

Victorian State Election 2002

Winsome Roberts*

Labor Premier Steve Bracks called on an election in Victoria at the earliest possible date and nearly a year before the Parliament was due to expire. The campaigns were short but, for the Liberal Opposition, ill-starred. Bracks won majorities in both Houses and proceeded immediately with major changes to the Parliament, especially to the Legislative Council.

The results of the 2002 Victorian State Election had none of the excitement of the last one, in 1999, when the Kennett Liberal–National coalition government unexpectedly lost office, after seven years in power, and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) formed government with the support of three independent members of parliament. This time the ALP was returned as expected: a result the polls had consistently predicted. Quietly confident, Labor conducted a professional but low-key campaign that rested on the policy credentials of incumbency and promoted Premier Steve Bracks’s style of leadership as delivering responsive and incremental government, summed up in the slogan ‘Bracks. Listens. Acts.’

The Liberals’ campaign, by contrast, was aggressive: attacking the leadership as overly cautious and using scare tactics designed to show Labor as irresponsible economic managers. Any chance of a serious challenge, however, was compromised when, midway through the campaign, the Liberals’ novice leader, Robert Doyle, had to announce the resignation of economic spokesman, Robert Dean, owing to his having failed to register his electoral enrolment. The Nationals, having departed from the Coalition agreement following the 1999 election, and reformed as VicNats, campaigned independently in rural Victoria with a success that maintained its parliamentary status. The Greens, buoyed by federal successes and with some leadership from Senator Bob Brown, vastly upgraded their electoral challenge, but the strong surge in their support did not convert to winning seats, despite close contests in inner metropolitan constituencies.

* Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne.

Although Labor's victory had been anticipated, what was perhaps surprising was its magnitude. The outcome was a 'Brackslide', with the ALP gaining a record majority in the Assembly as well as winning outright control of the Council. The Liberals were decimated, and although the Nationals and the independents more or less maintained their respective positions, the extent of Labor's win meant that their influence in the new parliament was marginalised. The Bracks formula of cautious incrementalism when in office, combined with branding the ALP as the party concerned with democratic process, finally yielded Labor the parliamentary dominance that has allowed its platform of significant constitutional reforms to be achieved. Ironically, implementation of these reforms, especially the change to proportional voting in the Legislative Council, will clear the way for minority parties to gain greater parliamentary representation and, hence, more influence in future parliaments.

Victoria votes

The election was announced on Monday 4 November 2002 and Victoria's three million voters, including 157 000 new ones, went to the polls on 30 November in a voting environment marked by boundary changes and alterations to the electoral law.

Under the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act 1982*, all electorates are required to have roughly the same number of enrolled electors. In 2000 the Electoral Boundaries Commission had determined that, as a result of population acceleration or decline, enrolments in 22 of the 88 Electoral Districts (for the Legislative Assembly) and in 2 of the 22 Electoral Provinces (for the Legislative Council) fell outside the legal limit of 10 per cent variation from the average. Following a process of lengthy consultation, the redrawn boundaries were tabled in Parliament on 26 September 2001 and the election proceeded with some new electoral constituencies.

In addition, the election was conducted under the terms of the recently enacted *Electoral Act 2002*. Coming into effect on 1 September 2002, this represented the first major legislative reform in the Victorian electoral system in more than a century and one of the changes it introduced was to have an entirely unforeseen but dramatic impact on the election campaign. Under the new system, electors were required to be enrolled in their current place of residence in order to vote, whereas, in the past, someone enrolled at an old address was still able to vote. Despite widespread advertisement of this change, Robert Dean, the Liberal Party spokesman on economic management, failed to update his enrolment and therefore disqualified himself as both candidate and voter. Other important changes, designed to curb manipulation of the preferential voting system, were the tightening of rules of eligibility for registration of political parties, to require membership of at least 500 bona fide members. In addition, public funding of \$1.20 was introduced for each vote received by parties and independent candidates obtaining at least 4 per cent of first preference voting.

