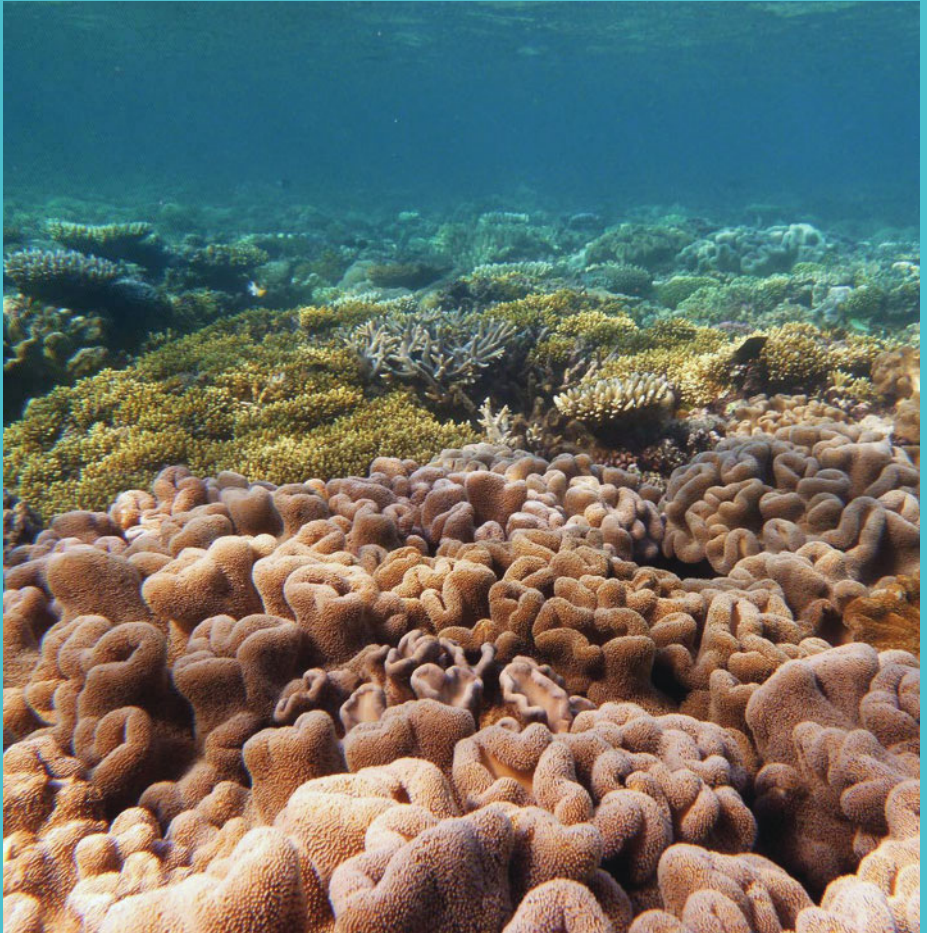


LEADERSHIP AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN



BRUCE TRANTER, LIBBY LESTER, LYN MCGAURR

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Introduction: Environmental Leadership in Transition

The environmental movement was the most influential social movement of the twentieth century (Rootes 2007a) and continues to have a substantial impact upon contemporary Australian life—not only on the nation’s environment but also socially, economically and politically. Yet, in 2012, when Australian Greens Members of Parliament described tensions within their party as ‘growing pains’ (Kerr 2012), they could have been referring to the environmental movement as a whole. At the 2010 federal election, the Greens secured nine seats in the Senate, and a crucial lower house seat in a hung parliament, and their political influence increased considerably. Since then, however, public scrutiny of Greens policies has intensified and internal divisions have been widely aired. In 2017, Australia’s most prominent environmental activist and former party leader Bob Brown publicly attacked New South Wales Senator Lee Rhiannon, urging her to resign to enable a generational changing of the guard and boost the Greens’ electoral support in New South Wales (Gartrell 2017).

