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The state and federal seats of Fremantle: past, present and future

William Bowe and Martin Drum

This article provides a brief overview of the results for the State and Federal seats of Fremantle, with a view to identifying and analysing the changing nature of its demographic makeup. In particular, an examination of the first preferences of voters since 1986 demonstrates a longer term decline of the Labor vote in Fremantle, a stable Liberal vote, and a growing Greens vote during the last quarter of a century. We look at the future ramifications of this trend, and what these results might suggest about the political nature of the Fremantle community.

The early development of democracy in Fremantle

Fremantle's first official election was held in 1868 for a seat in the Legislative Council, preceding that of the Fremantle Town Council which was established in 1871 in place of the appointed Fremantle Town Trust¹. A poll had earlier been conducted in 1867 to guide the then Governor, John Stephen Hampton, in appointing one of six regional representatives on the newly expanded Legislative Council, but it was not for three more years that the election process was given a legal basis with "an Ordinance to provide for the establishment of a Legislative Council, the division of the colony into electoral districts, and the election of members to serve on such a Council". Under its provisions, the Fremantle district was allocated two out of a total of twelve elected members, who continued to be supplemented on the Council by three *ex-officio* and three non-official

members (to expand over the next two decades to seventeen elected and nine non-elected members, with Fremantle's representation remaining at two).²

These events took place in an electoral world wholly unfamiliar to modern practice. Until the secret ballot was introduced in 1877, elections were conducted by a show of hands at public meetings held at the Odd Fellows Hall on William Street.³ The scale of these elections was extremely small: Western Australia's population in 1870 was approximately 1% of what it is today, providing a limited pool of voters that was further curtailed by limitations on the franchise. Votes for women were still three decades away, and men were required to be British citizens, over 21 and in possession of an appropriate property qualification (although it would appear this was not greatly restrictive – the December 1870 election attracted 696 voters, compared with 983 males over the age of 21 recorded for the Fremantle district in the previous year's census). Not until the turn of the century would Fremantle's electoral districts record votes in the thousands rather than the hundreds. Sitting members were frequently returned unopposed, something that only became unusual after World War II.

Government in the colony was transformed by the Constitution Act 1889, which established responsible government and a Legislative Assembly of 30 members. The first election for the Legislative Assembly, followed by the establishment of the first elected government under Sir John Forrest, was held in December 1890. The Legislative Council meanwhile briefly reverted to a fully appointed body, before being reformed into an elected chamber in 1894. In the same year there also occurred both the abolition of the property qualification for the Legislative Assembly, which was thus only in effect at the 1890 election, and the instatement of a new property qualification for the Legislative Council – a restraint on popular sentiment that would remain in place until 1963. Women were granted the vote in 1899, making Western Australia only the second colony to do so after South Australia. When a further opportunity for the exercise of democratic rights arrived with the first federal election in 1901, at which state electoral and franchise laws applied pending the first meetings of the federal parliament, it was only in these two states that women were able to vote, which was rectified when the federal parliament legislated to enfranchise women in other states one year later. Voting would remain voluntary until compulsory voting was introduced for federal elections in 1922, Legislative Assembly elections in 1936 and Legislative Council elections in 1964.

The expansion of the franchise and the population explosion initiated by the gold rush are the most obvious explanations for the nearly ten-fold increase in the number of votes cast in Fremantle's electoral districts

between 1890 and 1910, but the uneven rate of that increase suggests a third factor: the rise of political Labor. Big increases in turnout were recorded at the time of Labor's two electoral breakthroughs, in 1904 (from 11% to 19%) and 1911 (from 18% to 23%).⁴

Changing boundaries

No analysis of the changing political dynamics within the Fremantle Federal and State seats can be undertaken without appropriate consideration of the electoral boundaries in place over time. Electoral redistribution can have a profound impact on electoral outcomes and can make comparative measures a difficult affair, unless trends are analysed on a booth by booth basis.

Given Western Australia's dramatic growth since 1890, there have inevitably been sweeping changes to Fremantle's electoral geography at both federal and state level. The federal division of Fremantle has been a constant of the House of Representatives since its inception, but the Fremantle region itself has by no means always dominated it. From the first federal election in 1901 until the expansion of parliament in 1949, Western Australia's allocation of five House of Representatives seats required that boundaries commissioners divide the Perth metropolitan area into two divisions, Perth and Fremantle, leaving three for the remainder of the state.