An election is what the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) describes as 'Victoria's largest one-day public event' and it grows as Victoria's population increases. In 2002 there were 3.2 million Victorian voters enrolled, compared with 2.8 million ten years earlier. A record number of 477 candidates contested seats in either one of the 88 single-member electoral districts, each of roughly 37 000 voters, or in one of 22 electoral provinces, of 148,000 voters. It is a costly business. With ever-increasing vigilance to enhance transparency and accessibility, the bill for the 2002 election reached \$23.7 million, almost double what it was a decade earlier (\$12.2 million in 1992). Most voters registered their vote at one of the 16 000 voting centres (81.7%), but an increasing number registered either an absentee vote (7.7%) or a postal or early vote (9.8%). The VEC has, in recent years, made special provisions for those with a disability as well as those from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Victoria records a high voter participation rate, relative to other states. However, its rate of 93.2% for the 2002 election, although equal to 1999's, was slightly lower than for either the 1996 election (94.1%) and the 1992 election (95.1%). The VEC report on the election also showed that most votes cast were valid. Only 3.4 % of votes were declared informal, slightly higher than that for the 1999 election (3.0%), certainly higher than the 1996 election (2.3%), but not as high as for that held in 1992 (3.8 %).

The preferential voting system used in Victoria can sometimes mean delays in declaring results. The outcome of this election was determined relatively early, and the VEC returned the writ, endorsing the names of the successful candidates, to the Governor just on a fortnight after the polls closed (Friday 13 December).

The lead up to the election

The election had been called a year prior to the four-year term of expiry. Labor was in power only with the support of independents in the Legislative Assembly and was experiencing frustration with its legislative agenda in the Legislative Council, including proposals for constitutional reform. Announcing the election, Bracks said he was seeking 'a mandate from the people of Victoria to govern in our own right.' Although Labor was disadvantaged by electoral redistribution, it went into the election ahead in the leadership stakes as well as reaping the benefits of managing a prosperous economy.

Sworn in as Victoria's 45th premier on 20 October 1999, and dubbed 'The Accidental Premier', Steve Bracks presented throughout his term in office as 'Captain Cautious': likeable, and not a risk taker. He belonged, as writer Andrew Clark pointed out (*The Australian Financial Review*, 4 December 2002), to the ranks of the new Labor leader, as pioneered and perfected by Neville Wran. The very model of 'the modern telegenic politician', Bracks won a large following as a political leader. By August 2000 he had a popularity rating of 77%, one of the highest

recorded in Australian political history. Continued favourable ratings for Bracks gave Labor a distinct advantage when the election was called, especially because the leader of the Liberal Party, Robert Doyle, was relatively unknown, having only attained the leadership in late August, beating former leader, Denis Napthine, 36-21.

The Labor Government in office had been low-key, mindful in policy and presentation of ‘not frightening the horses’. In pursuing the centrist policies trinity of ‘third way politics’ — fiscal responsibility, economic growth and some social populism — it was the epitome of incremental government. As well, the Bracks Government reaped the benefit of a Victorian economy that was, according to all figures, in excellent shape. Former leader, John Brumby, in the Treasury portfolio, could take credit for management of a Victorian economy that continued to bear the dividends of sustained population growth, an increase in employment, a rise in average household earnings on top of consumer spending that was yielding an expansive revenue base. It was therefore a quietly confident Labor team that went to the polls.

The campaign

Campaigns for Victorian elections can run for between 25 to 58 days. The current trend, Australia-wide, is to have shorter ones, and in the 2002 election there were 26 days of campaigning, with the ballot 15 days after the close of nominations.