The new decade also witnessed a period of intense disruption in one of Australia’s largest environmental organisations. In 2010, a high-profile leadership struggle erupted within The Wilderness Society (TWS) when long-term National Director Alec Marr was usurped in a ‘palace coup’. The resulting leadership change followed a petition by 144 TWS staff members that exposed intergenerational divisions over movement agendas (Fyfe 2010). In the birthplace of TWS, the island state of Tasmania, tensions in the movement were also evident in a decision by direct action

environmental groups to defy requests from mainstream environmental organisations, government and industry to stop their media-focused protests and support roundtable negotiations with industry and government to end environmental conflict in the forests.

These examples highlight a major challenge for researchers seeking to explain how environmental threats and conflicts are publicly articulated. In a social movement where the very notion of leadership is sometimes contested and often hidden, how are we to understand the role of environmental leaders in shaping political and public-issue agendas? Why are some leaders more influential than others? How do the sometimes conflicting interests of environmental organisation leaders, Greens politicians and environmental protest groups influence the way environmental concerns are negotiated? How do leaders interact with still-emerging forms of new media in constructing environmental issues and how does generational change among leaders affect the way those concerns are acted upon? We explore the basis of environmental leadership, how leadership is understood by environmentalists, and how it has changed over time. In addressing these questions, we hope to provide new evidence-based understandings of the people and processes driving public debate on Australia's environmental future.

ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS

While the sociological literature on environmental-movement organisations and the structure of social movements is extensive, the very notion of environmental leaders has been a contested topic that goes against the grain for many environmental activists (Barker et al. 2001, p. 2). This is partly because the notion of leadership does not sit well with the principles of consensus decision-making, often claimed to be a central tenet of new social movements (Dalton et al. 1990). In contrast to formal, hierarchical organisations, social movements are 'loosely connected groups, social circles and networks', according to Pakulski (1991, p. 43), while Diani (1992, p. 13) emphasises the 'informal interactions, between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared identity'. Similarly, Rootes (2007a, p. 610) defines an environmental movement 'as a loose, non-institutionalized network of informal interactions that may include, as well as individuals and groups who have no organizational affiliation,

organizations of varying degrees of formality'. This loose structure tends to result in less formalised leadership that lacks the authority of formal organisations, although there are exceptions, such as the hierarchically organised environmental organisation Greenpeace (Diani and Donati 1999, p. 19). In an ideal-typical sense at least, movements tend towards participatory decision-making based upon consensus (Dalton et al. 1990; Dalton 1996), and tend to be non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic in structure (Doyle and McEachern 2001).

Yet, social movements do have leaders. Leaders 'inspire commitment, mobilise resources, create and recognise opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands and influence outcomes', and they have strategic 'connections to elites in other sectors such as political parties, unions, and mass media' (Morris and Staggenborg 2004, pp. 171, 188). The claim that social-movement leaders are 'strategic decision-makers who inspire and organise others to participate' (Morris and Staggenborg 2004, p. 171) provides a useful working definition of leaders for our research. Social-movement leaders tend to employ impression-management techniques (Bass 1985; Gardner and Avolio 1998) and strategies to mobilise public opinion on environmental issues, from non-violent protests to social media campaigns and conventional lobbying of governments.

While scholarship on social movement leaders per se is relatively rare, academic research on environmental leaders is an underdeveloped field, particularly in Australia. Doyle (2000, p. 161) described what he termed an 'elite network' of activists operating in the Queensland wet-tropics campaign in the mid 1980s. Members of this 'elite' were not volunteers but 'professional activists' employed by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) or TWS (or with links to both organisations), and were located in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne or Hobart (where TWS first emerged). Doyle claimed that this agenda-setting core group of activists who controlled decision-making were 'a small band of professional, organisational activists banded together to dominate many conservation initiatives. As such elites increase their hold on movement politics, representativeness and equality in decision-making diminish' (Doyle 2000, p. 11). For Doyle, this dominant group of activists:

was not necessarily the result of a conscious bid for power but a consequence of their attempts to play the political game as defined for them by party-political and government agendas ... Due to the key positions of

power this national elite held, they were able to convince the politicians, the media and the general public that their actions reflected the wishes of the movement in general. (Doyle 2000, p. 161)