The federal division of Fremantle at first included the southern half of Perth's central business district together with Claremont and Nedlands, and extended south as far as the Shire of Waroona. In later arrangements it would envelope large parts of the Perth metropolitan area, including areas in its north and east. The boundaries from 1922 to 1937, including the period in which the seat was won, lost and regained by John Curtin, involved a north-to-south division which allocated the west to Fremantle and the east to Perth. This placed far-flung Scarborough and Balcatta within the boundaries of Fremantle, while nearby Spearwood was accommodated in the rural division of Forrest. With the expansion of parliament in 1949 the northern extremity of Fremantle was brought in to City Beach and Floreat, and then to Claremont and Swanbourne in 1974, before reaching its present position at North Fremantle in 1980. With the last expansion of parliament in 1984, the southern boundary with the new electorate of Brand was set north of Kwinana, and the eastern limits were set to exclude Booragoon and Willetton. The present boundaries were set by the 2001 redistribution, when Fremantle lost Melville to its eastern neighbour Tangney while maintaining inland territory further south as far as Jandakot and Banjup.⁵

At state level, the electoral district of Fremantle has experienced greater

continuity, having mostly been set by the natural boundaries of the harbour and the coast. A line of descent can also be drawn from the neighbouring seat of South Fremantle to that which succeeded it in 1962, Cockburn, although it today accommodates suburbs which at the turn of the century had yet to be built. Fremantle's eastern neighbour likewise evolved from North Fremantle to East Fremantle to North-East Fremantle to Melville, which was eventually divided between Alfred Cove and Willagee in 1993. Among the territories which continue to be divided between the electorates on Fremantle's periphery are the south-eastern City of Fremantle suburbs of O'Connor, Hilton and Samson, which are presently in Willagee.

The boundaries which took effect with the 1890 Legislative Assembly election divided the town of Fremantle into three electoral districts, with the district of Fremantle limited to the West End and its surrounds. The Adelaide Street end of the town, together with the North Fremantle town site and Fremantle's undeveloped outskirts, constituted the district of North Fremantle. The district of South Fremantle extended from Stevens Street (then Stephen Street) southwards through undeveloped territory as far as Rockingham. The three were combined into West province for the Legislative Council when that chamber was reconstituted in 1894, which owing to the slow pace of electoral reform in the twentieth century, returned three members exclusively representing Fremantle and its immediate surrounds until 1955.

Amid frequent boundary changes resulting from the 1890s gold rush and the concurrent expansion of the Legislative Assembly from 30 seats to 50, the only fundamental rearrangement around Fremantle was the division of North Fremantle into separate North Fremantle and East Fremantle districts in 1896. This was reversed when the Fremantle area lost a seat with the Redistribution of Seats Act 1911, which created a district of North-East Fremantle and pushed Fremantle's eastern boundary out to East Street and Swanbourne Street. North Fremantle was abolished as an electorate in 1947 and its town site absorbed within Fremantle, which also at this time expanded its territory south of the river. The knock-on effects to its eastern neighbour caused its name to be changed from East Fremantle to Melville, which extended eastwards through what was now suburban territory as far as North Lake Road.

The district of Fremantle assumed roughly its modern dimensions when North Fremantle was transferred to Cottesloe in 1962, with Carrington Road consistently serving as an eastern boundary thereafter. The expansion that was thereafter necessitated by its relatively stagnant population was achieved by adding additional territory in the south, as far as the railway line through Spearwood in 1971 and Mayor Road in the south of Coogee

in 1988. The boundary shifted back northward at the redistribution which gave effect to "one vote, one value" electoral reforms in 2007, which set its current limits to include Coogee and Spearwood west of Hamilton Road.

