

Disaffection and volatility dominate West Australian election

Our correspondents
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This Saturday's election in the state of Western Australia is being approached nervously by both major parties—Labor and Liberal-National—nation-wide. The first of up to six state, territory and federal elections due in Australia this year, the WA campaign has been dominated by volatility and uncertainty.

Opinion polls point to a close result, with up to one-third of voters supporting minor parties and the possibility that no-one will be able to form a majority government. Just one week out from the election, a *Sunday Times* poll reported that 32 percent of voters were undecided, indicating unprecedented disaffection with the political system.

Despite broad hostility toward the eight-year-old right-wing government of Premier Richard Court, there is no great enthusiasm for the Labor opposition led by Geoff Gallop, a close confidant of federal Labor leader Kim Beazley. Another recent poll estimated support for Court's Liberal-National coalition at just 35 percent, with Labor polling marginally better at 40 percent. The Greens held 4 percent, the extreme right-wing One Nation 3 percent, the Australian Democrats 2 percent and Independents 3 percent.

Court is currently WA's longest-serving Premier and the longest-surviving state or federal government leader in Australia. Every other leader, Labor and Liberal, has been swept from office since the mid-1990s, after implementing the cost-cutting and privatisation measures required by the financial markets and major companies.

Since defeating the discredited state Labor government in 1992 and winning a second term of office in 1996 with an increased vote, Court has held a commanding majority in state parliament. The ruling coalition has 35 seats in the 57-member Legislative Assembly, compared to just 18 Labor MPs, with two ex-Labor and two ex-Liberal Independents.

Because of an electoral gerrymander, in which rural votes carry up to four times the weight of votes in the state capital Perth, the Labor Party requires 54 percent of the two-party preferred vote—a swing of 5.3 percent—to form a majority government, though a swing of 3.2 percent could produce a hung parliament.

No opposition has ever required and won this many seats in a WA election. Yet, Court is so unsure of his support that he has spent the final days of the campaign appealing for the preference votes of the minor parties, including One Nation. Furthermore, he and his family are personally door-knocking his blue-ribbon electorate in Perth's wealthy suburbs.

Prime Minister John Howard has increasingly sought to distance himself from Court. He has not campaigned in WA at all and this week rejected a complaint by a senior Court government minister, Graham Kierath, who blamed the expected poor result on federal issues, such as the new Goods and Services Tax and the rising fuel

excise.

Court originally called the election for February 10, with as little notice as possible and as early as he could in the New Year, in an effort to scrape back into office amid rising unpopularity, the outbreak of scandals and signs of disarray within the government.

The short campaign has only highlighted the gulf between the political establishment and ordinary people. Neither the government nor the Labor leadership has offered any policies to address the fundamental concerns of working people—declining living standards, growing inequality, unemployment and job insecurity, and the devastation of the public health system and social services.

Social polarisation

Under both Liberal and Labor governments, the past two decades have seen mounting social polarisation. While WA is the wealthiest state in terms of raw materials, producing 25 percent of national exports, it now has the highest incarceration rates in the world among the state's Aboriginal population. According to a report published by the Association of Heads of Churches in WA last year, "the incarceration rates have doubled in less than a decade. WA Aborigines are more likely to be jailed than any other people".

This is only the sharpest expression of a deepening class divide.

* An estimated 41,000 workers in Western Australia are reported to be living on the lowest wage levels in the country, up to \$64 a week worse off than the poorest workers in the eastern states.

* Long-term unemployment is on the rise, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting that 11,200 West Australians had been out of work for at least a year last November, compared to 10,400 in October 1999.

* Housing groups estimate that up to 12,000 people are either homeless or at risk of being homeless in WA, with a noticeable increase in the number of men aged between 25 and 40 living in hostels.

* According to the WA Council of Social Services, one in nine people live in poverty. Some 74 percent of welfare agencies are operating at maximum capacity, with 71 percent reporting an increase in the number of people assisted over the last six-month period.

* The WA Farmers Federation estimates that up to 2,000 small farmers are on the verge of bankruptcy following three years of drought, floods and locust plagues. Rural workers have also been hit by the closure of banks, government departments, post offices and other social facilities.

Polls have indicated that for most people, the number one issue is the appalling state of the public hospitals. Chronic nursing shortages, poor working conditions and debilitating budget cutbacks have had a devastating impact, leading to periodic closures of overcrowded

accident and emergency departments, growing surgery waiting lists and 12-hour queues for treatment.