Nor did the actions of these powerful activists represent the broader environmental movement (Doyle 2000, p. 161). Yet, for elite theorists such as Robert Putnam (1976, p. 4), an *elite* consists of leaders who have *power* over subordinates, a relatively small number of people who are able to make strategic decisions within hierarchically structured organisations. In other words, ‘persons with power to affect organisational outcomes individually, regularly and seriously’ (Higley et al. 1979, p. 3). *Power* in this context is ‘the ability to make rewards and threats that are likely to alter the motivations and conduct of persons other than the power-wielder’ (Higley et al. 1979, p. 3). Elite members are located at the top of large, complex organisations, with hierarchically organised structures, and their members are able to issue commands that subordinates are compelled to follow. In contrast, as Barker et al. (2001, p. 7) point out, social-movement leadership is ‘above all, an activity of persuasion’ rather than based upon power located in large organisations.

Within the sparse research on Australian environmental leaders, Tranter (1995) found a polycephalous (Gerlach and Hine 1970) form of leadership in the Tasmanian environmental movement in the early 1990s. He identified a variety of leadership roles, including spokespeople, organisers, experts, green politicians, image-makers and exemplary figures, with a large degree of role-sharing between leaders. Unlike government or business elites, he found ‘leaders of Tasmanian EMOs have limited formal authority over their followers as their organisations are structured in a non-bureaucratic and non-hierarchical manner’ (Tranter 2009, p. 720). In follow-up research based upon interviews with influential Tasmanian environmental activists conducted early in the new millennium, Tranter (2009, p. 720) argued:

EMO leaders exert a subtle form of influence over other movement participants stemming from the respect they have gained through long involvement in successful campaigns. Yet because they have influence rather than authority even if leaders attempt to ‘lead’, other activists and supporters are not compelled to follow [...] A range of views and approaches to environmental problems almost inevitably arise in social movements, as with their non-hierarchical structure they lack an overarching form of leadership.

Tasmanian environmental leaders became influential through lengthy participation as environmental activists in semi-formal and informal networks, with leadership often based upon issue expertise. Leaders exert *influence* rather than power, with functional roles as spokespeople, organisers or experts often overlapping (Tranter 2009, 1995). Yet, what form does environmental leadership take in the Australian environmental movement more broadly, and how has this form of leadership changed over time as the movement has routinised, to become a more mainstream fixture of the political landscape (Pakulski et al. 1998)? Basic questions also underpin our research interest: who are the leaders of the Australian environmental movement and what roles do they play in the environmental movement?

We are particularly interested in how environmental leaders interact with various media, and how these symbiotically related actors (Lester 2007) negotiate the construction of environmental issues in the public sphere. How leaders use media to construct environmental concerns is one question; how media construct environmental leaders is another. Both questions are crucial to explore at this point in history when media and communications are experiencing unparalleled disruption and change. Exposing leader interactions with media is integral to this project, as political agendas are substantially framed ‘by the inherent logic of the media system’ (Castells 2004). Proposals and causes that do not appear in mass media have little hope of attracting widespread support—a reality that impacts upon and is influenced by internal movement leadership and strategic decision-making, as environmental groups remain ‘reflexively conditioned’ to media practices and logics (Gitlin 1980; Cottle 2008). We investigate the shifting frames and dynamics of environmental threats and conflicts within media, examining the ways in which media both represent and influence the Australian movement and its leaders. This expands upon Lester’s extensive work on media-movement relationships in Tasmania (see, especially, 2007) and internationally (for example, 2010; Lester and Hutchins 2009, 2012; Hutchins and Lester 2006, 2015), and McGaurr’s work on the interaction of activism, politics and media in Tasmania and beyond (for example, McGaurr 2015, 2016; McGaurr et al. 2015).

The environmental leaders we have interviewed include both high-profile spokespeople and strategists from large environmental movement organisations, former and current Greens politicians, and activists engaged with smaller but nonetheless influential environmental groups.

