmanian HydroElectric Commission for new dams that would flood Lake Pedder. The campaign was unsuccessful, but it wrought far-reaching changes in the Australian environmental movement. In 1971, a green political party, the United Tasmania Group, was formed to fight on the issue. A campaigner on Lake Pedder, a Tasmanian doctor, Bob Brown, went on to found the Tasmanian Wilderness Society in 1976.

The emergence of environmental campaigns led the Whitlam Government to appoint the world's first environment minister, Moss Cass, who launched an inquiry into Lake Pedder, the findings of which the Tasmanian government ignored. The failure of the Australian Conservation Foundation to take a strong stand on the Lake Pedder issue led Cass to threaten to withhold government funding unless they reformed their organisation. A new activist leadership of the ACF was elected.

There were other tributaries to the environment movement through the seventies. The Builders Labourers' Federation in NSW, under the leadership of Jack Munday, set up a "green bans" strategy of refusing to supply labour to projects that were deemed to damage the environment. The Friends of the Earth ran a campaign, opposing uranium mining in Kakadu, and taking it to the floor of the AGM of the mining company, EZ Industries.

By the time Tasmania's HEC announced another proposal for a dam that would flood the Franklin River in 1979, the environment movement was ready for it. The campaign included direct action of sitting in front of bulldozers and people chaining themselves to trees. It included international appeals and national newspaper advertising campaigns. More than 1400 people were arrested attempting to block the construction.

The use of the media was sophisticated with environment groups regularly putting out media releases structured to gain attention. When journalists sought to balance the story seeking comment from the HEC, the environment groups were assiduous in writing well-framed letters to the editor. Organisational skills in terms of building and mobilising membership were also sophisticated.



The Hawke government was elected in 1983 with a commitment to stop the damming of the Franklin. In a revolutionary action, it used the fact that the South West of Tasmania had been accorded World Heritage Listing to use its external powers under the constitution to block the project. This was widely perceived as an early political victory for the Hawke government, the first time that the environment had been perceived in such terms.

The Liberal Party was perceived to be more closely committed to economic development and hence less likely to stand in the way of any commercial project on environmental grounds. Labor was, by the seventies, extending beyond its traditional union base to incorporate other social interest issues. The Liberal Party was also philosophically opposed to federal intervention in state issues so it could never match the Labor Government's activism.

This tension was seized upon by Labor environment minister, Graham Richardson, through the 1987 and 1990 elections. Following Labor decisions to block the Wesleyvale Pulp Mill, to negotiate a large set-aside of Tasmanian forest for World Heritage and to block BHP from developing a gold mine in the Kakadu National Park (notwithstanding that its Environmental Impact Statement had been approved), Labor was able to secure recommendations from both the ACF and the Wilderness Society that preferences should be directed towards it in the 1990 election.

This was a high point for the environment movement in Australia. The number of people who thought the environment was the most important issue for the government to deal with rose from around 5% in 1987 to 26% by 1989. A 1990 survey showed that 3% of the adult population belonged to an environmental group, 22% had considered joining and 74% approved of their activities. Environment groups

still claim that their combined membership outweighs that of the established political parties.

During this period, there was a formal coalition of environmental organisations that met on a regular basis to coordinate the positions that would be put to the Federal Government. Although the environment organisations differed in their tactics (some more committed to direct action, others to government level lobbying) and in their ideology (some believing capitalism was doomed, others believing it could be reformed), they were able to work together by keeping their focus on issues.

Early on some companies and industries also embraced the notion of sustainable development – indeed it was the mining industry not the environment movement that first brought the concept to the attention of the Hawke government.

Through the diversity of ideology of the various environmental organisations ran a common thread of securing the future through sustainable development. The environment movement always attacked from the high moral ground of defending the interests of the future. It was a simple ideal that contrasted with the established political parties, often tainted with the vested interests of either business (Liberals) or unions (Labor). This perception (or reality in some cases) also hampered the private sector in its advocacy.