Both Court and Gallop have produced last-minute funding pledges, which they claim will overcome the health crisis. The puny amounts involved—Labor has promised \$179 million—cannot possibly fix the breakdown in the public hospital system, which has an annual budget of \$2 billion.

The situation will worsen as soon as the election is over. Only last month, the government announced further budget cuts at Perth's hospitals after a shortfall in funding for new community services. Registered nurses at a major hospital in the northern suburb of Joondalup recently threatened to resign en masse over management plans to hire nursing assistants to replace registered and enrolled nurses.

Another major issue is the financial scandals that have hit the government in recent months. The collapse of an investment company associated with Court's brother, Ken Court, cost small investors, mostly elderly retirees, more than \$100 million. Court refused to sack Fair Trading Minister Doug Shave, who allowed the company to operate.

In the dying days of the campaign, Court also defended a backbench Liberal MP, Bob Bloffwitch, who admitted to failing to declare a substantial shareholding in a company seeking permission to construct a multi-million dollar steel mill in his electorate.

While Labor has sought to capitalise on these scandals, its last period of office saw the Labor leaders subsidising and bailing out the projects of failed WA business chiefs, including Alan Bond, while slashing social services and increasing taxes and government charges.

Throughout the campaign, Gallop and his colleagues have attacked the Court government from the right, condemning it for over-spending and endangering the budget surplus. Gallop has vowed to reduce the size of the government. Labor's \$756 million worth of new commitments over four years would be more than offset by savings worth \$976 million over the same period. The cuts can only be achieved by eliminating thousands more public sector jobs.

One Nation

The utter indifference of the traditional parties toward the needs of ordinary people has opened the door for Pauline Hanson's One Nation to return to the political centre stage. Hanson is making a direct appeal to disaffected voters, on the basis that hers is the only real opposition party. "I wouldn't be able to rear my head in this country if the main parties got out there and listened to the Australian people," she declared late last month.

One Nation seeks to channel widespread disaffection, particularly among rural and regional middle class people, in a reactionary nationalist direction, pushing law-and-order and scapegoating welfare recipients, refugees and Aborigines. Increasingly, her party is dictating the official political agenda. While formally rejecting preference-swapping deals with One Nation, both Labor and Liberal have courted Hanson's supporters by pursuing many of her policies, including the vilification of asylum-seekers and the imposition of mandatory prison terms for minor criminal offences.

Opinion polls are indicating a One Nation vote of up to 15 percent support in some rural electorates, with statewide support of up to 5 percent, enough to win two seats in the upper house. Fearing this electoral backlash, some government and Labor MPs have sought preference deals with One Nation, bolstering Hanson's profile even further. This week a Liberal MP publicly criticised his leadership for refusing to swap votes with Hanson, declaring that he could lose his

seat as a result.

More and more, the election has taken the form of a law-and-order auction. Court has pledged to extend WA's notorious mandatory sentencing laws—which particularly target Aboriginal youth—and give magistrates the option of sending youth to work camps, where they will be used as a source of cheap labour. He has also floated proposals to re-introduce the death penalty and establish a public register of drug offenders.

Gallop has not only promised to retain mandatory sentencing but also to boost police resources and powers, matching Court's plan to place 250 more police on the streets. "We supported tough on crime legislation in opposition and we'll take that support into government," Gallop declared this week.

Unable to offer any improvement in social conditions, both parties are victimising working class young people, particularly Aboriginal youth, and attempting to create a right-wing constituency for the further gutting of welfare and social services.

Even before the election is over, business leaders have demanded that the next government must cut social spending more ruthlessly, facilitate the lowering of wages and working conditions and extend the privatisation program to electricity companies and other utilities. The WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Lyndon Rowe has accused both parties of being reckless with their promises. The Murdoch media has particularly lashed Court for allowing the budget to slide toward a deficit.

An editorial in the *West Australian* on January 16 declared the real election issues to be, "the rules governing workers compensation, the future of workplace agreements legislation, payroll tax and getting competition into the electricity sector... Of course hospital beds, police numbers and school places matter too, but these can be provided on no greater scale than the state's economic wealth permits." The editorial said the election had to deliver "the government team most able to keep the state in front in an increasingly competitive world".

The *Australian Financial Review* reported on February 1 that 200 companies, including BHP, Woodside Petroleum, Wesfarmers and BankWest, have paid \$500 to join the Labor Party's Business Roundtable, giving them a formal input into Labor's policy-making. This indicates that sections of business may now regard a Labor government as a somewhat more credible, less corrupt and crony-dominated administration for imposing the requirements of global markets.



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