

The Western Australian Election of September 6, 2008: The First Chink in Labor's Armour

William Bowe*

Introduction

From a national perspective, the Western Australian state election of September 6, 2008 was remarkable as a break in continuity. The election of a minority Liberal government under the leadership of Colin Barnett was the first victory for the conservative side of politics in any Australian state or territory election since February 1998. However, from a local perspective, the defeat of a government approaching eight years in office seems like business as usual. Since John Tonkin's tenuous one-term Labor government was defeated in 1974, changes of government have occurred with impressive regularity — in 1983, 1993, 2001 and now 2008. The record of the four governments over this period suggests the introduction of four-year terms in 1989 reduced the natural life-span of a Western Australian government from three terms of three years to two terms of four. In this case, the government's period in office was truncated to seven-and-half years by Premier Alan Carpenter's highly contentious decision to call the election six months early.

Western Australia's distinctiveness was further demonstrated by the central role assumed during and after the election campaign by a staunchly independent National Party. Not for the first time the party had found itself pondering its future at the national level in the wake of a federal election defeat. Advocates of a merger with the Liberals had achieved a breakthrough in July 2008 with the foundation of the Liberal National Party in Queensland. However, the Western Australian branch

* PhD student in the Discipline of Political Science and International Relations, The University of Western Australia, and editor of the electoral studies weblog The Poll Bludger published by Crikey.com.au. The site is <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollbludger/>. I would like to thank Bruce Stone for contributing amendments and references, and for his assistance with the presentation of electoral data in Table 1.

felt no inclination to associate itself with a state Liberal Party it had long distrusted,¹ and which threatened to eclipse it following the abolition of rural vote weighting in the Legislative Assembly. Far from pursuing closer ties with the Liberals, parliamentary leader Brendon Grylls made support for a government of either complexion contingent on commitment to a 'Royalties for Regions' program, under which a quarter of the state's prodigious mining royalties — estimated at \$675 million a year — would be earmarked for regional development.²

The success of the Nationals' posture rivalled the change of government as the most significant result of the election. Despite the electoral reforms that reduced the number of non-metropolitan Legislative Assembly districts from 23 to 17, the National Party achieved its objective of securing the balance of power by returning four of its five members to the Legislative Assembly while finding a place for the fifth in the Legislative Council. Even more remarkably the surge in support boosted the party's representation in the Legislative Council, where rural vote weighting had been maintained, from one seat out of 34 to five seats out of 36. The prospect of an unprecedented Labor–National alliance was kept alive for eight days after the election as the party gave serious consideration to Labor's lavish offerings of ministerial positions and Royalties for Regions funding. Not until September 14 did Grylls announce that the Nationals would enter an alliance with the Liberal Party, which he insisted did not amount to a coalition despite the presence of three Nationals in cabinet. So it was that Colin Barnett became Premier just six weeks after taking the leadership of a divided and demoralised Liberal opposition, which most commentators thought to be headed for a landslide defeat.

This commentary will review the events of Labor's tumultuous second term in office, and analyse its ultimate defeat in the context of the sweeping electoral reforms enacted in the aftermath of the 2005 election.

One Vote, Variable Value

The 2008 election marked a watershed in the state's electoral history even before the first vote was cast, as it gave effect to Labor's long-cherished ambition to introduce a 'one vote, one value' electoral system. Previous attempts had been blocked in the Legislative Council where Labor has never enjoyed a majority. During the government's first term the combined numbers of Labor and the Greens fell one vote short of the absolute majority required for the necessary amendments. The situation changed in the period between the election of February 26, 2005 and the date on which the result took effect in the Legislative Council, which is fixed at May 22 by Western Australia's Constitution. The government succeeded in enlisting the support of defeated independent Alan Cadby, who had earlier quit the Liberal Party after losing pre-selection. Reforms negotiated between Labor, the Greens and Cadby were passed by the Council on May 17.

