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Gaining Ground from Standing Your Ground

by Peter Browne

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Sometime in the late 1890s Edward Andren, a sailor from Gothenburg in Sweden, jumped off a ship anchored on the northern coast of New South Wales. One of Australia's long line of unauthorised arrivals, Seaman Andren was apprehended and deported. But he tried again, and this time he wasn't captured. After settling in rural NSW, he became an Australian citizen – according to family legend – in 1903.

Edward Andren's single-mindedness might help to explain why his grandson, Peter Andren, the federal member for Calare, spoke so strongly against the federal government's border protection legislation in August last year. Despite the looming federal election, and despite the views of his rural New South Wales constituency, Andren told parliament that the "very aim and tenor of the bill" was not worthy of his backing. "Perhaps my electorate supports this legislation right up to the hilt," he added, "but I do not."

Ten weeks later, still arguing that the government's asylum seeker policies are inhumane and dishonest, Peter Andren became one of only two independent MPs since federation to win a federal electorate for a third time. His primary vote rose by a remarkable 11 per cent and he now holds one of the safest seats in Australia, taking in rural centres including Bathurst, Orange, Lithgow and Cowra.

Andren's performance runs strikingly against the conventional wisdom about boat people. As the federal Labor Party sets about reviewing its refugee policy, everyone from conservative columnists to Premier Bob Carr has been warning that adopting a softer attitude would be electoral suicide. Peter Andren's victory seems to show that public opinion on the issue is less rigid and predictable than these commentators believe.

To get a sense of whether voters in Calare supported Peter Andren because of his views on refugees, or despite them, Australian Fieldwork Solutions conducted a phone poll of 250 Andren supporters in mid-March. Voters were asked why they voted for Andren, whether they were aware of his views on asylum seekers, and what impact those views had on their voting decision. Although the response was mixed, the poll detected a shift in opinion during the election campaign – a shift in favour of asylum seekers – which has significance for the national debate.

Just over six years ago, in January 1996, Peter Andren was news editor and news reader at Prime TV in Orange, where he'd worked since the late 1970s. "We all knew him," Bruce Miller, Mayor of Cowra, told me in his office late last month. "He was there every

night for ten years on the TV news.” Like Brian Henderson or Richard Morecroft in Sydney, Andren was the dependable face of local broadcasting.

A few months earlier, the longstanding Labor member for Calare, David Simmonds, had announced he wouldn't be running again at the next election. With no outstanding candidates coming forward for the poll, a young colleague suggested to Andren that he should run for the seat. By the time Paul Keating announced the election in late January, Andren had brought together a group of supporters and done the electoral arithmetic. In a three-cornered contest, his profile in the electorate meant he'd be likely to pick up a strong flow of preferences from each of the other candidates. If he managed around 30 per cent of first preferences then the flow could be enough to get him over the line.

On election night the voting pattern almost exactly matched his calculations. With preferences from Labor and the Nationals, Andren captured 63 per cent of the two-candidate preferred vote. Campaigning partly on rural issues – opposing the privatisation of Telstra, calling for a review of competition policy – and partly as an alternative to a “party politician”, he effectively overcame the argument that, as one opponent put it, an independent would be “a waste of space” in parliament.

Independent MPs do face particular problems in persuading voters that they're having some impact in a party-dominated system. Andren has been an energetic and shrewd MP, both in parliament and in the electorate, and he's capitalised well on the comparatively large number of newspapers and broadcasters in the electorate willing to feature the views of the local member. His criticism of parliamentarians' superannuation and entitlements and his scepticism about national competition policy undoubtedly strike a nerve in Calare.

When Australian Fieldwork Solutions asked their 250 respondents why they'd voted for Andren it was the attraction of a strong, hard-working local member that came up most frequently. Andren's views often coincide with the dominant opinion in the electorate, but in other cases – his opposition to the Northern Territory's mandatory detention laws, for example – he has taken electorally risky stances which seem to have reinforced his reputation as the right sort of person to represent Calare fearlessly in Canberra. As much as anything, according to Len Ashworth, the editor of the Lithgow Mercury, Andren's success rests on the fact that he isn't a member of any political party.