Labor hegemony

Fremantle's early electoral history belies its reputation, only recently interrupted, as an eternal stronghold for the Labor Party. The dominant personality in the early years of Fremantle's democratic life was William E. Marmion, a grazier with extensive commercial interests who served in the conservative government of Sir John Forrest. Mr Marmion was an elected representative for Fremantle in either the WA Upper House or Lower House for more than two decades, from 1872 to 1896⁶. Marmion's extensive tenure may in part reflect the crimp that was placed on radical tendencies by restrictions to the franchise, but two significant constraints on Labor remained even after the property qualification was removed in 1893: candidates with the means to take on parliamentary responsibilities were difficult to find at a time when members of parliament were still unpaid, and the labour movement was relatively weak in the colony in any case.⁷ The former impediment was removed when a payment for members of parliament of 200 pounds a year was introduced in 1900. The latter difficulty was transformed by the onset of the gold rush, resulting in an infusion of radical politics as prospectors arrived from the exhausted Victorian goldfields. The increasing capitalisation of mining in the second half of the decade also saw the emergence on the Goldfields of a natural constituency for organised labour politics, something which the colony had previously had in only limited measure.⁸

The "Political Labor Party" achieved its first breakthroughs with the election of one member in 1897 and the success of six candidates out of the 22 it was able to field in 1901, but on neither occasion did Fremantle feature among its successes. The first seat won was North Perth, and the 1901 victories were achieved mainly on the Goldfields. Indeed, Labor at this point was still yet to field a candidate in the state district of Fremantle, and its candidates in neighbouring districts had been unsuccessful. Then at the 1903 federal election, Labor candidates swept to victory in four of the state's five House of Representatives seats, William Carpenter in Fremantle among them. At the state election of 1904, Fremantle, North Fremantle and East Fremantle were among the 22 won by Labor from an Assembly of 50 seats, confounding all expectations at the time.⁹ That year also saw Labor in power for the first time at both federal and state levels, albeit in each case at the head of short-lived minority governments. The federal and state seats of Fremantle were lost by Labor at the subsequent

elections, but the state party held North Fremantle and East Fremantle through to their next breakthroughs at the federal and state elections of 1910 and 1911, when parliamentary majorities were won for the first time. William Carpenter failed to recover federal Fremantle in 1910, but he was elected to the state district of Fremantle amid Labor's clean sweep of the area the following year.

The federal division of Fremantle returned to the Labor fold with Reginald Burchell's win in 1913, which he achieved despite Andrew Fisher's government losing office. Both Burchell and Carpenter threw their lot in with Billy Hughes's pro-conscription Nationalist forces amid the party split of 1917, with very different electoral consequences – Burchell was easily re-elected at the 1917 federal election, but Carpenter was defeated in the same year by the official Labor candidate, Walter Jones. Jones was in turn defeated by the Nationalist candidate at the next state election in 1921, which would be Labor's last defeat in the state seat of Fremantle for 88 years. Labor was also establishing its dominance in the neighbouring seats at this time, with the Nationalists' narrow win in North-East Fremantle in 1930 being a final exception. The latter seat was recovered for Labor in 1933 by future Premier John Tonkin, who would hold the seat and its successor Melville until his retirement in 1977.

The Fremantle region thus consistently furnished the Legislative Assembly with three Labor members for most of the period from 1924 to 1989, together with three Legislative Council members until at least 1955, when the West province was expanded to include the outer urban district of Canning. Labor was slower to establish its dominance in elections for West province, the three members of which were chosen at elections held biennially, serving staggered six-year terms. Here Labor was constrained by the limited franchise which kept it perpetually in the minority in the chamber, and presumably also by lower turnout due to non-compulsory voting and the staging of elections at separate times from those of the Assembly. Enrolment for West province was typically about half that for its constituent Assembly districts, turnout was around 60%, and Labor's vote was around 10% lower. Labor nonetheless won seats for the province for the first time at by-elections in 1919 and 1920, and went undefeated after 1924.