Western Australia thus became the last state in the country to abolish zonal mal-apportionment in its lower house, which had divided the state into metropolitan and non-metropolitan zones and established electoral districts in the latter with far fewer electors. As of the 2005 election, there were 34 metropolitan and 23 non-metropolitan districts with respective average enrolments of 27,639 and 14,245. The new system increased the size of the Assembly from 57 seats to 59, providing for 42 metropolitan and 17 non-metropolitan districts, with a uniform quotient of approximately 21,500. However a concession to regional over-representation remained. Following the example of similar reforms introduced in 1991 by the Goss Labor government in Queensland, districts of more than 100,000 square kilometres were granted a 'large district allowance' equal to one 'notional' voter for every 66.67 square kilometres (50 square kilometres in Queensland's case). In effect vote weighting was abolished in the conservative Agricultural and South West regions where districts were too small for the allowance to take effect, but maintained in the remote Mining and Pastoral region where Labor had sources of support in mining towns and Aboriginal communities.

While more equitable in theory, the new system assisted Labor by locking up conservative votes in country districts that were extremely safe for the Liberal or National parties. Labor's more modest majority across the metropolitan area was distributed with much greater efficiency. Estimates based on polling booth results indicated that only one of the nine new metropolitan districts would have been won by the Liberal Party at the 2005 election. Labor's share of seats would have been boosted from 32 out of 57 to 38 out of 59. To lose its majority Labor would need to suffer a uniform swing of 4.4 per cent, which would reduce it to 48.7 per cent of the two-party vote compared with 51.3 per cent for the Liberal and National parties.³

The apparent loser from the redistribution was the National Party which appeared sure of returning only two of its existing five lower house members. Two of its seats, Greenough in the northern wheatbelt and Stirling in the south-west, were merged into neighbouring Liberal seats to create the current districts of Moore and Blackwood–Stirling. The remaining three, Merredin, Avon and Wagin, were consolidated into two, Merredin and Central Wheatbelt. The new arrangement created friction between Brendon Grylls, the member for Merredin, and Max Trenorden, the member for Avon and Grylls' immediate predecessor as party leader. Both wished to contest the enlarged district of Merredin, which Trenorden threatened to do as an independent if the party would not accommodate him. The impasse was resolved when Trenorden agreed to stand in the upper house Agricultural region.

The reforms to the Legislative Assembly were accompanied by more modest changes to the Legislative Council, although these had no bearing on the chamber's pronounced rural weighting. Under the previous system, the state was divided into two equally represented zones, each constituting one region of seven members (North Metropolitan, South West) and two regions of five (East Metropolitan, South Metropolitan, Agricultural, Mining and Pastoral), creating equal numbers of

metropolitan and non-metropolitan members. The new system maintained the two zones of three regions, but allocated six members to each region in place of the existing five or seven. The size of the chamber was thus increased from 34 members to 36.

A Government in Disarray

The Labor government spent its second term engulfed in a series of scandals and crises that collectively claimed an unprecedented five ministerial scalps. The first involved a relatively benign conflict-of-interest indiscretion by Bob Kucera, the Sports and Seniors Minister, who resigned in October 2005 over his failure to excuse himself from a cabinet vote involving a company in which his wife owned shares. Kucera had earlier been demoted from Minister for Health in 2003 and Minister for Tourism in 2005, and his long-term tenure in cabinet was already seen to be in doubt.⁴

The next change in personnel was voluntary and came at the top level. On January 16, 2006, Geoff Gallop brought an abrupt end to a premiership of four years and 10 months when he announced he needed time to recover from depression. This unheralded event initiated a three-way contest for the leadership between Michelle Roberts, the Minister for Police and Emergency Services; Alan Carpenter, the Minister for State Development and Energy; and Jim McGinty, Attorney-General and Minister for Health and a former Leader of the Opposition. After a week of complicated factional negotiations, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union state secretary Jock Ferguson announced the 10 parliamentary members of his union's sub-faction would support Carpenter. This provided the impetus for first McGinty and then Roberts to withdraw in quick succession, leaving Carpenter to be elected unopposed at a party room meeting on January 24.

