

Western Australian election: a campaign of diversions

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The election being held today in the state of Western Australia (WA) has been dominated by voter disinterest and popular hostility towards official politics. Neither the ruling Labor Party nor the Liberal/National Party Coalition has addressed the concerns and needs of ordinary people. Instead, the campaign has been narrowly focussed on “law-and-order” and a handful of promises pitched at key swinging voters. Neither side has even referred to the broader issues—including the involvement of Australian troops in the illegal occupation of Iraq, on which both Labor and the Coalition fundamentally agree.

At the previous state election in 2001, an unprecedented 30 percent of the electorate voted for minor parties or Independents. Labor’s Geoff Gallop only took office because of a massive swing against the Coalition, which revealed deep-going animosity to the federal government led by Prime Minister John Howard, as well as towards his state colleague, Premier Richard Court. Labor won the election with only 37.6 percent of the vote, its second worst result ever. Gallop scraped in via second preference votes from the Greens, an array of Independents and the right-wing outfit, One Nation.

After four years of Labor rule, during which Gallop’s government has striven to satisfy every demand of the financial markets, dissatisfaction has only intensified. A recent poll by the Western Australian Council of Social Services (WACOSS) showed that more than 70 percent of people were more concerned about social services than tax cuts. The appalling state of WA’s hospitals was the biggest worry, with almost two-thirds of those surveyed naming health care as the principal issue, while education came in second on 13 percent.

The early stages of the campaign were dominated by “law-and-order” issues with both parties seeking to outdo each other on being “tough on crime”. This is a formula that has been repeated in state elections around Australia. Its transparent aim is to divert attention from deteriorating social conditions by promoting a climate of fear and uncertainty about “rising crime rates”.

Gallop has boasted of employing 250 new police, with another 350 to come in the next four years. He has declared that his government will provide police with 40 stun guns to add to the 14 currently issued to the tactical response and gang

response units. Labor has already introduced a curfew barring young people from the popular nightclub and restaurant district of Northbridge—a move directed against Aboriginal and homeless youth in particular.

For its part, the Coalition has upped the ante by promising 410 extra police and new mandatory imprisonment laws. Liberal leader Colin Barnett grabbed the headlines with the announcement that he would purchase a \$300,000 truck-mounted water cannon to control crowds. Labor’s reply was to accuse the Liberals of hypocrisy because they did not initially back the Northbridge curfew.

The deteriorating condition of physical and social infrastructure also surfaced as an issue in the campaign, despite Labor’s attempts to bury it. Barnett attempted to grandstand on the state’s increasingly serious water shortages by pledging to build a canal running 3,700km from the tropical north to the capital of Perth, at a cost of at least \$2 billion. The promise was clearly pitched at key regional electorates where an estimated 3,000 jobs would be created. While major water projects are needed in WA, Barnett proposed his scheme without consultation, discussion or debate on the possible alternatives.

Attention was briefly focussed on the state of the public hospital system when nurses voted to go on strike three days before the election over a long-running pay dispute. Gallop rapidly defused the issue by reaching a deal with the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) to resume negotiations if he was re-elected. The ANF then negotiated an arrangement with Barnett, who declared that he would grant the pay rise and outdo Labor’s offer on working conditions.

In fact, both parties are responsible for carrying out an assault on public health. When in power the Coalition implemented a swathe of hospital closures and privatisations of hospital support services. When Gallop took office in 2001, he pledged to fix the crisis, but chronic nursing shortages, poor working conditions, budget cutbacks, growing waiting lists and periodic closures of overcrowded accident and emergency departments remain.

In September 2003, the Gallop government cut \$11.7 million from government-funded health programs, directly affecting the most vulnerable sections of the population—Aborigines, the elderly and the mentally ill. He declared it was “impossible” to

fix the health system, because “we don’t have the revenue to fund all the programs and health services”.

Once the election is over, whichever party wins will undoubtedly make the same excuses to ditch its limited campaign promises. Big business is insisting that further cutbacks must be made to government spending, along with more pro-market reforms. In the final days of the campaign, the media has expressed a clear preference for Gallop, who has spent four years demonstrating his “fiscal responsibility”, over the untested Barnett and his sensationalist plans.