The rise of the Greens

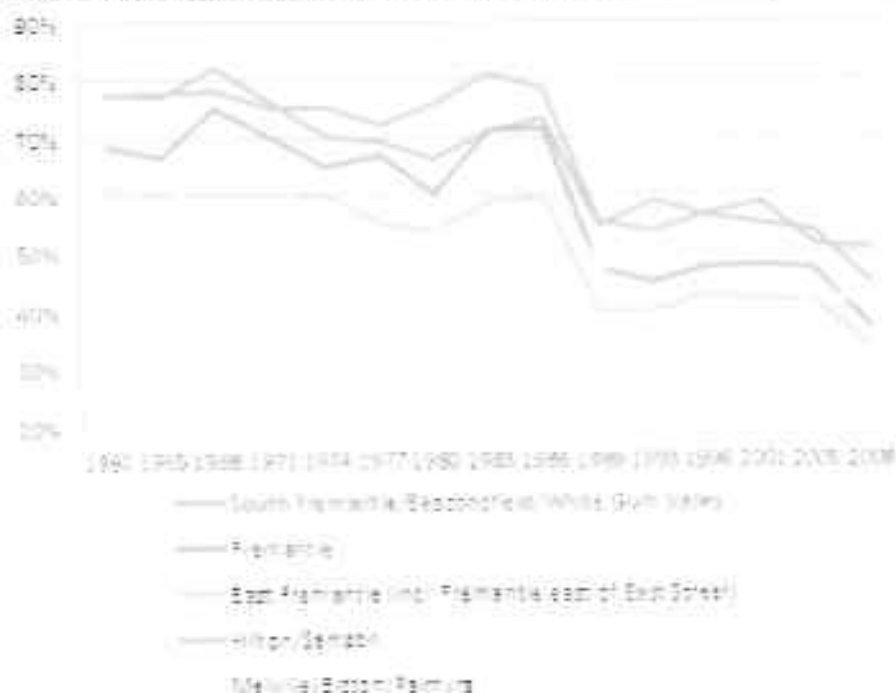
By the 1980s the political scene nationally and in WA was beginning to change. The most substantial minor party in Australian politics during the 1980s was the Australian Democrats, which won Senate seats in Western Australia at the double dissolution elections of 1983 and 1987,

but neglected state politics as the single-member electorate system still in use for the Legislative Council did not give it the same prospects for success as the Senate. This changed with the upper house reforms secured in 1987 by the Burke Labor government with support from the National Party, producing a Senate-style proportional representation system that took effect in 1989.

The Democrats were not however, the only political party to make an impact in the 1980s. This period saw the emergence of the Nuclear Disarmament movement. This movement was able to take advantage of an issue attracting significant media coverage at the time, the presence of US warships in Fremantle harbour. This was a prominent issue given that the threat of nuclear war was still being discussed regularly in public debates. The Nuclear Disarmament Party received 7.2% of the vote nationally at the 1984 election, but were only able to return one senator, in Western Australia.¹⁰ The new senator was Jo Vallentine, who was to go on to become the first Federal parliamentarian to sit in either chamber as a Green, when the WA Greens party was formed in 1990. Ms Vallentine was re-elected as a Greens senator at the 1990 Federal election.

By the end of the decade, the emergence of new political alternatives was beginning to have an influence on the Labor vote in Fremantle. The

Chart 1: Labor primary vote by suburb at Legislative Assembly elections



watershed arrived with the slump in the Labor vote at the 1989 state and 1990 federal elections. This is clearly indicated in Chart 1, which shows the progress of Labor's primary vote at suburban level in Legislative Assembly elections between 1962 to 2008. The suddenness of the change is exaggerated somewhat by the broader range of options which became available to voters at this point. Elections over the previous two decades had often attracted only Labor and Liberal candidates, though usually there was the addition of a radical left party or an obscure independent.

A portent of the future however, emerged at this election with the candidacy of Dec Margetts, a future Greens Senator then running under the banner of the Alternation Coalition. A further element of interest was provided by the independent candidacy of former member John Troy (whose father, Paddy Troy, was a candidate in Fremantle for the Communist Party on seven occasions at state and federal elections between 1945 and 1966), running against the member who had deposed him for Labor preselection in 1980, David Parker. Troy, Margetts and the Democrats respectively polled 12.8%, 4.9% and 5.1%, sending Parker's primary vote plunging from 65.0% to 42.6% -- the first time since 1921 Labor had been required to go to preferences in the seat.

That this local electoral earthquake was something other than a transient protest vote was demonstrated at the March 1990 federal election, when Labor's vote in the Fremantle area fell from 64% to 45%. A month later came a state by-election caused by David Parker's resignation, which saw a further slump in the Labor vote to 33.8% amid a field of 11 candidates which again included John Troy. Labor's new candidate, Jim McGinty, was outpolled on the primary vote by Liberal candidate Arthur Marshall, a former professional tennis player, East Fremantle league footballer and future member for the seat of Murray, and McGinty emerged with a winning margin of only 4.9% after preferences. As is often the case, the seat reverted to its more usual behaviour when the next general election was held in 1993, but Labor's primary vote remained solidly below 50% thereafter.