Carpenter's first substantial actions as Premier were to have far-reaching consequences. Since April 2003, Gallop had forbidden ministerial contact with two leading figures of the WA Inc era of the 1980s: Brian Burke, the former Premier who had twice been imprisoned and continued to bear a criminal conviction for fraudulent use of travel allowances, and Julian Grill, a minister in Burke's government. The highly visible activities of Burke and Grill's lobbying partnership had caused considerable embarrassment to the Gallop government, which was exacerbated by Burke's ongoing influence in Labor's factional system. The sub-faction associated with Burke carried enough weight that it would normally have been guaranteed a position in cabinet, which it was denied at Gallop's insistence. Carpenter lifted the ban on contact with Burke and Grill on the day he became leader, and promoted Burke ally Norm Marlborough to cabinet as Small Business Minister a week later.

The folly of this move was made apparent later in the year, when Marlborough became the first victim of the Corruption and Crime Commission's inquiries into

Burke and Grill's lobbying activities. On November 8, a counsel to the commission revealed that Marlborough had owned a secret mobile phone specifically for communication with Burke. Covertly taped recordings exposed Marlborough taking orders from Burke on parliamentary statements and board appointments. Another two ministerial victims followed three months later: Tony McRae, the Minister for the Environment, who was accused of using his power over a planning application to seek fundraising assistance from Grill, and John Bowler, the Minister for Local Government, who was found to have leaked a confidential committee report to Grill. Investigations unrelated to Burke and Grill had earlier ended the ministerial career of John D'Orazio, who was demoted from Minister for Police and Emergency Services and then dumped from cabinet in May 2006 when it emerged he had been unwittingly driving without a licence.

The length of the casualty list was in part due to Alan Carpenter's severe policy towards indiscretions by members of the parliamentary party, which resulted in D'Orazio, Bowler and upper house MP Shelley Archer being forced out of the party. Carpenter's concurrent push for selection of personally favoured pre-selection candidates led to accusations he was exploiting the turmoil to assert his authority over the party.⁵

An Opposition in Disarray

Sadly for Western Australian democracy, the government's travails were matched and perhaps even surpassed by the chaotic state of the Liberal Party. The Liberals' second term in opposition began promisingly enough when Matt Birney, the 35 year-old member for Kalgoorlie, was elected as leader after Colin Barnett retired to the back-bench in the wake of the election defeat. However Birney soon faced controversies over a taxpayer-funded trip to Europe for his fiancée and a finding of contempt of parliament after he secretly altered his shares register. His standing within the party was further weakened when a shadow cabinet reshuffle in February 2006 was seen to have punished factional opponents.⁶ Birney was narrowly defeated in a party leadership vote a month later by Paul Omodei, who had served as Minister for Local Government throughout the Court government's period in office from 1993 to 2001.

Omodei's leadership was in turn beset by perceptions the party was failing to capitalise on the government's woes, as indicated by mediocre opinion poll ratings and a poor performance at the Peel by-election on February 3, 2007.⁷ Reports of a planned challenge by Vasse MP Troy Buswell proliferated through 2007, several of which suggested that Buswell was biding his time until the federal election was out of the way. Just as it appeared the plot was about to come to fruition in January 2008, accusations of inappropriate behaviour towards female staff and colleagues prompted Buswell to announce he would not pursue the leadership, as he needed 'more time to develop'. Determined efforts from party colleagues and *The West*

Australian's editorialists⁸ persuaded Buswell to reconsider, and he assumed the leadership a week later after Omodei stepped aside rather than face defeat.