Called on the eve of the running of the Melbourne Cup, the election was predictably likened to that famous race meeting. There are some nice parallels: David Malouf has favourably commented on the essentially light-hearted way Australian voting proceeds and the Cup is distinctive for its democratic, egalitarian ethos as well as its conviviality. A Bruce Petty cartoon in *The Age* next day showed Steve Bracks and Robert Doyle as the on-field fashion fillies, eyeing the form and watching the tote, as the media fawned around: Doyle trying to impress in a Bells and Whistles hat and Bracks in a more austere bowler number. Members of the crowd, unperturbed by this posturing, are shown scanning the broader field for form. The tote places Bracks at the top, with Doyle considered for placement. The only bystander taking particular note of fashions is the Prime Minister, in a Top Hat — not such a bad metaphorical snapshot of election campaigning.

There are two Melbourne Cups and two election campaigns. The Cup is as famous for corporate interests and fashions as it is for horses and betting. An election campaign has a similar layering. There is the state-wide campaign of a contest between political leaders groomed by party managers according to poll results. The competition is fierce, the costs are exceedingly high and the campaign goes into intense levels of overdrive in the final countdown to the day itself. On the other hand voters, like most race goers, remain largely undistracted by the corporate brouhaha, if good-naturedly amused by some of its more intrusive aspects, and take a more personal view, as light-hearted as it is sanguine, in looking at issue and form to determine which local hack to back in ‘the people’s choice’.

Election campaigns typically start out relatively low-key, with campaigns only officially launched mid-way through electioneering and momentum building just before polling day. The 2002 Victorian campaign was no exception. The first day on the hustings was overshadowed by the running of the Cup, and although both leaders attended, they did so as racegoers rather than political leaders. The early days of the campaign were also low-key, leaders engaging in stage-managed 'street walks' either before or after release of specific policy statements in locations targeted for their electoral uncertainty. However, in a departure from campaigning in recent elections, an election debate was also agreed to (Kennett having refused to debate with either Brumby or Bracks). This was staged at the end of the first week. Televised, it attracted a large number of viewers (25% of sets tuned in) but the outcome was judged indecisive: Doyle more articulate, but Bracks more comfortable.

It is significant that assessment of the debate was made in terms of style and presentation rather than content. The fact is both the major parties, in pursuit of power, endorse policies that market research shows are popular to maximise their chance of winning votes. This is of no comfort to those challenging the established policy agenda. Progressives in Victoria have become increasingly concerned during the last decade at the impact of neo-conservatism on policy. The focus on economic management and commercial development has meant public goods such as transport, conservation, heritage, health, education and welfare have been second order issues. Victorian lobby groups used the election as an opportunity to drive home the concerns of the broader electorate on these matters, ranking the parties' platforms in terms of commitment to their specific agendas and concerns. The Greens, following establishment of the Environment Liaison Office in 1999 as a direct linkage between the major environmental lobby groups and the parliament, released a scorecard that predictably gave the Greens a top rating, but also gave broad approval to Labor. The Victorian Council of Social Services conceded that Labor had made some incremental benefits in education, community health and housing and, with the Greens, was probably more progressive, but did not give unqualified support to any party. The Public Transport Users Association was critical of Labor's performance in office, stating that despite its promises it had delivered little and only marginal progress had been made on rural services. Anglicare Victoria, the state's largest non-government child and family welfare agency, prefaced its regional needs analysis, prepared for purposes of the election, with the declaration that it was 'responding to an increasing number of problems confronting marginalised families and individuals whose lives are being torn apart because they are unable to secure adequate housing and/or access to jobs.'

The churches spoke out for social justice. Catholic Social Services issued a letter signed by the bishopric urging voters to think carefully before casting their vote, because the election was 'a chance to review government policy and how best to advance the well-being of all Victorians'. The Victorian Council of Churches expressed direct concern that 'the disadvantaged lack voice'. But there was to be not much comfort for those concerned for the marginalised and dispossessed in the

platform planks of any of the parties, despite the progressive patina to the Labor Party and the tradition of small 'l' liberalism in the Victorian Liberal Party. The most successful of the lobbyists were the Greens, who, with the activism of the Greens, were able to secure a promise to phase out logging in the Otways. Increments to health and educational services were limited and, given political pressures, reserved for outer metropolitan areas and regional ones. Instead, both Labor and Liberal opted to bolster law and order by promising to increase the number of police substantially. Concerned to appear fiscally responsible, each undertook to have their promises independently audited: Labor's by Price Waterhouse Coopers and the Liberal party's by University of Melbourne economics professor, Neville Norman.