At the state elections of 1996, 2001 and 2005, the Democrats and Greens both contested the state seat of Fremantle, with their combined vote remaining relatively static in 1996 and 2001 at 21.6% and 20.5% respectively. During this period however, the Democrat vote was declining (7.2% to 3.4%) and the Green vote was on the rise (14.5% to 17.4%). By the 2005 election the Democrats were no longer fielding candidates. Such a trend was consistent with others occurring around the country, and related to the overall demise of the Democrats as a political force, and the transferral of their voter base to the Greens.¹¹ In 2005 the Greens

polled just 15.83%, but this figure was likely suppressed by the presence of independent and future Greens candidate Adele Carles in the field (5.8%).

At the 2008 state election, the now Greens candidate in Fremantle Adele Carles achieved their highest vote in a single seat in Western Australia, 27.6%. She narrowly failed in edging ahead of the Liberals into second place, and potentially winning the seat with Liberal preferences. After the retirement of Jim McGinty in 2009, the subsequent by-election saw Carles' primary vote, in the absence of any Liberal candidate, soar to 44.1%, delivering the Greens their first lower house seat in Western Australia at either a state or Federal level.

The Federal seat of Fremantle, as indicated above, covers a much broader area, extending into more working class suburbs such as Hilton, Hamilton Hill, and Coobellup. Whilst the progress of the Greens has therefore been less spectacular, their primary vote at 2010 election reached 17.6%, and Labor has been forced to rely on their preferences to win the seat since 1996.

The electoral demographics of Fremantle

Labor's strength in Fremantle relative to the remainder of the burgeoning Perth metropolitan area became evident in the second decade of the twentieth century. Census figures from 1910 tellingly reveal that the Fremantle municipality's salient characteristic was a transport and communications sector which constituted nearly a quarter of its workforce, and that over half of this sector was involved with maritime work. The next major demographic shift in Fremantle was the post-war influx of Italian immigrants, which proved equally conducive to electoral support for Labor. Between the first post-war census in 1947 and that held in 1961, the number of Italian-born residents in the municipality swelled from 414 (2.2% of its total population) to 2369 (10.8%). This proportion continued to grow at a slower rate until 1971, and was complemented by smaller influxes of immigrants from Yugoslavia, Hungary and Greece.

As indicated by Chart 2, which shows the difference between the various demographic groupings' share of the Fremantle population and that of the Western Australian population as a whole, a turning point was reached in the 1970s which portended the shift in voting behaviour that began to manifest a decade later. The occupational categories of trades, labouring and transport and communications, together with the industry-of-employment categories of manufacturing and industry, declined precipitously in this period. Partly this indicated a shift among wage-earners to the retail sector which was evident throughout the economy, but the decline in traditionally working-class vocations was especially steep in

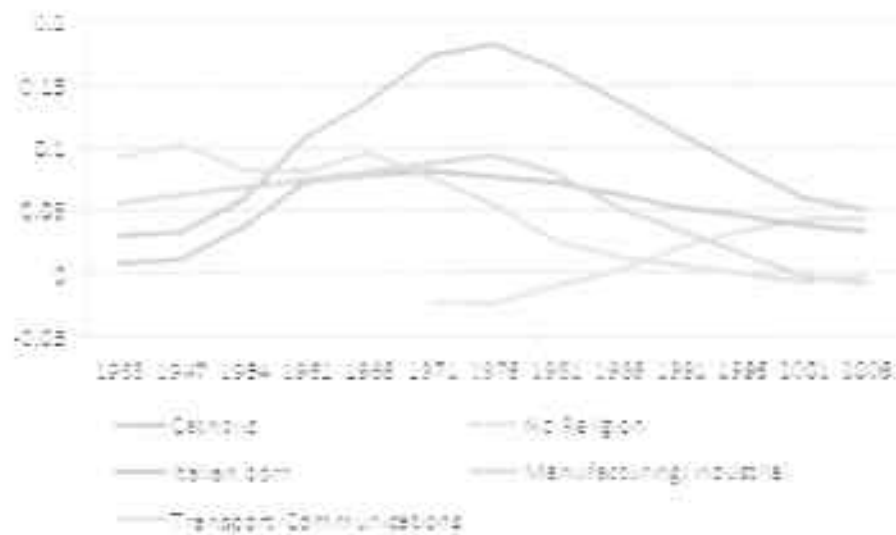


Chart 2: Census responses for selected demographic characteristics: share of Fremantle population minus share of Western Australian population