Murdoch’s *Australian* yesterday editorialised for a Labor victory, denouncing Barnett for indulging in “old-fashioned populist politics”, lambasting his planned canal and declaring there was a \$200 million “black hole” in his budget projections. Its front page reported that the WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a peak employer group, described Barnett’s budget costings as inadequate and “unachievable”. The chamber ridiculed the canal plan as so “reckless it could cripple the state”.

In its editorial, the *Australian Financial Review* berated both parties for a “depressing campaign”. It described Gallop as “the colourless incumbent”, who conceded too much to the unions and raised taxes. But the newspaper directed the bulk of its criticism at the Liberals. “Mr Barnett has wasted opportunity after opportunity,” it declared. “Instead of advocating proven free-market solutions to WA’s problems, he’s confirmed his image as a parish-pump opponent of competitive reform.”

While not openly advocating a vote for Labor, the *Review* left no doubt about its displeasure with the Liberals. “The bad news about tomorrow’s poll is that neither party has any vision for locking in the prosperity from the resources boom. A redistribution has made it easier for the Liberals to win. Should this occur, Mr Barnett would probably be no worse than Mr Gallop. Indeed, it’s hard to find a compelling reason to vote for either side. But it’s the opposition that has to make the case for change, and it has failed.”

The editorial points to one of the underlying contradictions in the election campaign. Over the past four years, thanks largely to booming exports of minerals and energy to Asia, particularly China, economic growth in WA has run at 7.5 percent, with a record \$793 million state budget surplus. But in order to ensure continued profits, corporate Australia is insisting on more “reforms”—that is, further inroads into the living standards of ordinary working people. Both parties are committed to making the state “competitive” but, in doing so, they have alienated broad sections of voters.

Over the past four years, the Gallop government has presided over a widening gulf between rich and poor. None of the export-generated prosperity has gone into social services or alleviating hardship. Instead, Labor has slashed social spending, while handing tax concessions to business and high-income earners. It abolished land tax for business and last October announced \$1 billion in tax cuts over four years.

As well as seeking foreign investment, the Labor government has also made WA a base of operations for the US navy. In the build-up to the Iraq war, Gallop welcomed Prime Minister Howard’s offer to the US Navy of sea-swap facilities at naval bases in the state. In 2002, Labor sent its own delegation to America to push for US Navy maintenance facilities in WA on the basis that a devalued Australian dollar and low hourly wage rates made costs much cheaper than the US.

The social costs of Labor’s policies have been spelled out in a series of recent studies and surveys conducted by WACOSS. These show that 16 percent of people are living in poverty. More than 80,000 people, or 7 percent of the population, are even struggling to pay for accommodation. The supply of affordable rental housing has fallen by approximately 20 percent in the past 12 months, while about 30,000 more people have sought assistance from social welfare agencies every year.

More than half the welfare agencies said their waiting lists were longer than the previous year, and 63 percent reported having to dig into their financial reserves to make up the shortfall between the increased demand and their funding.

WACOSS reported a dramatic growth in the number of “working poor” because of low-paid jobs and higher levels of casual and part-time employment. Documenting the widening gap between the wealthy and the poorest sections of society, it noted: “Over the last six years, the income of ordinary people has only increased by 6 percent whilst that of higher income earners has risen by almost 32 percent.”

It is hardly surprising that when ABC radio interviewed voters yesterday, most indicated that they had not even thought about the election. The vast majority have been effectively disenfranchised, as they do not feel that any of the parties gives voice to their concerns and aspirations. As in other Australian elections, if voting were not compulsory, there would be a dramatic slump in the participation rate.

According to a last minute poll published in today’s *Australian*, Labor appears to have taken the lead after trailing the Liberals throughout the campaign. Far from constituting a surge of enthusiasm for Labor, the poll simply confirms that the media campaign against Barnett has had its effect. Gallop may scrape back into office, but the campaign will only reinforce the view among broad layers of voters that there is simply no one within the political establishment who represents their interests.



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