The wisdom of Buswell's initial reticence was demonstrated in April when the *Sunday Times* reported a further incident of sexual harassment towards a female staff member. According to the report, Buswell had lifted the staff member's chair and 'started sniffing it in front of her', then repeated the act before several of her colleagues.⁹ The resulting furore sparked an ongoing leadership crisis that encompassed two spill motions that failed for want of a credible challenger. Buswell's opponents were vocal in their desire for Colin Barnett to return to the leadership, but he initially remained firm in his intention to quit politics after serving out the term.

Signs of a breakthrough emerged in late July when it was reported that Buswell was considering giving Barnett the clear run at the leadership he desired, depending on the results of internal party polling then being conducted. These findings confirmed a recent published survey which showed Buswell was weighing down the Liberal vote by 6 per cent.¹⁰ After initially indicating he would continue to tough it out, Buswell appeared before the media on August 4 to announce his intention to relinquish the leadership. Barnett's return was confirmed by the party room without opposition two days later.

Short and Sharp: Carpenter's Snap 30-day Election Campaign

Barnett's bloodless coup upset Labor's calculations for a campaign based on Liberal Party disunity. Party strategists were concerned that the longer Barnett had to establish himself, the less effective would be Labor's message that the Liberals represented instability and risk. An early election offered further temptations. The Liberal Party was organisationally unprepared: fund-raising had been hampered by a lack of confidence in its electoral prospects¹¹ and time was needed to recast its campaign strategy around the new leader. The first half of the looming four-week period coincided with the Beijing Olympics which promised to deny Barnett the media exposure needed to rebuild his public profile. Just one day after Barnett assumed the leadership, Carpenter announced an election would be held on September 6, arguing it had become necessary to end the 'cynicism' resulting from 'continuous speculation about an election'.¹²

Even before the post-election recriminations, it was reported that not everyone in the Labor hierarchy was pleased with the decision. A day after the announcement, Labor sources were quoted saying Carpenter had not consulted one of the government's most senior figures, Jim McGinty.¹³ It was later claimed that the Treasurer, Eric Ripper, had been similarly kept in the dark.¹⁴ Strategists who calculated that a backlash over an opportunistic early election would fade during the campaign received a timely corrective when the Northern Territory election was held a year ahead of time on August 9. The Labor government of Paul Henderson

went into the election holding 19 of the parliament's 25 seats and emerged with 13, suffering a swing of over 8 per cent.

Nonetheless Carpenter's early election plainly succeeded in catching the Liberal Party off guard. For the first few days it was unclear whether Barnett would even have a seat to contest, as a new candidate had been preselected for his seat of Cottesloe after his retirement announcement in February. The Liberals were unable to organise television advertising in the early part of the campaign, leaving the massive Olympic Games audience captive to Labor's message of 'vision, stability and leadership' under Alan Carpenter. The Liberals were similarly lacking in the detailed policies needed to capture the diminished share of news space available during the games. With few other options available, the party chose to concentrate its television advertising in the second half of the campaign, while pursuing a small-target strategy of focusing on Labor negatives. One stark but effective television advertisement gave viewers 30 seconds of silence to 'think of three good things Alan Carpenter's Labor has done in eight years of boom'. Other negative themes were the influence of Brian Burke and a perception picked up in focus group research that Carpenter and his government were 'arrogant'.¹⁵

The Liberals' modest program of election commitments was highlighted by a promise to cut taxes by \$250 million over four years, which was criticised as lacking in detail.¹⁶ Following Labor's example in the federal election campaign a year earlier, Barnett justified the relative modesty of the undertaking by emphasising the need for investment in education. A series of announcements on law-and-order sought to focus attention on the acknowledged failure of the government's 'truth in sentencing' laws which remained unreformed as a result of the early election announcement. A point of difference on health policy was offered through a promise to turn the iconic Royal Perth Hospital into a 400-bed trauma facility, contrasting with the government's plan to downgrade the hospital and transfer services to growth areas in the suburbs.¹⁷