The interviewees identify several qualities associated with environmental leadership. These include authenticity, trust, credibility, highly developed communication skills, the ability to mobilise resources, to be able to empower and motivate staff and volunteers, and to act strategically. Media prominence is underpinned by strategic planning, ‘the capacity to organise a political response at community level, the ability to counter and anticipate industry arguments and bureaucratic positions’, as one of the interviewees notes. On one hand, a leader with a prominent media profile can be potentially disempowering for others within an organisation, while on the other, relinquishing a media presence may have consequences for an organisation in terms of its ‘stature in the community’. The prominent media profiles enjoyed by some leaders also tend to obscure those ‘invisible’ leaders who play important roles behind the scenes. These are issues we explore in the following chapters.

Scholars often refer to the charismatic qualities held by many leaders such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and John F. Kennedy. Notably, Max Weber (1947, p. 301) argued that charismatic leadership is based upon the personal qualities of leaders, with charisma in this context associated with ‘devotion and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative patterns of order revealed or ordained by him’. For Klein and House (1995, p. 183), charisma ‘resides in the relationship between a leader who has charismatic qualities and those of his or her followers who are open to charisma’. The Australian environmental movement has its own charismatic leaders, notably Bob Brown and Drew Hutton (see Chap. 4 regarding the latter). Dr Bob Brown is a highly respected environmental leader, both within and outside of the environmental movement, and numerous insider accounts have been written about him and his leadership (for example, Norman 2004; Thompson 1984). Brown’s leadership was based on vast campaign experience gained over decades as a committed environmental activist. Regarded as having a high degree of integrity and enjoying an exceptional following due to his charisma, he is, according to one of our interviewees, the ‘pied piper’ of the Australian environmental movement. Another describes her first meeting with Brown in these terms: ‘... and I’m still sure he hypnotised me...because I just, was just so taken with the man and his ... vision and his heart and his love of this place and the planet.’ Nevertheless, some leaders regard such charismatic qualities with a degree of scepticism: ‘[A] leader is best if people

scarcely know they exist, worse if people love and adore them and worse still if people hate and despise them.’

In Australia, the protest-based campaigns and radical activism of the early phases of the movement persist, and continue to be framed by news media practices that frequently contain and weaken political influence (Carroll and Hackett 2006; Lester 2010). As Rootes (2007b) suggests, ‘[E]stablished environmental movement organizations have become embedded in policy networks, but, in some countries, there has been a resurgence of environmental radicalism.’ Such activities have been accompanied by the increased leverage of the Greens in representative politics, both at the federal level in the Senate, and as demonstrated in power-sharing arrangements in the Tasmanian state government (Miragliotta 2006). There is the potential in Australia for tensions to emerge more fully between Greens politicians and the broader environmental movement if the Greens move away from ‘participatory processes in light of their increasing parliamentary role and their expanding membership’ (Turnbull and Vromen 2006, p. 456), a phenomenon documented in Europe (see, for example, Frankland 2008). Tranter (2009) found similar internal tensions in his qualitative study of Tasmanian environmental leaders, while recently, a factional division has opened within the Greens between the socialist left of the New South Wales state branch and more environmentally concerned Greens located elsewhere in the country (Gartrell 2017).

One of the criticisms levelled at the Australian environmental movement has been the ageing of its leaders. Many leaders of environmental organisations remained in their positions for decades. However, during, or just prior to, the period of our study (2013 to 2016), generational replacement has been occurring across the movement at a rapid rate. For example, the leadership of The Wilderness Society, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Greens have all passed to younger environmentalists. Even ‘pied pipers’ age. Bob Brown was replaced by Christine Milne as leader of the Australian Greens in 2012. Both Brown and Milne were environmental activists of long standing who sought election to Parliament and later the federal Senate. Both had also occupied leadership roles of various kinds for decades. However, in 2015, Christine Milne retired from politics and was replaced as the federal Greens leader by the much younger (late forties), urban-based leader from Victoria, Dr Richard Di Natale.