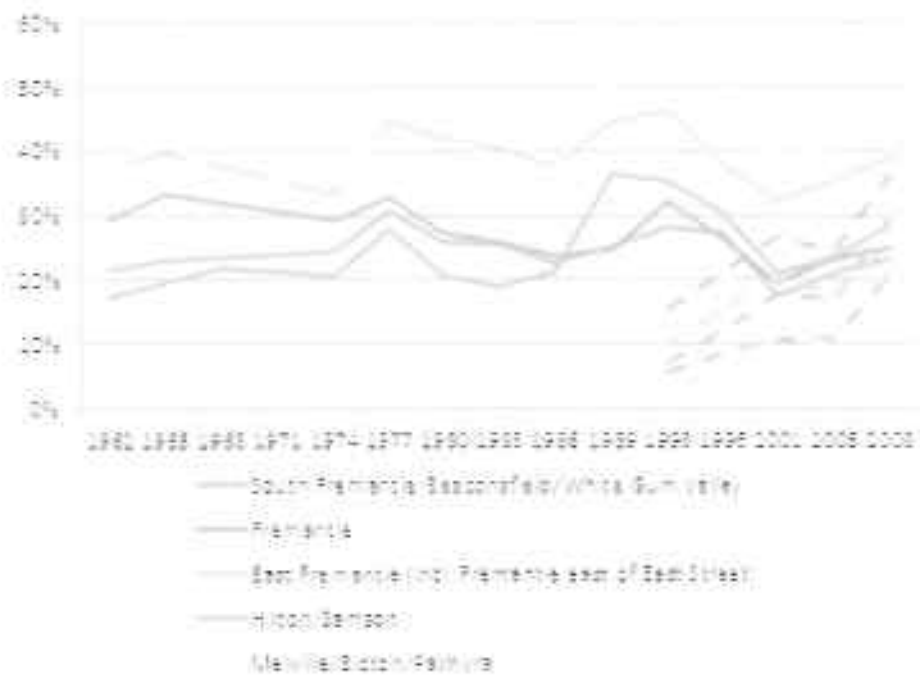


Chart 3: Liberal and Greens primary vote at Legislative Assembly elections

Fremantle, as the progress of the transport and communications category in Chart 2 during the 1970s indicates. Such a change of professional occupation is reflected in contemporary data regarding the highest level of education attained by residents. In the 2006 census more than 40% of residents in the Fremantle Local Government Area had Bachelor degrees or higher, as opposed to a state average of 27%.¹²

There also occurred from 1971 onwards a decline in Fremantle's distinctiveness as a centre of Perth's Italian community, with the "Italian-born" census measure falling to nearly a third of its peak in that year. While this measure obscures the effect of subsequent generations born to the migrants who arrived between 1947 and 1971, it is telling that the decline has been matched by residents identifying as Catholic, which fell from 43.2% to 28.7% over the same period.

These trends do much to explain the decline in the Labor primary vote, but the question remains as to why the beneficiary should have been the Greens rather than the Liberal Party. The obverse of the decline in the occupations traditionally associated with support for Labor has been an increase in the more prestigious occupation categories, and a corresponding increase in relative income measures. However, as Chart 3 illustrates, the Liberal primary vote in Fremantle booths and their immediate neighbours has been generally flat once fluctuations in the electoral cycle are accounted for.

A number of trends can be held to account for this. One is that increasing affluence has been disproportionately driven by the number of residents identifying as professionals, which rose from 12.3% of employed persons in 1986 to 31.9% in 2006. That this occupation group is a source of electoral strength for the Greens was indicated by the Australian Election Study survey conducted after the 2010 election, which showed professionals more than twice as likely to identify with the Greens as the remainder of the population. Secondly, the decline in the number of Catholics has been matched by a rise in those identifying as of "no religion", which accounted for a negligible share of the total population until the 1960s but grew dramatically to a peak of 22.9% across Western Australia at the 2006 census. Studies of the rise of the Greens have noted non-adherence to organised religion as a salient characteristic of its support base¹³, with the measure serving as a proxy for the "post-materialist" values which have been invoked to explain the rise of environmental politics¹⁴. It is thus noteworthy that the rate of increase in the "no religion" response has been especially fast in Fremantle since the 1980s, reaching 27.1% in 2006 after sitting slightly below the state aggregate as recently as the mid-1980s.