Labor's early campaign advertising suggested it would seek to promote government strengths as a contrast to the Liberals' recent record of instability. However, it soon became clear that the pre-determined strategy had been jettisoned in the face of poor internal polling. One unusual challenge for the party was dispelling the perception it was headed for an easy victory as indicated by betting agency SportingBet's opening offer of \$4.40 on a Liberal win. On two occasions during the campaign Labor officials openly briefed the media on marginal seat polling which showed the government would be swept from office by swings of up to 7 per cent. Not for the only time in the campaign, the message Labor sought to project was vigorously contested by the state's monopoly daily newspaper. On August 28, the front page of *The West Australian* told readers they could 'forget talk of a tight race', as columnists Robert Taylor and Paul Murray had decreed Labor to be 'home'. Support for this proposition was offered two days later when the paper published a Westpoll survey of 400 voters which showed Labor leading 54 per cent to 46 per cent on the two-party preferred vote.

The tone of Labor's campaign in the final week left little doubt that its private polling told a very different story. A remorseless scare campaign over Liberal Party policy on uranium mining and genetically modified crops was punctuated by attempts to soften Carpenter's image with television advertisements depicting him at home with his family. The final Newspoll survey of the campaign underscored why this was necessary. Carpenter's approval rating had fallen 11 per cent since the pre-campaign poll to 42 per cent, while his disapproval rating was up 14 per cent to 48 per cent. Nonetheless, both Newspoll and the final Westpoll survey showed the election to be a statistical dead heat.

Results

The election produced no clear majority for the Labor Party which won 28 seats out of 59, the Liberal Party which won 24 seats, or the combined Liberal and National parties which won 28 seats. The balance consisted of three re-elected independents, two with conservative leanings (Liz Constable in Churchlands, who had been offered a position in a Liberal cabinet, and Janet Woollard in Alfred Cove) and a third (John Bowler in Kalgoorlie) who had been a minister in the Carpenter government before his expulsion from the ALP in March 2007. Labor thus emerged from election night with a slim hope of clinging to power despite its second worst performance on the primary vote since World War I. As shown in Table 1, only a part of the deserting Labor vote had gone to the Liberal Party, the remaining beneficiaries being the Greens and the Nationals.

Labor was defeated in 11 of the 38 seats it would have won on the 2005 results, including 10 in the metropolitan area. The 11 included Bunbury and Darling Range, which had been made notionally Labor by the redistribution but were easily retained by their sitting Liberal members. The defeated Labor incumbents were Judy Hughes in Kingsley, Tony McRae in Riverton, Paul Andrews in Southern River and Dianne Guise in Wanneroo, along with Shane Hill in the notionally Liberal seat of Geraldton. Labor also failed to win the new metropolitan seats of Ocean Reef and Jandakot and the existing northern suburbs seat of Swan Hills, which sitting member Jaye Radisich had vacated after developing an acrimonious relationship with Carpenter.¹⁸

Particular significance was attached to Labor's defeats in two inner northern suburbs seats where Carpenter had insisted that ministerial casualties make way for new talent. Morley and Mount Lawley were successors to the abolished seats of Ballajura and Yokine, held for Labor by John D'Orazio and Bob Kucera. D'Orazio had fallen from grace after a string of political scandals cost him first his place in cabinet, then his party membership. The latter was restored after a legal challenge, but his bid to win preselection was blocked by Carpenter, who had earmarked the seat for Channel Seven political reporter Reece Whitby. D'Orazio ran as an independent and directed his preferences to Liberal candidate Ian Britza, who achieved a shock 340 vote victory on the back of a 10.8 per cent two-party swing.