Andren's first preference vote rose to over 40 per cent of the primary vote in 1998 – a swing of 11 per cent – and his two-candidate preferred vote was an impressive 72 per cent. He expected a similar level of support in last November's election, but then the Tampa came along and made the situation in Calare a lot less predictable.

Reporting Andren's speech on the border protection legislation, the Bathurst-based Western Advocate headlined “Let 'em land: Andren”, underlining what many people to the right of Andren hoped would be the dominant theme of the election. But the Advocate itself was generally supportive of Andren's view, according to its editorial writer Tony Rhead, which probably should have made Andren's main conservative opponent, the

National Party's David Shearing, think carefully about his strategy. Instead, he mounted a scare campaign using the slogan "You might like Peter Andren... but you won't like what he thinks about protecting Australia's borders" and told the Australian that "Australia is going to war but Peter Andren wants to let them in to shoot us".

The strategy backfired. With the National Party candidate moving into One Nation territory, many conservative voters were faced with a dilemma, and some solved it by voting for Andren. According to the president of the Bathurst Chamber of Commerce, Lachlan Sullivan, "dyed-in-the-wool Liberals" were handing out Andren's how-to-vote cards in November.

On that evidence alone, the asylum seeker issue doesn't seem to have harmed Andren's campaign. Some people – like Andrew Fisher, editor of the Cowra Guardian, and Len Ashworth at the Lithgow Mercury – argue that this is because the issue was either unknown or little-remarked in the electorate. Others, like Lachlan Sullivan, say Andren's view was "everywhere" during the campaign. Andren certainly mentioned his attitude to asylum seekers more than once in his weekly column in three of the electorate's newspapers, and he referred to it in his own pre-election newsletter. He was questioned on the topic at public meetings, and responded to nearly 200 letters and emails and numerous phone calls about asylum seekers.

Of AFS's 250 respondents, 73 people (or 29 per cent) said they weren't aware of Peter Andren's views on "the Tampa and asylum seeker issues". Of the 174 people who say they were aware of those views, 75 (or 43 per cent) say they disagreed but voted for Andren anyway. Another 57 (33 per cent) say they already held similar views.

It's the remaining group of 36 people – 21 per cent of those who knew what Andren thought about asylum seekers – that is the most interesting. These are the people who agreed with Peter Andren "after listening to his arguments". Over a comparatively short period, against a background of border-protection rhetoric from the Coalition and Labor, Andren was able to persuade 21 per cent of the people who were listening to him that the boat people deserved a less hostile response.

In other words, among people who heard his views Andren was able to lift support for a change in policy from 33 per cent to 54 per cent in a period of around ten weeks.

Many of the people I spoke to in Calare believe that Peter Andren is a special case – a high-profile local identity in a regional electorate, tapping very effectively into rural concerns – and that reading too much into his victory might be deceptive. And it's also true that people could vote for Andren without worrying that his views on asylum seekers would become government policy.

But there is another way of looking at the election result and the findings of the AFS survey. They show that a trusted local member can put across what seems like an

unpopular viewpoint without losing support. Indeed, Andren’s performance shows that such an MP can persuade a proportion of voters to his point of view without losing the support of voters who disagree on a specific issue.

It’s impossible to say exactly how Andren’s approach would translate to the ALP, for example. But his experience in November shows that a strong stand on the issue might be courageous but it isn’t necessarily foolhardy.

Peter Browne works in the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University and produces The National Interest on Radio National

Andren and asylum seekers: what the survey found

Peter Andren was opposed to the government’s response to the Tampa and asylum seekers. When you cast your vote were you aware of his views? If you were, how did you feel about his views on asylum seekers?

	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
No, not aware of his views	73	29%
Yes, aware of his views and...		
...didn’t agree, but voted for him anyway	75	43%
...you had formed similar views to his before he spoke out	57	33%
...you agreed with him after listening to his arguments	36	21%

Survey of 250 voters in the electorate of Calare who voted for Peter Andren in the November 2001 federal election, carried out during March 2002 by Australian Field Solutions. “Don’t know” and “refused” excluded from this chart.