Such patterns are also reflected in the variations in party support recorded throughout the Fremantle electoral district. The maps below are colour-coded by census collection district to indicate variations in median family income and proportion of residents of "no religion", together with the percentage vote recorded by Labor and the Greens at the electorate's polling booths at the 2008 general election. The first shows a clear tendency for incomes to be highest at the harbour and riverside, and to be greater in East Fremantle than in the suburbs further south. It is apparent that electoral support for Labor is sensitive to these variations, their primary vote remaining near 50% at the lower-income end of the electorate but falling below 30% at the largest East Fremantle booth. The trend of stronger incomes around East Fremantle carries over the boundary into neighbouring Alfred Cove, explaining that district's conservatism and the drift of Melville away from Labor which culminated in its fall to the Liberals in 1989.

The second map shows that the "no religion" tendency is most heavily concentrated around inner Fremantle, being weaker in East Fremantle and especially in the lower-income suburbs of the south, and that this tendency



correlates with support for the Greens. Taken together, the maps point to the existence of three tendencies in Fremantle: an affluent post-materialist area around the town centre and associated where support for the Greens is strongest; a more typically affluent demographic in East Fremantle, where support for the Liberal Party is higher; and a more traditionally working-class vote which persists for Labor in the lower-income suburbs at the district's southern end, which as Chart 1 shows has long been the party's strongest area. Another manifestation of this tendency is that the Greens have not posed a comparable threat to Labor in Fremantle's southern neighbours of Willagee and Cockburn, nor in the federal division of Fremantle, where Greens-voting inner Fremantle is leavened by suburbs further afield where the major party vote is higher.

Where to from here?

Predicting the future political swings in any one area is usually fraught with difficulty, and the three distinct constituencies mentioned above make this especially difficult in Fremantle. It is difficult to envisage a reversal of the secularised post-materialist vote in inner Fremantle, meaning that the Green vote will continue to be important to the outcome of both seats. Furthermore, as the above data has shown, the Fremantle area has consistently gentrified in recent years, and there is no sign of this discontinuing. As a result, one of the intriguing aspects remains the persistently high Liberal vote in both seats, which makes it difficult for the Greens to finish in second place in the short term. In the Federal seat in particular, the Liberal primary vote in 2010 was practically the same as Labor's (38.9% Lab to 38.6% Lib). Indeed, a Liberal victory in the Federal seat, whilst not likely, remains an outside possibility if their primary continues to increase.

In the state seat the Liberal primary has remained resilient, and strengthened at the 2008 election from 26.57% (2005) to 30.21%. This makes the seat difficult for the Greens to win in the short term, since they would need to finish in second position and rely on Liberal preferences. Given the consistent long term decline of the Labor vote identified above however, the resilience of the Liberal vote, and the gentrification of the Fremantle area, it is a distinct possibility that the state seat could eventually end up as a contest between the Liberals and the Greens. Whilst there may be media focus on the direction of the Liberal preferences in the short term, it is perhaps the direction of the Labor preferences which may decide the seat further into the future.

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- 2 David Black & B de Garis, "Legislative Council of Western Australia: Elections and Electoral Law 1867-1890", Parliament of Western Australia: Perth, 1992, pp 5-8.
- 3 The Oddfellows Hall was demolished in 1919.
- 4 David Black, *Election Statistics: Legislative Assembly of Western Australia 1890-1989*. Parliament of Western Australia, Parliament House, Perth, Western Australia, 1997
- 5 David Black's website *Changing Boundaries: The Federal Electorate of Fremantle: a history since 1901* is an excellent resource which contains detailed maps of the Fremantle Federal Electorate in its various forms since 1901, cf. <http://john.curtin.edu.au/fremantle/>
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- 7 R McMullin, *The Light on the Hill, The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*, Oxford, 1991, p 40.
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