Table 1.
Results of Western Australian State Elections in 1996, 2001, 2005 and 2008

	Vote share and seats won							
	1996		2001		2005		2008	
	First preference vote %	Seats n	First preference vote %	Seats n	First preference vote %	Seats n	First preference vote %	Seats n
Legislative Assembly								
ALP	35.8	19	37.2	32	41.9	32	35.8	28
Liberal	39.9	29	31.2	16	35.6	18	38.4	24
National	5.8	6	3.3	5	3.7	5	4.9	4
Greens	4.7		7.3		7.6		11.9	
Democrats	5.1		2.6					
One Nation			9.6		1.6			
Other	8.7	3 ¹	8.9	4 ²	9.6	2 ³	9.0	3 ⁴
Legislative Council								
ALP	33.1	12	37.9	13	43.4	16	36.1	11
Liberal	45.9	14	34.0	12	37.1	15	39.6	16
National	0 ⁵	3	2.4	1	2.2	1	5.3	5
Greens	5.6	3	8.0	5	7.5	2	11.1	4
Democrats	6.6	2	3.7		0.9			
One Nation			9.9	3	1.6		0.6	
Other	8.9		4.1		7.3		7.3	

Notes: ¹ Ernie Bridge (Kimberley), Philip Pandal (South Perth), Elizabeth Constable (Churchlands).

² Janet Woollard (Alfred Cove), Philip Pandal (South Perth), Elizabeth Constable (Churchlands), Larry Graham (Pilbara).

³ Janet Woollard (Alfred Cove), Elizabeth Constable (Churchlands)

⁴ Janet Woollard (Alfred Cove), Elizabeth Constable (Churchlands), John Bowler (Kalgoorlie).

⁵ The National vote is contained within the Liberal entry, as the two parties ran joint tickets in the Agricultural and South West regions.

Source: Western Australian Electoral Commission

In Mount Lawley, Kucera was pushed aside at Carpenter's insistence in favour of Karen Brown, a former deputy editor of *The West Australian* who had lately worked for Labor-linked lobbying firm Halden Burns. Brown was defeated by Michael Sutherland, the Deputy Lord Mayor of Perth, after a swing of 8.1 per cent.

The Liberal Party's gains were balanced by a failure to carry two regional seats that would have been won on the 2005 results. Peter Watson narrowly retained Albany for Labor in 2005 after gaining the seat in 2001, but expansion into conservative rural territory beyond the city limits had produced a notional Liberal margin of 2.3 per cent. Watson was one of several members who demonstrated the advantage of incumbency in the context of a sweeping redistribution, picking up a 2.5 per cent swing to prevail by 96 votes. Incumbency effects also made their presence felt in Kalgoorlie, where Matt Birney took his considerable personal vote into retirement after an unhappy experience in the party leadership. The district once again showed its idiosyncratic ways by electing John Bowler, previously the member for abolished Murchison–Eyre, who evidently remained popular throughout the Goldfields despite the circumstances of his departure from cabinet and the ALP.

The Liberal Party suffered further regional defeats at the hands of the National Party in Moore and Blackwood–Stirling. Sitting member Gary Snook was defeated in Moore by Grant Woodhams, the National Party member for the abolished seat of Greenough. Blackwood–Stirling had been formed largely out of Liberal-held Warren–Blackwood, the electorate of retiring former leader Paul Omodei, but was won for the Nationals by Terry Redman, member for the abolished adjoining seat of Stirling. Two naturally conservative seats in the metropolitan area remained in independent hands: Churchlands which the Liberals did not contest after Colin Barnett offered sitting member Liz Constable a position in cabinet, and Alfred Cove, where Janet Woollard won a third successive narrow victory. The Liberals had better luck in Nedlands which former Shadow Attorney-General Sue Walker failed to retain as an independent after quitting the Liberal Party.

