

Progress versus ‘progressives’, Greens have lost the plot

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The similarity between the words “progress” and “progressive” is one of the great curiosities of modern politics. Could perchance the two be related?

The meaning of the noun progress is clear enough, having served as a statement of political intent since the dawn of democracy. Progressive, on the other hand, is an adjective struggling to give coherence to a succession of exotic causes, many of which are likely to send us backwards.

Which leads us to the Greens, a party easily bored by the prosaic challenges of government — balancing budgets, defending borders, efficient service delivery, that sort of thing. How will the party fill its working day, now the battle of the rainbow has been won?

No amount of pink champagne could hide the Greens’ disappointment when the changes to the Marriage Act were agreed. It must have hurt like Hades to see a Liberal prime minister lapping up the applause. Even worse, with such a potent issue now off the agenda, the Greens are beginning to look like a rabble without a cause. In the fickle world of progressive politics, that is the quickest way to irrelevance.

Adam Bandt was less than exuberant when the Marriage Act amendments were passed. It wasn’t victory, he told parliament, merely “a watershed moment”. It was “not the end and not the beginning” since equality “will continue to elude us well after this bill is enshrined in law”.

What on earth could he mean? We were led to believe that the right to be joined in secular matrimony was *la cause du siecle*, the fulfilment of the promise of *liberte, egalite et fraternite*, not to mention sorority, and that once the legislation was passed we would finally be able to hold up our heads as members of a civilised nation.

But no, says Bandt, it is just “a step on a long, winding path towards justice”.

“We must remember that we are only dismantling one part of a system that bombards LGBTIQ people from every angle with a message that they are different,” he said.

A long, winding path towards justice is an essential element of the progressive narrative. Another is the dark past and bloody struggle, and Bandt made sure there was one of those as well.

“We must remember that every step towards equality for LGBTIQ Australians has been paid for with pain and sometimes blood — the blood of queer Australians and their allies who took to the streets to stand up for their rights, only to be batted down by batons and fists,” said Bandt, reaching for the cliché bowl. Australian lesbians and gays had faced “hundreds of years of persecution”; had been “callously murdered for daring to be who they are”; “innocent blood was spilt”; it was “an unspeakable tragedy”; the horrors of which “many of us can only imagine”.

A postal plebiscite, scrupulously conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and bloodless as far as we can tell, seems a tame ending to such an epic struggle. It is little wonder Bandt felt obliged to denounce this dastardly democratic act. It was a “final humiliation ... a cruel twist”. How so? Because “the fundamental rights of a minority were decided by the very majority that oppressed them for so long”.

It seems unlikely that sex will return to being simply an activity rather than a political cause. The Greens have invested too much in these boutique human rights to give it away, even if their search for aggrieved minorities is yielding diminishing returns.

The Greens' next big cause is not immediately clear. The Labor Party has stolen their pitch on climate change, and it seems only a matter of time before the federal ALP turns its back on coal altogether. Labor is well on its way to embracing Palestine. The Greens lost the moral high ground on asylum-seekers eight years ago, when the toll of drownings became too big to ignore.

The struggle to carve out a constituency in a crowded market for minor parties is a challenge for Green parties across the democratic world. In Germany, the Greens finished in sixth place in last September's federal election as they struggled to hold their own against Die Linke, a left-wing populist party. Green parties are struggling for members in Britain and France too. In Australia, Richard Di Natale's strategy of leaning towards the mainstream is in trouble. The Greens failed to maintain double-digit support for much of last year.

A convincing by-election victory in the Victorian state seat of Northcote late last year and the strong possibility that the Greens could win the federal Victorian seat of Batman in the event of a by-election show the party's resilience, but highlight its dilemma.

It can clearly hold its own in demographically exceptional enclaves where university lecturers outnumber plumbers, but if its support nationally is to rise beyond 10 per cent it needs wider appeal.

The party's internal tensions are strongest in NSW, where the Left Renewal faction is in open revolt against the federal leadership.

"Talk about misreading the portents of our times," Hall Greenland wrote recently on his blog Watermelon Papers. "Social democracy everywhere shifts to the left and the Australian Greens parliamentary leadership decides to go in the opposite direction."

Greenland says Labor has stolen the march on renewable energy and urges the party to keep the ecological "crisis" at the centre of its agenda. His vision for the future for the party is two-speed: an "activist extra-parliamentarianism" — an ugly word for an ugly concept — while using parliament for "carrying popular causes".

In the absence of any other viable radical progressive minor party, the Greens clearly cannot be written off. The apparent drought of moral crusades should not fool us into thinking that progressive politics is likely to become any less fruitier.

After all, there is one thing we know for certain: when the next batty progressive cause arrives, it will catch the centre-right by complete surprise. It will make the mistake of assuming that the cause will collapse under the weight of its own craziness, failing once again to recognise that the unopposed absurdity of today becomes the conventional wisdom of tomorrow.

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