Former Executive Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Don Henry, was replaced by Kelly O'Shanassy, after having occupied the position from 1997 until 2014. Further, after intense internal wrangling, Alec Marr resigned as Executive Director of The Wilderness Society in 2010, having held the position since 1997. Drew Hutton is another charismatic and long-serving leader. Unlike Bob Brown, Hutton was never elected, although he stood for election on several occasions. Also, in contrast to other environmental elders, late in his environmental career Hutton became an instrumental force in the formation of the Lock the Gate Alliance (2010) (see above and Chap. 4).

Generational change in leadership has also been accompanied by a shift in the gender balance in senior environmental leadership roles. Women tend to be heavily involved as participants in environmental movement organisations, particularly filling volunteer roles as organisers and fundraisers. As former Senator and Leader of the Australian Greens Christine Milne puts it, 'Overwhelmingly the women do the work and the men lead the movement':

I can tell you, having been involved in many, many, many campaigns over the years, you have got in the back rooms of those campaigns, women working ... oh, incredible hours, and, not just the hours, but in strategy, in public relations, in design of materials, in ... research, you know, you name it, they're in there doing it all. But up until in recent years, it's been the blokes out the front. (Christine Milne, pers. comm. 2015)

Milne argues that, unlike the Australian Labor Party, with its recruitment channel into representative politics at the state and federal levels through the union movement (Pakulski and Tranter 2015), environmental activists and Greens politicians do not have obvious mechanisms for moving on. As she says: 'when people have got to the front of the environment organisations they've stayed there, stayed there much longer than they should have' (Christine Milne, pers. comm., 2015). More broadly, the leadership of the environmental movement in Australia tends to reflect the type of gender imbalance that is apparent in other leadership roles, such as representative politics, business and the public service (Pakulski and Tranter 2015). Of the 45 leaders we interviewed, 16 were women, a little over one third of our sample.

Still, there is evidence that the gender imbalance in environmental leadership is changing. Women are increasingly filling important roles

as leaders of large environmental organisations. As mentioned above, Kelly O'Shanassy has been the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Conservation Foundation since 2015, while two of ACF's three Directors are women. The late Felicity Wishart led many important campaigns to protect rainforests and stop land clearing in Queensland and was an inspirational leader in the Australian Marine Conservation Society. Several younger women are emerging as leaders, including Amelia Telford as co-director of Seed, a network of young Indigenous people campaigning for climate justice, and a member of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC). The AYCC was co-founded by Amanda McKenzie, who went on to become CEO of the Climate Council.

Leaders' influence in the hard-fought climate-change debate in Australia is another crucial issue we examine in this book. As noted earlier, the Australian environmental movement has a record of successful environmental campaigns over the last 30 to 40 years. However, according to several leaders who participated in our study, the movement has failed badly when it comes to climate change. 'The global environmental movement has been useless on climate change,' says one of our interviewees. Meanwhile, some leaders praise the new kid on the block, the Lock the Gate Alliance, a disparate alliance of farmers and environmental groups, as an example of a very successful approach for mobilising grass-roots support. On one level, grass-roots mobilisations are nothing new for environmental movements, as environmental organisations and groups have employed such tactics at the local level over several decades. Yet, as we see in Chap. 4, 'climate change' and 'global warming' are terms rarely mentioned by Lock the Gate, on their website, in their policy objectives or in media releases. Terms such as 'climate change' tend to alienate conservative Australians. For political conservatives, action on climate change tends to be associated with increased regulatory control over business that may hinder that neo-liberal sacred cow, economic growth. This is not to say that many involved with environmental groups within Lock the Gate are not concerned about climate change. Some are just notably less so. People living in rural communities tend to be more politically conservative than city dwellers are, and while some may shift their views on climate change after involvement in Lock the Gate, and exposure to the science of climate change, many rural-based Australians remain sceptical of the phenomenon (Buys et al. 2014). Communication of scientific findings on the dangerous impact of global warming may influence some who are uninformed on the issue. Yet others, although