Another common feature of the environment campaigns is their use of science: environmental campaigns have marshalled facts effectively and used the imprimatur of science to confer their legitimacy. Richardson used a report from the CSIRO as a pretext for blocking the Wesleyvale Pulp Mill. Companies too often commissioned scientific reports many of which were dismissed by critics on the grounds of being sponsored by “vested” interests.

The appeal of the environment stretched across the political divide. There were organisations that were about the advancement of scientific knowledge, that appealed to people who simply loved the bush, or Australia's native animals, while at the other end, organisations like Greenpeace aimed at corporations and attracted support of the Left. Business, which had been horrified by the Wesleyvale and Coronation Hill decisions, started to develop proactive environmental advocacy policies, including public measures of their environmental performance in their annual reports.

A radical development in environmental politics was the alliance established between the National Farmers' Federation (traditionally perceived as one of the most conservative organisations in the country) with the activist Australian Conservation Foundation to establish a national “Landcare” program. It was a tribute to the leadership of both Phillip Toyne at the ACF and Rick Farley at the NFF.

In 1996, the Liberal and National opposition, under John Howard, sought to gain the advantage over Labor in the forthcoming election promising to establish a \$1 billion National Heritage Trust to support environmental programs out of the proceeds of selling a third of Telstra, a policy welcomed by both the ACF and the Wilderness Society. The Wilderness Society campaigned against Labor, directing preferences to the Coalition, because of its view that the Keating government had gone soft on forestry issues.

The Greens meanwhile managed an increasingly effective presence in the Senate and gave a number of sitting Labor members a close run in the House of Representatives elections in 2001. Internal disputes within the Democrats are expected to make the Greens the third largest party in the Senate after the next elections.

Key takeouts

- The use of a simple and compelling vision (securing the future through sustainable development) that mobilised people around an ideal
- High overt ethical standards: never being tainted with vested interests. Often this is a perception, rather than a reality
- An organisational capacity to build membership and reach out to the public
- The presence of a large number of organisations that spanned the political spectrum but could nevertheless unite on key issues. The issues that united them were greater than the tactical or ideological matters that differentiated them
- Mobilising opinion around individual issues (eg the Franklin or Coronation Hill) which had definable achievements
- The effective use of non-violent direct action to dramatise symbolic issues
- Use of the media for advocacy
- Use of science to marshal facts and confer legitimacy
- Good leadership at the NGO level (eg Phillip Toyne and Bob Brown)
- Ability to frame issues in a way that helped the ruling political party – effective political lobbying
- Preparedness to cross the political divide
- The use of international treaties (ie World Heritage) to force an issue

Conclusions

Unity

- Internal division invites defeat
- The presence of a large number of organisations that spanned the political spectrum but could nevertheless unite on key issues. The issues that united them were greater than the tactical or ideological matters that differentiated them

Vision

- Clarity of the proposition
- The use of a simple and compelling vision (securing the future through sustainable development) that mobilised people around an ideal
- The vision for a republic, argued on nationalist grounds, did not ignite the passions of the electorate
- High overt ethical standards: never being (seen to be) tainted with vested interests

Leadership

- Good leadership at the NGO level (eg Phillip Toyne and Bob Brown)
- Energetic advocates providing leadership

Organisation

- Development of networks in the bureaucracy, business and academia
- An organisational capacity to build membership and reach out to the public
- Encouraging establishment or strengthening of vehicles (think tanks, lobby organisations etc.) to constantly advance ideas

Political skills

- If powerful forces oppose you (like the Prime Minister), it is important to understand why
- The engagement of political leadership is needed: however much politicians may be distrusted, they are often a better reflection of the people than self-appointed interest groups
- Ability to frame issues to help the ruling political party – effective political lobbying
- Ensuring that key players in the whole process of public policy debate are aware of the arguments for change

Flexibility

- Bipartisan leadership is required to achieve change
- Crossing the political divide
- Preparedness to cross the political divide

Internationalism

- The use of international treaties (ie World Heritage) to force an issue
- Drawing ideas and support internationally