The result in the Legislative Council emphasised how much Labor had given away in its determination to win support for reform of the Legislative Assembly. The Nationals won five seats across the three non-metropolitan regions, including three of the six seats in the severely over-represented Agricultural region (home to 82,479 enrolled voters, compared with more than 300,000 in the metropolitan regions). Together with the 16 seats won by the Liberals, the traditional coalition partners won a clear majority that would allow for renewed revision of the electoral rules without reference to Labor or the Greens. Labor performed disastrously across the board, winning only two seats out of six in each region except Agricultural, where it won one. The Greens did well to double their representation from two seats to four, winning seats in each of the three metropolitan regions plus Mining and Pastoral, but the party nonetheless stands to be marginalised due to the dominant position of the conservative parties.

Hard Bargaining

Labor's slim hope of continuing as a majority government quickly vanished as late counting put it out of contention in Wanneroo where it had held a narrow lead on election night. The best-case scenario then became a minority government

supported by John Bowler, an outcome that was dependent on Labor winning Riverton. This prospect evaporated on September 11 when Bowler announced he would act in concert with the Nationals, by which time Labor's hopes in Riverton had faded. The National Party was thus confirmed in the position of kingmaker, which it proved determined to exploit to the hilt.

Acknowledging its position of weakness, Labor made the Nationals a remarkable offer of six cabinet posts along with a detailed plan to implement the Royalties for Regions scheme.¹⁹ For his part, Nationals leader Brendon Grylls attached a further string to any agreement with Labor: Alan Carpenter would have to remain as leader, notwithstanding that elements in the ALP were pushing for his removal. Adding to Labor's difficulties was the result in the Legislative Council, where any arrangement between Labor and the Nationals would have needed further support from either the Liberals or the Greens. The Liberal Party felt able to make a considerably more modest bid, providing a sketchier commitment to Royalties for Regions and a promise of three positions in cabinet. Labor's offer at least succeeded in driving a wedge between the Nationals' ambitious young leader and the older and more conservative hands in the parliamentary party. Reports emerged on September 13 that the party indeed stood on the verge of an historic alliance with Labor, despite federal parliamentary leader Warren Truss threatening disciplinary action against Grylls and warning that the move would destabilise the party federally.²⁰

The result of the Nationals' internal deliberations was revealed the following morning: an alliance would be formed with the Liberal Party, paving the way for a change of government and the confirmation of Colin Barnett as the state's twenty-ninth Premier.

Conclusion

The defeat of the Carpenter government confounded the expectations not just of bookmakers, but also of commentators who had come to take Labor state election victories for granted. Many who failed to predict the result argued Labor had thrown away an 'unloseable' election through tactical bungles of unprecedented magnitude, such as the early election announcement and a negative, poll-driven advertising strategy. The second of these explanations no doubt played its part. It was reported after the election that Labor strategists had considered suggestions that advertisements be run in reply to the Liberal Party's 'name three good things Alan Carpenter's Labor has done' campaign, but rejected the idea as it would have made them appear 'reactive'.²¹ That may well have been so, but it could hardly have been less effective than the near-hysterical campaigns on uranium mining and genetic modification that were offered in its place. The early election hypothesis also has something to recommend it, not least because further supporting evidence is available from the Northern Territory result. However, it must equally be remembered that Labor would almost certainly have won if Carpenter had gone to the polls earlier still, thereby locking the Liberals in behind Troy Buswell. Calling

an early election might be a dangerous game, but Labor's defeat should not be taken as proof positive that it cannot pay off if done correctly.

A more instructive lesson might be that the election was more loseable than conventional wisdom suggested. Labor's success in winning five out of seven state elections from 1983 to 2005 belies the party's systemic weakness in Western Australia. Of the 12 state and federal elections held since 1990, only the 2005 state election has given Labor a primary vote in Western Australia of over 40 per cent. Former federal leader Kim Beazley observed during the campaign that Perth's 'blue-collar component' was less than half that of other state capitals, also noting that the state lacked the 'large non-English speaking background electorate so richly supportive of Labor in the east.'²² In this light, the reluctance of Western Australian voters to grant a Labor government a third four-year term does not seem especially remarkable.

