Western Australian election: Labor returned to office with help from the media

Our reporters
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After heading for what appeared to be certain defeat, the state Labor government in Western Australia was returned to office in the February 26 election on the back of support from the media. Premier Geoff Gallop retained his majority of 32 seats and the Liberal/National Party coalition increased its seats from 21 to 24, while the number of Independents fell from four to just one.

The result constituted a blow for the federal Howard government, which was hoping that Gallop's would be the first in a series of state Labor governments to fall. Currently the Australian Labor Party (ALP) holds power in every Australian state and territory. Howard joined Liberal leader Colin Barnett in the campaign, but, despite being hailed by the political establishment as a something of a supremo, appeared to make no positive impact whatsoever.

Labor seized on the outcome as a sign of revival following its federal defeat last October. Media pundits speculated on the significance of the "Beazley factor" in Gallop's victory, given that Kim Beazley recently replaced Mark Latham as the party's leader. But, far from revealing a resurgence in Labor's support, the election result once again exposed the yawning gulf between voters and parliamentary politics. The campaign was largely met with indifference or undisguised hostility. Many people would not have voted at all if it were not compulsory.

At the previous state election in 2001, an unprecedented 30 percent of voters supported minor parties or so-called Independents. The National-Liberal coalition was ousted by an 8 percent swing across the state. Labor, which mustered just 37.6 percent of the primary vote, took office on the basis of preferences from the Greens, a host of independent candidates and the extreme right-wing party, One Nation.

One Nation, notorious for its anti-immigrant and anti-Aboriginal bigotry, advanced no policies or program in the course of the 2001 campaign. Its leader Pauline Hanson appealed to voter resentment and anger, particularly in rural areas, by calling on them "to put sitting MPs last"—that is, to allocate their preferences so that the incumbent, regardless of political affiliation, would receive the lowest number of votes. Her campaign had the biggest impact on coalition MPs and assisted Labor in gaining preferences from One Nation's confused and alienated supporters, particularly in rural and regional areas.

With all the polls pointing to a collapse in One Nation's support, both parties pitched their campaigns to its former constituency. Gallop sought to outdo the Coalition on "law-and-order", promising more police and stun guns, in reply to Barnett's pledge to use water cannon on the streets. Labor also promised big business it would continue its "fiscal responsibility" and tried to woo voters in marginal electorates with various inducements.

During the final week of the campaign, Labor experienced something of a boost. The main factor was not popular enthusiasm, but growing doubts in business circles about the reliability of Barnett and the Liberals. Just prior to the poll, the media produced a string of articles, editorials and comments deriding the economic viability of Barnett's plan to build a 3,700-kilometre canal from the tropical north of the state to alleviate water shortages in the state capital Perth.

In the course of the five-week campaign, none of the major issues confronting ordinary working people were addressed by either party: the Howard government's decision to send another 450 Australian troops to Iraq, rising interest rates, a public hospital crisis, electricity shortages, cuts to social services or growing social inequality. In a climate of general alienation, the media's intervention appears to have tipped the balance.

As predicted, the vote for One Nation collapsed from 9.5 percent to just 1.6 percent. The Australian Democrats, which secured 2.6 percent in 2001, stood no lower house candidates. The Democrats, who used to promote themselves as the responsible "third party", have virtually imploded since supporting the Howard government's Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 1999. The Forest Liberals—a Liberal Party breakaway—that gained 1.6 percent in 2001 also stood no candidates. Support for other minor parties fell by 3.5 percent, taking their total losses to 15.6 percent.

