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The Arithmetic of Independence

by Peter Browne

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Midway through the third week of the election campaign the main street of Orange, in mid-western New South Wales, is quiet, untouched by any sign of election fever. Peter Andren, the federal member for Calare, is walking along Summer Street, the main shopping strip, and there's not much in his demeanour to suggest that he has much to worry about on 9 October. People nod as he walks past, some of them approaching him for a short, friendly chat.

Despite this low-key campaigning, two things are particularly interesting about Calare. It's the second safest seat in Australia, just behind the Labor-held Victorian electorate of Batman. And it isn't held by any of the political parties. Peter Andren is an independent – the most electorally successful independent in the House of Representatives since the second world war – and he's fighting his fourth election. He won each of the other three, and it is almost certain he'll win again.

In late April this year, when another independent candidate, Brian Deegan, first announced he would stand against Alexander Downer in Mayo, the *Sunday Mail* took a poll of 400 people in the electorate. The results were published under the headline, "Poll Says Downer Still Safe in Mayo". Although the poll gave Mr Deegan only 18 per cent of first preferences, the headline drew a slightly reckless conclusion from the figures – especially as the election was still months away and Deegan had barely begun his campaign for the seat. On top of that, a sample of just 400 voters has significant statistical risks: the margin of error of plus or minus 5 per cent means that Mr Deegan's support in May could have been as low as 13 per cent or as high as 23 per cent.

Taking the *Sunday Mail*'s figures at face value, though, it's still possible to argue the opposite of what that paper concluded. To do that, it's interesting to look at how Peter Andren scraped into the position of member for Calare when he first ran, back in March 1996.

The sitting member, Labor's David Simmonds, had announced his resignation early the year before. He had won over 50 per cent of first preferences at the previous election – a remarkable result in this regional seat once held for many years by the National Party – but his successor looked likely to suffer a big anti-Labor swing.

Andren was news editor for the local TV station and had, for many years, been an on-screen presence in much of the electorate – in regional centres like Bathurst, Orange and Lithgow, and in the farming areas between. "Peter, why don't you have a run?" a young journalist asked. It wasn't until a few months later that Andren sat down and had a look at the figures. And when he did he decided that – as a high-profile independent – he could realistically aim for 30 per cent of the primary vote.

“I was confident that if I could come second, or better, on the primary vote then I’d pick up support from both ends of the spectrum,” he told me. That’s exactly what happened. Andren received 29.37 per cent of first preferences, picked up preferences from Labor, the Nationals and the Liberals, and ended up with just over 63 per cent of the two-candidate preferred vote. Despite his relatively low primary vote, Andren capitalised on the fact that he was not running for any of the major parties, and he went on to broaden his support in 1998 and 2001.

For the voters in Mayo there’s also an example much closer to home. In 1998 the former singer–songwriter John Schumann took on Mr Downer on behalf of the Australian Democrats. His primary vote was just 22.4 per cent, yet he picked up enough preferences from Labor and some small parties (and benefited from a fall of 11 per cent in Downer’s primary vote) to win 48.26 per cent of the two-party preferred vote and come amazingly close to defeating the foreign minister.

Back at the end of April Brian Deegan wasn’t too far short of John Schumann’s figure. It’s hard to say whether he has picked up support in the meantime, particularly with the emergence of an energetic Green candidate, Dennis Matthews, who would expect to attract some of the people who voted for Schumann. But Peter Andren’s experience shows that a well-known candidate can win with less than a third of the primary vote, and John Schumann’s performance shows that you can come very close with less than a quarter.

It seems like a paradox, but “safe” seats like Mayo are actually the most likely to fall to independents or small-party candidates. An independent needs to get into second place (if there is a large number of candidates, third place will do), and that’s easiest if the main opposition candidate – the Labor candidate, in the case of Calare – is likely to poll relatively poorly.

A few days before I visited Calare, the Nationals leader John Anderson was in the electorate castigating the very voters who have directed their primary vote or their preferences to Peter Andren. “We want to shock people in seats with independents,” he told a breakfast at the Bathurst RSL Club. “A vote for an independent is, at the very best, a wasted vote and at the very worst, a vote for Mark Latham.”

Mr Anderson chose the wrong electorate in which to rail against independent MPs. Voters in Calare have had eight years to size up Peter Andren and assess his effectiveness, and the indications are that many of them like what they see. People I spoke to in the electorate described him as an energetic and conscientious local member. They also see him as an effective player in Canberra – certainly more effective than a government or opposition backbencher. And they like the fact that he says what he thinks, even when they don’t agree with his views on specific issues.

This last point was vividly illustrated during the 2001 election. During the stand-off between the government and the captain of the *Tampa*, John Howard introduced the first of a series of border protection bills. Andren opposed the legislation. He told parliament that “the very aim and tenor of the bill” – which he’d only just been shown – “suggests that it is not worthy of support”. He added, “perhaps my electorate supports this legislation right up to the hilt – but I do not”.

It wasn’t the first time he had taken a position that might not have wide support in Calare; the previous year, for example, he introduced a private member’s bill to stop mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory. Yet Peter Andren won Calare at the 2001 election with an extraordinary two-candidate preferred swing of over 15 per cent (compared with a 3 per cent national swing towards the government). For the first time he received a majority of the primary vote.

It’s difficult to view Andren’s period in parliament as anything other than a positive. He has argued persuasively on issues like the quality of Telstra’s country services and the need to scale back politicians’ superannuation, and shown up the cosiness of the two-party system. If Brian Deegan looks like he would bring the same qualities to parliament, then the voters of Mayo should seriously consider whether he is a more attractive local representative than Mr Downer.

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