

The release of the Federal Commissioners proposed boundaries for New South Wales has again put the spotlight on Bennelong. I think that much of the commentary on Bennelong including the new margin is just plain wrong. To help clarify things I want to address four questions. These are:

1. What is the effect on Bennelong's margin of the proposed boundaries?
2. Is State Election voting patterns a useful guide to predicting Federal results?
3. Did Andrew Wilkie (who got 16.4% as a Green in 2004) distort the true 2PP vote in Bennelong?
4. Are there any special factors in play in Bennelong?
5. Is Bennelong really a marginal seat?

John Howard is correct when he says that the impact of the Commissioners' proposals in Bennelong has only slightly affected the margin in his seat. The addition of around 7 500 electors from Beecroft and Melrose Park takes his margin down by just 0.2% to 54.13%. (On 2004 figures the new votes added to Bennelong break down to 2PP Lib 3360 (51.7) to ALP 3138).

Now that that's out of the way, let's deal with the suggestion that John Watkins, the NSW Deputy Premier whose seat of Ryde is entirely within Bennelong would beat Howard. That partly concerns the proposition that State voting patterns can be a pointer to Federal results. No they aren't. A good recent example can be seen in the 2004 Queensland State and Federal results. At the State poll the ALP romped in with 63 out of 89 seats. Later that year the ALP only got six out of 28 Queensland Federal seats. The contrasting performance is explained by the fact that whereas State Labor got 57.5% 2PP, federally its Queensland vote was only 42.9% 2PP. Had Federal Labor in QLD polled the same as in the State then 17 extra seats in QLD would have been won.

I've just pulled down a straw man. It's more complicated than that. For an associated question is can an MP in a metropolitan seat build up a strong personal vote? The evidence in favour has been historically weak as one might expect in a Westminster System. But in the last 10 years the evidence in support has become so strong that the proposition can no longer be denied. I'll cite a few examples from NSW, one of which is John Watkins. In 1999, as a result of a State redistribution his former electorate of Gladesville was abolished and Watkins was forced to contest the new seat of Ryde, (which was entirely within Bennelong). Watkins, needing a swing of 4.2% simply to remain in Parliament scored a swing of 10.8%, well above the State average of 7%. Yet he barely won Eastwood polling place (50.8% 2PP). At the next election, in 2003, the swing to NSW Labor was a tiny 0.2% but Watkins got a further swing of 8.9 % in his seat(taking his overall margin to 65.5%). Eastwood polling place itself recorded a 2PP of 66.1% and provided the best swing (15.3%) in the seat. Another example, at the Federal level is Dana Vale, MP for Hughes. She has gained a swing at every election since 1996, totalling 16.6% more than 10% above the swing in NSW to the Coalition.

Why MP's can now build a following I have no doubt is related to the higher level of resources available to MP's via allowances and public funding. Two Labor Federal MP's who lost their seats at the last Federal elections (from redistributions) have told me that they got good swings in the parts of the new Division containing their old electorate but not in the new. But some do better than others.

But there is no evidence in NSW to support the idea that a State MP can transfer a personal vote to a higher sphere. Most speculation on the point is wrong way round. The more relevant question is "what's Howard's personal vote worth"?

Next we come to the Wilkie factor. It's a pretty widespread view that the 2PP in Bennelong last time was distorted by the high profile former Australian Intelligence Officer, Andrew Wilkie who ran, as a Green candidate, an impressive campaign in Bennelong against the Iraq war. He ended up with 16.4% of the primary vote, more than double the State average for the Greens. Moreover, many suggested that the 3.4% swing against Howard, despite a small swing of 0.2% in NSW could only be explained by Wilkie's campaign.

I think Wilkie had almost no impact on the 2PP in Bennelong. For one thing the swings against the Liberals were similar in the adjoining seats of Bradfield (-2.7%) and North Sydney (-3.2%). Also in those same seats the Green vote was much higher than the State average (Bradfield, 11.5%; North Sydney, 12.3%). Given his profile and the second string on Iraq you'd expect Wilkie to do better than his fellow Greens. But his 4.5% extra primary votes on Iraq were, in the context of 2004, always going to go back to Labor.

The special factor in play in Bennelong is that in recent years there has been a significant shift in the ethnic mix. This decade Bennelong has seen a rapid influx of new, mostly Asian migrants with the suburb of Eastwood transformed into a vibrant Korean community.

According to the 2001 Census, (see <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/2004-05/05RP01.htm#table25>), and based on boundaries in 2003, whereas the Australian average of those born in non-English speaking countries is 13.3%, in Bennelong this proportion was 28.9%. Only 16 Divisions out of 150 had a higher proportion and all were and are Labor held. Expect Bennelong to be in the top 10% in the 2006 census.

Chatswood, (split between the Divisions of Bradfield and North Sydney), is another suburb on the North Shore where there has been a concentration of new migrants in recent years. In Chatswood these migrants are mostly Chinese and Japanese. It's not the case that the resulting new electors are ALP voters—at the last Federal election they broke slightly in favour of the Libs, but they have replaced generally, WASPs, who tended to break two to one against the ALP.