The state Labor party campaign was professionally managed and well staged. The strategy, directed by David Feeney, was to build on the groundswell for democratic process that had gained past electoral support for Labor. Labor's campaign slogan was: 'Bracks. Listens. Acts.' It was a homegrown Victorian product and distanced itself from the federal party. The campaign also benefited by drawing on a long history of policy development, the foundations of which were laid with the *New Solutions* package (May 1999) and later reworked at the ALP State Conference in early 2000 to provide a ten-year forward look, the *Labor Plan for Building a Stronger and Fairer Community in Victoria*. The campaign focussed in marginal areas in the outer eastern and southern metropolitan areas and in the regions, with Bracks taking a lead role, often accompanied by his wife and children.

The state Liberal party campaigning, orchestrated by Brian Loughnane in his first election as State Director, attempted to discredit the leadership of Bracks as over-consultative and inactive and the performance of his government as inept. Without an array of alternative policies, the campaign hoped to win hearts and minds through the articulate presence of former career-teacher Robert Doyle. Its slogan was 'Robert Doyle — Real Leadership for Victoria'. Allied with this, it used scare tactics hoping to undermine and discredit opponents. On the first day of campaigning, Doyle stood on the steps of Parliament House with a long roll of toilet paper on which were written all the reviews and enquiries commissioned by the government to give the message that the Bracks Government was a 'do nothing' affair that over-consults. Ten days into the campaign, a senior public servant alleged that the Bracks Government had used more than \$50 million of public money to promote itself in a pre-election campaign. Doyle then did a 'Chicken Little' routine, alleging that the budget was not in sound shape. Federal Liberal Party MP, Petro Georgio, wrote an opinion piece in *The Age* warning that the Government's 2030 urban planning scheme was a time bomb.

What instead turned out to be a time-bomb, at least for the Liberal campaign, was Doyle's stunning announcement, half-way through, and on the eve of entering its more intense and serious phase, that Robert Dean, friend and colleague, was no longer in the race, deemed ineligible by the Victorian Electoral Commission because he was not enrolled. The media went into a frenzy. Apparently Dean, who

lived in Hawthorn, had obtained another property in the outer-eastern electoral seat where he had sought and gained preselection but was struck off the list because enrolment validation forms sent to this property had been returned unopened by the residing tenants. This predicament reeked of self-interest as well as ineptitude so that, ironically, the Liberal party's strategy that had targeted Labor's lack of credibility backfired spectacularly. The headlines of *The Age* for Friday 15 November screamed: 'Liberal Campaign Derailed'.

Even more seriously for the Liberals, Dean, as former shadow Treasurer, was to have launched the next phase of their campaign focussing exclusively on allegations of Labor's economic mismanagement. In fact, when the revised budget estimates were revealed, the budget generally appeared in good shape, with a surplus of \$542 million, up \$20 million on the May budget figures. Political analyst Nick Economou summed up the second week of campaigning (*The Age*, 17 November) with the prediction that 'If Labor has another week like this they will cruise to an easy election victory.'