Most of all, the result underscored the primacy of the electoral cycle, a lesson with implications far beyond the state's borders. The various Labor governments currently in office at state and territory level came to power between 1995 and 2002, and will be seeking third, fourth or even fifth terms the next time they face the polls. It is plainly no coincidence that these governments' greatest electoral triumphs corresponded with a federal Coalition government that was entering the unfavourable end of its own cycle. As surely as the Howard era is over, so it is clear that the era of landslide wins for state Labor governments is in the past. They should certainly be spared any further talk of 'unloseable elections'. ▲

Notes

- ¹ See Geoff Gallop and Lenore Layman, 'Western Australia', in Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (eds), *Country to National*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1985, pp. 109–118.
- ² Legislative Assembly, *Hansard*, 15/5/2008, p. 3206.
- ³ Antony Green, 'Election summary', *ABC Elections*: <http://www.abc.net.au/elections/wa/2008/guide/summary.htm>. Retrieved on 12/11/2008.
- ⁴ Robert Taylor and Graham Mason, 'A steady decline for top cop and star Labor man', *The West Australian*, 14/10/2005, p. 9.
- ⁵ Amanda O'Brien, 'Premier parades parachute troops', *The Australian*, 21/5/2008, p. 7.
- ⁶ Joe Spagnolo, 'Birney in new fight', *The Sunday Times*, 12/2/2006, p. 5.
- ⁷ Robert Taylor, 'Liberals in turmoil as Omodei slumps', *The West Australian*, 12/2/2007, p. 1.
- ⁸ 'Buswell must face up to his responsibility to the party', *The West Australian*, 14/1/2008, p. 20.

- ⁹ Joe Spagnolo, 'Buswell 'sniffed' staff chair', *The Sunday Times*, 27/4/2008, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Robert Taylor, 'Barnett "can lead Libs to landslide"', *The West Australian*, 26/7/2008, p. 1.
- ¹¹ Robert Taylor, Yasmine Phillips and Kate Campbell, 'Libs facing split over Buswell row', *The West Australian*, 3/5/2008, p. 1.
- ¹² Chalti Sonti and Andrea Hayward, 'Premier Alan Carpenter calls WA election', *WA Today*, <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/premier-alan-carpenter-calls-wa-election-20080807-3rib.html>. Retrieved on November 12, 2008.
- ¹³ Amanda Banks and Jessica Strutt, 'McGinty sidelined in poll decision: insiders', *The West Australian*, 9/8/2008, p. 9.
- ¹⁴ Paige Taylor, 'Burke faction weighs in', *The West Australian*, 9/9/2008, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Robert Taylor, 'Big ask for the man from Cottesloe', *The West Australian*, 7/8/2008, p. 21.
- ¹⁶ Jessica Strutt, 'Few details as Barnett vows to cut tax by \$250m', *The West Australian*, 27/8/2008, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ 'Liberal Government will legislate to save Royal Perth Hospital', Liberal Party website: http://www.wa.liberal.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=554:liberal-government-will-legislate-to-save-royal-perth-hospital&catid=54:loop-news-category&Itemid=109. Retrieved on 12/11/2008.
- ¹⁸ See Harry C.J. Phillips and Liz Kerr, 'Political Chronicles: Western Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 54(4), p. 637.
- ¹⁹ Robert Taylor, 'Bids in the bush worth less than a handshake', *The West Australian*, 29/10/2008, p. 21.
- ²⁰ Joe Spagnolo, 'Grylls told not to go with Labor', *The Sunday Times*, 14/9/2008, p. 1.
- ²¹ Robert Taylor, 'Labor's plight a child of several dead-beat dads', *The West Australian*, 11/9/2008, p. 20.
- ²² Kim Beazley, 'Poll 'will be a cliffhanger'', *WA Today*, 14/8/2008, <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/poll-will-be-a-cliffhanger-20080813-3uyc.html>. Retrieved on 12/11/2008.