I mentioned before that at the 2004 election, despite a swing against the ALP of 0.2% in NSW, Bennelong, Bradfield and North Sydney swung towards the ALP by 3.4%; 2.7% and 3.2% respectively. In 2001 there was a swing of 3.2% to the Libs in NSW. In Bennelong the swing was 2.5% weighed down by the fact that in Eastwood, the largest polling place in the seat, and the swing to the Libs was only 0.9%.

Those figures together with John Watkins's performance in Eastwood give credence to the view that the growing Asian in Bennelong is more susceptible of voting Labor than those they have replaced. My view is that Howard with the status of the Prime Ministership has muted the trend against the Liberals caused by the change in the ethnic mix of Bennelong.

My last question was "Is Bennelong really a marginal seat?" After all, it's been held by the same Party since its creation in 1949, over 23 elections and only two members. My answer is that during John Howard's time, Bennelong was never a marginal until very recent years. To explain why, I need to go through the history of the seat since Howard became the member.

On 18th May, 1974 following the retirement of Sir John Cramer, John Howard became the second Member for Bennelong since its creation in 1949. Although Howard obtained a majority on primaries, his 2PP (two party preferred vote) was 54.5% which on paper would make his seat marginal. (A marginal is usually defined in Australia as a Division with a 2PP of 6% or less). However, Howard knew as would any other experienced judge of these things that his seat was only a 'paper marginal'. It was in fact a safe Liberal seat. For in 1974 Labor's 2PP in NSW was 54.9% a result that has since not been bettered. (Keating in 1993 came closest when Labor got 54.4% 2PP in NSW).

In 1974 Bennelong was a seat centred on Lane Cove Council and which included significant sections of Willoughby and North Sydney Councils, all of Hunters Hill Council and part of Ryde Council. The suburb of Ryde itself was locked up in Lowe, held by former Prime Minister Bill McMahon. (From 1955-77 Lowe straddled both sides of the Parramatta River and incorporated Ryde and Strathfield. Incidentally, for those who dismiss the importance of redistributions, the 1955 Commissioners decision to allow Lowe to jump the Parramatta River eventually cost Labor the 1961 election when both Lowe and Bennelong were held by margins of less than 1% thereby allowing Menzies to scrap back by a two seat majority. But for the slash of the Commissioners' pen Arthur Calwell might have died a happy man!)

Thirty and one half years later Howard was elected for the 13th consecutive time as MP for Bennelong. This time his vote was 54.3% 2PP, nearly the same as in 1974 but with the difference that the ALP 2PP for NSW of 48.1% was 6.8% below that which it got in 1974. Against this, the cumulative effect of the 1984, 1991 and 1999 redistributions was a weakening of Bennelong of 4.5%, (now 4.7% with the 2006 proposed boundaries). Boundary changes weren't enough by themselves to make Bennelong marginal. The extra came with the changing ethnic mix in the seat. Combining the results of the last two

elections we see a swing to the Liberals in NSW of 3.4% and a swing against in Bennelong of -0.9%.

Directly across the River Lowe became a Labor seat with an earlier begun change in its ethnic mix. Might the electoral impact of such changes have stopped in Bennelong? I don't know, but doubt it. What's clear though is that Bennelong has only since 2004 become a truly marginal seat, only likely to be held if the Government is re-elected. Factoring in the continuing impact of the change in the ethnic mix within its current boundaries my best guess is that a swing of say 3% to Labor in NSW and not 4.2% as the pendulum suggests would be enough for Labor to win Bennelong in 2007. Of the 10 elections from 1980, half won by Labor, the other half by the Coalition, the ALP has an average 2PP in NSW of 51.0% which is 2.9% greater than what it got in NSW in 2004. That is, should Labor in NSW achieve its historical average NSW vote then Howard is in serious trouble in a seat which is trending to Labor.

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YEAR	BENNELONG	NSW (2PP%)	AUST (2PP%)
1974	54.5 (-)	45.1 (-)	48.3 (-)
1975	62.6 (+8.1)	53.2 (+8.1)	55.7 (+8.4)
1977	62.6 (-0.0) REDISTRIBUTION		
1977	63.3 (+0.7)	52.4 (-0.8)	54.6 (-1.1)
1980	58.9 (-4.4)	49.6 (-2.8)	50.4 (-4.2)
1983	55.7 (-3.2)	45.9 (-3.7)	46.8 (-3.6)
1983	55.7 (-3.2)	45.9 (-3.7)	46.8 (-3.6)
1984	55.4 (-0.3) REDISTRIBUTION		
1984	58.5 (+3.1)	47.1 (+1.2)	48.2 (+1.2)
1987	60.6 (+2.1)	49.7 (+2.6)	49.2 (-1.0)
1990	60.3 (-0.3)	47.9 (-1.8)	50.1 (+0.9)
1991	56.9 (-3.4) REDISTRIBUTION		
1993	53.2 (-3.7)	45.6 (-2.3)	48.6 (-1.5)

1996	60.1 (+6.9)	52.6 (+7.0)	53.6 (+5.0)
1998	56.0 (-4.1)	48.5 (-4.1)	48.6 (-5.0)
2000	55.2 (-0.8) REDISTRIBUTION		
2001	57.7 (+2.5)	51.7 (+3.2)	51.0 (+2.0)
2004	54.3 (-3.4)	51.9 (+0.2)	52.7 (+1.7)
2006	54.1 (-0.2) REDISTRIBUTION		
TOTALS	-0.4	+6.8	+4.4