The Liberals attempted to undo the damage by focussing on what they saw as the Achilles' heel of the Bracks Government, namely its industrial relations record, where the boom in property development had strengthened the bargaining muscle of the building unions. Taking the lead from Grocan's director, the building magnate, Daniel Grollo, who had lashed out on 13 November that Victoria was 'the nation's most costly place to do business', the Liberals harnessed the services of federal Employment Minister, Tony Abbott, to go in for the kill, accusing the Bracks Government of being 'in the pocket of unions'. The strategy failed to wash. Dean Mighell, Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, summing up the tense relations between Trades Hall and Spring Street, was a spokesman for an alternative version of state industrial relations history and went on record just before the polls as saying that Labor 'treated unions with contempt'. In an attempt to maintain momentum on industrial relations, the Liberals also mounted an expensive advertising campaign that named large corporations operating in Victoria that had recently downsized their operations, allegedly due to industrial trouble. But, again, this exercise backfired: having failed to gain prior clearance from the firms concerned, the Liberals were further embarrassed when six major companies publicly demanded removal of their names from the advertisement, stating that industrial relations had nothing to do with their downsizing.

The contrast between the smooth Labor campaign, that had the added advantage of what Geoffrey Barker described as 'the quiet confidence bestowed by incumbency in office', and the Liberal Party's negative, fraught campaigning, was nowhere better epitomised than in their respective campaign launches. Labor's, staged at the Kingston Town Hall, Moorabbin, to the tune of 'Better Times', was a multimedia spectacular that promoted a triumphant record of achievement. The Liberals' launch, at the Nunawading Reception Centre, had less ceremony. Doyle used the occasion to mount an articulate attack on Bracks' leadership and his government. 'Dancing in the Storm' was used as the theme song, reportedly chosen not only to

sum up the oppositional quality of the Liberals' campaign, but because Doyle liked the line 'I will not give in'. However, in a campaign dogged by misadventure, there was another embarrassing sequel: the songwriters (from former rock group, Boom, Crash Opera) publicly objected to the song's usage, no prior permission having been sought by the Liberals.

As the campaign proceeded, it was becoming increasingly evident, as one commentator observed, that this was 'a one horse race'. The polls consistently showed Bracks comfortably ahead in the leadership stakes and the Labor party far in the lead on a two-party preferred basis. The Saulwick poll, reported in *The Age* (19 November) on the sample of 1,000 voters, showed Labor as the preferred contender, 61% to 39%. Centrebet betting shortened the odds for a Labor victory.

This is not to say that in specific electorates, things were not tense. With the electoral boundaries redrawn, the electoral pendulum showed 27 marginal seats and 15 very marginal (Burwood, Ripon, Cranbourne, Ballarat West, Carrum, Benalla, Seymour, Macedon, Narracan, Geelong, Yan Yean, Bellarine, Narre Warren South Bentleigh, Monbulk, Mordialloc). There is a very different quality between the state-wide campaign and those in particular electorates, especially marginal ones, where in a preferential voting system, like Victoria's, minor parties can exercise an important influence in determining outcomes by allocation of preferences.

The Greens, confident following their win of the House of Representatives seat of Cunningham in the recent Federal by-election, hoped to reap some of the left-wing dissatisfaction with Labor's centrist policies. Having never previously gained a seat in either house of the Victorian Parliament, they hoped to do so at this election. Whereas in the 1999 election, the Greens ran in only 28 seats, this time round they fielded more than 80 candidates, signaling their ambition of becoming what Michelle Grattan dubbed 'the major minor party' (*The Age*, 27 November). Bob Brown played an extensive role in the campaigning and the Greens all out determination was probably significant in helping achieve Labor's announcement, early in the campaign, that it would phase out logging in the Otways. Nonetheless the Greens refused to issue a state-wide directive that would award preferences to Labor, leaving allocation of preferences to be determined on a seat-by-seat basis. They saw their best chance of winning in five inner-urban seats: the lower house electorates of Melbourne, Richmond, Brunswick and Northcote and the upper house province of Melbourne and conducted vigorous campaigns in each. Regarded for decades as ultra-safe Labor seats, the presence of Greens candidates and their campaigning hotted up local campaigns to letterbox-jamming proportions and resulted in cliffhanger voting.

The Nationals, too, campaigned with vigour and determination. Following the 1999 election the party had ceded from the coalition and had mustered resources to go it alone.