Public opinion

- Did not turn upon popularity: public focused on ends, not the means
- Arguments for public support need to go to the heart of the public's interest: intellectual and logical merit alone will not suffice
- If you give people what you know they don't want (the minimalist model) they will reject it
- Mobilising opinion around individual issues (eg the Franklin or Coronation Hill) which had definable achievements
- Widespread acknowledgment of problem

Media

- Use of the media for advocacy
- Good media coverage is not enough to turn the public at large, particularly if it is only in the up-market media
- Good use of media

Tactics

- Tactical defeats, such as the failure to get a plebiscite before the referendum, can matter
- The effective use of non-violent direct action to dramatise symbolic issues.
- Use of science to marshal facts and confer legitimacy



To help focus discussion, the key lessons from each of these campaigns are presented under common thematic headings.

The importance of unity is paramount. A lesson from the environment movement that also has some echoes in the coalition of forces that supported economic reform is that there can be diverse voices but there must be an agreed direction. It was this, above all, which destroyed the campaign for the Republic.

There must be a clear vision, ideal or proposition that is being advanced, and around which the campaign unites. A widespread comment about reconciliation is “what is it?” The vision must hold across a wide spread of interests: it should be seen to be to the benefit of all rather than a vested interest. A vision or an ideal should motivate people and imbue them with passion.

Good leadership is essential. It does not have to be one big name leading the charge: neither the campaign for economic reform nor many of the campaigns for the environment have been tied to a single individual. There have, however, in all cases, been intelligent leaders prepared to take risks, able to articulate positions and inspire support. The leadership of the republic movement was unable to retain unity or connect with the public at large.

The leaders must be supported by effective organisation. The environment movement provides a model of effective NGO advocacy. Although less formalised, and operating mainly at an elite end of the spectrum, the campaign for economic reform also displayed an ability to engage people who could advance its cause.

Political skills are important. To be successful, the leaders of public policy campaigns need to understand how they can persuade politicians, and how to frame propositions in a language and with ideas they can use. To achieve major enduring change, a significant degree of bipartisan support is required. Advocates need to have the flexibility to reach out to those who may initially have little sympathy for their cause on the other side of politics.

Both the environment and economic reform campaigns have drawn upon the global scene for ideas, support and, in the case of environment, for extra-national legal support. The indigenous movement has also used international forums to focus attention on issues. This is an increasingly contentious area, with growing nationalist opposition to the use of international treaties to force domestic change (although this may not extend to bilateral or multilateral trade agreements). The need is to carefully balance international pressure with domestic endorsement.

Not all public policy change rests upon the ability to mobilise public opinion, however it does require an acute understanding of where public opinion stands. The economic reform movement operated only at the level of elites, but its success rested on an understanding that the outcome would be improved economic growth and employment. The public understood there was a problem. The Republic Movement understood the popularity of the direct election of a President, but did not support it and was marginalised as a result.

The environment movement has made an art form out of media management: constructing stories that will appeal to the news sense of editors and journalists, providing them with well researched briefings and helping to set up “photo opportunities”. They have also used the letters to the editor pages and opinion pages to get their points across.

Tactics are important. An interesting feature of the environment campaign has been the constant parade of issues. It might be the Fitzroy River in Western Australia one day and the Snowy River in NSW and Victoria the next. This keeps the environment movement fresh. The use of direct action around each issue brings it to public attention. For the Aboriginal movement, refreshing the major symbolic campaigns, such as the walk across the bridge, the Sorry books or the Tent Embassy, seems an ongoing task.

The environment movement has been innovative in its use of tactics. For example, the Wilderness Society is currently building a highly effective corporate campaign against the logging company Gunns targeting bankers and shareholders. It has been effective in building the legitimacy of its case using the apparently objective evidence of science in support. The economic reform also made good use of academic experts to advance its cause. Finding external sources of legitimacy can help a public campaign.

There is no finishing line in public policy. The battle is never definitively won or, even in the case of the Republic, lost. The movement lives to fight another day. It is, however, important to have definable achievements, whether that is the Franklin River saved or a 25% cut in tariffs.