A portion of this vote flowed to the major parties—5.2 percent to Labor, 4.2 percent to the Liberals and 0.3 percent to the National Party. This only served, however, to highlight the volatility of the electorate—a large portion of which has no fixed or firm political allegiance. Labor's primary vote was just 42.4 percent—a modest rise from 2001, when it recorded its second

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worst vote ever. Moreover, the government lost ground in traditional Labor electorates, where many workers demonstrated their disgust at the state government's attacks on social services, jobs and conditions. In Fremantle, support for Attorney General and Health Minister Jim McGinty slumped by 3.1 percent. McGinty has presided over deteriorating hospital conditions and a bitter nine-month dispute with nurses. Education Minister Alan Carpenter lost 4.2 percent in the safe Labor seat of Willagee.

At the same time, Labor consolidated its grip in marginal metropolitan seats and made inroads into various Liberal seats. The ALP won the seat of Kingsley in Perth's northern suburbs—once regarded as a relatively safe Liberal seat. In Swan Hill and Wanneroo, sitting Labor MPs increased their primary votes by 14.7 percent and 11.5 percent respectively. While voters in these so-called mortgage belt suburbs turned to Labor—perhaps in response to the media's attacks on Barnett's economic credentials—few have any firm commitment to any party.

Significantly, the Greens failed to make any gains—in fact, the party's support dropped slightly to 7.2 percent. The Greens mounted no challenge to the major parties on key social questions such as health and education or their bipartisan attack on democratic rights. Having thrust itself forward as the anti-war party in 2003, it remained silent on Howard's decision to boost Australia's participation in the illegal occupation of Iraq.

In the upper house, the Greens lost three of their previous five seats, but retained the balance of power. Labor increased its tally from 13 to 16 seats and the coalition from 13 to 16. One Nation lost all three of the seats it won in 2001.

Post-election commentary sheeted the coalition defeat to Barnett's canal proposal and various discrepancies in his costings of the Liberals' campaign promises. In response, Barnett accepted full responsibility and resigned as party leader.

An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times* declared: "Dr Gallop should break open the champagne and thank Liberal leader Colin Barnett for helping him to victory. In the end, it was Mr Barnett's last minute $200 million mistake in the projected costings of his promises and his determination to build his canal from the Kimberley, no matter what the cost, that sank any chance he had of winning."

Federal Labor frontbencher Stephen Smith conceded that, while voters had supported Gallop's policies, they voted against Barnett's ineptitude. "Without Colin's canal, we would have been in very serious trouble," he told the press. A senior Liberal told the *Australian*: "We should have just sent Colin off to Bali for a month. We could have won this election if we'd just talked about giving voters back the money the Gallop government had taken from them."

The commentary merely served to underscore the degree of media manipulation in the election result. Barnett's canal proposal was hardly extraordinary: it was one of a number of possible solutions to Perth's serious water shortages. In different circumstances, the same editorial writers would have ignored the proposal, or even hailed it as a sign of great political foresight.

The point was that, as far as the ruling elite was concerned, Gallop presented less of a risk than Barnett. In its pre-election editorial, the *Australian Financial Review* summed up the mood within business circles when it characterised the campaign as "depressing", described Gallop as "a colourless incumbent" but attacked Barnett for "wasting opportunity after opportunity" to push for further economic "reform". The coalition, it made clear, had failed to make the case for change.

Having helped Labor back to power, the media immediately laid out its demands for the new government. Murdoch's *Australian*, in an editorial entitled "Unearned win means Gallop is put on notice", declared: "The political gods smiled on Geoff Gallop throughout the West Australian election campaign." After listing its grievances, it concluded: "But Dr Gallop must understand that such huge bolts of political luck, like lightning, seldom strike twice in the same place. In Western Australia as in the other states, the Coalition will eventually find a competitive formula. Yesterday, Mr Barnett fell on his sword—but Dr Gallop will eventually stumble on his own unless he dramatically lifts his game during his second term."

Gallop gave every indication that he had heard the message from the "political gods". Upon re-election, he made clear that his major concern during the campaign was to emphasise a basic theme, that "financial responsibility is a fundamental question to all governments." Neither he nor Barnett is in any doubt that it is largely the media barons and business leaders who, in the current political climate of mass disaffection, make or break governments.

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