Rebranded as VicNats, the Nationals's new campaign director, Meredith Dickie, focussed on winning the hearts and minds of farmers and small businesses in small country towns where the neo-liberal agenda, endorsed by both Liberal and Labor, has resulted in widespread and sometimes desperate poverty for farming families. The VicNats campaign focussed on campaigning in the 17 rural constituencies, hopeful of gaining a balance of power and mindful of the need to retain at least five seats in the lower house to maintain official party status in the Parliament, with all its attendant benefits. Peter Ryan, leader of the Nationals, campaigned solidly in bush electorates, leaving aside the razzamatazz of Cup Day, and travelled tens of thousands of miles to get across the promise of big spending on regional infrastructure.

What of the impacts of this state-wide and regional campaigning on voters? *The Age* monitored the qualitative responses of two groups of voters, a random selection of young, first-time voters and a group of families living in a street named Victoria Close, Eltham. Approached for their views towards the beginning and end of the electoral campaigning, the campaigning appeared to have little impact on either group. Without exception, each of the young voters continued their preference for either Labor or the Greens and in Victoria Close, family households continued as Labor or Liberal supporters, one householder pointing out 'you can't tell the difference between the blighters.' (*The Age*, 23 November, p. 10)

Trust and interest in politicians and the political process have been eroded. A Michael Leunig cartoon on the 2002 election showed billboards, flags and newspapers labeled with the word 'Lies'. Even for the less cynical, electoral campaigning is viewed as something of a sideshow, offering a distraction from more serious pursuits like following the cricket. Melbourne writer David Campbell adopted the persona of C.J. Dennis's larrikin, The Sentimental Bloke, to articulate the kind of irreverent appreciation (*The Age*, 18 November, p. 17) voters have for electioneering, from the start:

*Well blow me down! Cor stone the crows! Yer know what I just saw
A walkin' down our own Main Street, an' bold as brass wot's more ?
A brace uv pollies, jackets off, all flashin' cheesy grins,
It must be time ter vote again . . . ter reckon up their sins.*

to its finish:

*The only thing that cheers me up, that keeps me sorter sane
Is knowin' that the plague'll end an' peace'll once more reign.
For this time round I 'as ter say:
"You flamin' ripper, sport"
'Cos this campaign 'as one big plus . . . it's super bloody short!*

Electoral results

Polls closed at 6pm and Victorians gathering to watch the counting of the vote on TV did not have to wait long to learn it was a Brackslide. There were plenty of smiles in Williamstown, when, three hours later, Labor claimed victory and Doyle, in a very short speech, conceded defeat.

Final figures released by the Victorian Electoral Commission showed that Labor polled 47.9% on a first preference basis, the Liberals 33.9%, The VicNats 4.3% and the Greens 9.7%. On a two party preferred basis, Labor gained 57.8% of the vote and Liberals 42.2%. The swing of 7.6% was one of the biggest recorded in Victorian political history, surpassing Jeff Kennett's ascendancy in 1992 (5.8%) and recalling the triumphs of the Henry Bolte era in the 1950s and 60s.

Legislative Assembly		Legislative Council				
Party	2002	Party	1999	By-elections	2002	Total
ALP	62	ALP	8		17	25
Liberal	17	Liberal	11	+1	3	15
National	7	National	3	-1	2	4
Independents	2	Total	22		22	44

What it meant was that Labor gained a record 36 majority in the Legislative Assembly, winning 62 of the 88 seats, as well as control of the Legislative Council. The corollary was a devastating loss for the Liberals, who gained just 17 seats in the Assembly, its lowest vote in 50 years.

The VicNats, with 7 seats, lost both votes and seats. Although Melbourne swung behind Labor (9.2%), as did regional centres (6.6%), this was not true of the rural areas. Labor policies had helped provincial regional centres, rather than farmers and country towns. As a result, rural voters, amongst the most disadvantaged of all Victorians, disenchanted by Labor's poor performance and heartened by the committed campaigning and leadership of VicNats, swung back to their traditional champions.

The election was both heartening and disappointing for the Greens. While they polled well on first preferences state-wide, they failed, on preferences, in their inner city contests, and so did not gain any of the hoped-for seats in the new Victorian Parliament. Nonetheless, they were honourable defeats: Dr Richard Natale lost by a margin of just 546 votes and Gemma Pinnell, in Richmond, by 978.

The Australian Democrats, who had not seriously contested the election, gained only 0.14% of first preference votes. Two of the three former Independents were returned (Russell Savage and Craig Ingram), Sue Davies losing out in the electoral redistribution.

Outcome

Given the stunning swing to Labor, there was not much room, unlike the 1999 election, for influence by minor parties and independents. There was no balance of power issue. Even the Liberals were rendered impotent in the Parliament. Nonetheless, despite their shattering loss, Robert Doyle held onto the Liberal leadership. Helen Kroger, former wife of powerbroker Michael Kroger, won support as the State party president, the following March, on a platform committed to reforming the party at grassroots level.

The Bracks Government, however, is not a frightening presence. Its commitment is to the kind of centrist policies popularly endorsed throughout Australia, rather than to traditional Labor values of social justice. Its accepted mandate is to govern prosperity for the prosperous and those who hope to be prosperous. The cautious cabinet ensconces a government whose members are more at home talking to corporate leaders from the top end of town and regional provincial centres than to the disadvantaged and rural poor. Leaders at Trades Hall Council were frankly told, within the first week of Labor's being in office, to keep their voices, as well as their demands, down. Pleas from welfare groups lobbying for social justice are likely to fall on deaf ears. Liberals need not worry too hard that their policy interests are being neglected. Just a week after the election, the Council of Australian Governments met, on Friday 6 December, and John Howard, although surrounded by Labor premiers, was noticeably relaxed and on particularly friendly terms with Steve Bracks with whom he did a quick deal on gun control.

Leadership and style of government will be much the same as Labor's previous term in office, low-key and cautious, with policy development being incremental and dominated by economic management. Nonetheless, on two matters, the Labor Government will have introduced and presided over significant change. One is increasing the power and influence of women in government. Bracks not only appointed seven women to his new cabinet but the fifty-fifth Victorian Parliament is historically significant for having women elected for the first time to the positions of Speaker of the Assembly and President of the Legislative Council.

The other matter concerns implementation of constitutional change: the new government finally has the numbers to implement the required legislation. Presenting the *Constitution (Parliamentary reform) Bill 2003*, Premier Bracks described it as 'the biggest reform of Victoria's parliamentary democracy since it was established almost 150 years ago.' The bill, introduced at the end of February, was debated by both houses and passed by the end of March, thanks to the Government's new majorities. The reforms will give the Victorian Parliament fixed four-year terms (following the practice in NSW and SA), and a constant day — the last Saturday in November — for all future elections. A new settlement process for disputes between the houses, similar to the federal system, will also be introduced and members of both the Council and the Assembly will have the same status (the

title Honourable will no longer be conferred on Legislative Councillors). Rules of debate have changed. Parliamentary debate will end at 11 pm and new limits on debate mean that while key speakers will have thirty minutes to speak on proposed new laws, backbenchers will have only ten. However, the new rules allow MPs to debate parliamentary reports each Wednesday as well as allowing them up to 90 minutes each week to make statements to Parliament about matters of concern. Of greatest significance, however, is reform of the Legislative Council by introduction of a system of proportional representation, similar to that used for electing the Senate. In future Victorians will elect five members from each of eight regions (whose electoral boundaries will be established by the Electoral Boundaries Commission). This will allow greater influence by minor parties. Had the 2002 election been governed by these rules, the Greens would probably have gained the numbers to hold the balance of power in the Legislative Council. So, in future Victorian elections, stand by for crowded electoral campaigns and interesting parliamentary proceedings. Whether democracy can triumph, given an increasingly inegalitarian society, is not by any means guaranteed. ▲