

The South Australian Election 2010: A Summary

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In July 2009, the South Australian Labor party was cruising towards re-election on 20 March 2010, probably with an increased majority. Premier Mike Rann was streets ahead in the popularity polls, and his party held 28 of the 47 seats in the House of Assembly. A uniform swing of over 15 per cent was needed to produce the 10 seats needed by the Liberal party to lift its 14 seats to the 24 needed to win government.

Further, the Liberal party was in turmoil. Since the 2006 election, the party had gone through three leaders in three years. It was riven by factional and personality warfare. In July, the party selected its fourth leader. Isobel Redmond, first elected in 2002, she made the headlines as the first female leader of a major party in South Australia.

There was no evidence that the Rann government was under any real threat. A poll in June 2009 showed a Labor first preference vote of 42 per cent to the Liberals 23 per cent, which translated into a two-party split of Labor 64 per cent, Liberal 36 per cent. This poll was conducted in the Adelaide metropolitan area, so it probably understated the State-wide Liberal vote. But as Labor holds only one seat in the country, the city decides any election. Then it all seemed slowly to fall apart for Labor.

The first sign of decline came when a wildcard was thrown. A parliamentary waitress, Michelle Chantelois, went public with an allegation that she had a long-term sexual affair with Premier Mike Rann. He emphatically denied it, admitting only to a 'flirty' relationship. The story stayed on the front pages when the estranged husband of Chantelois attacked the Premier at a function with a rolled-up magazine. In the run-up to the campaign, Ms Chantelois appeared at the opening of an art exhibition, which Mike Rann had agreed to open. He cancelled the appointment.

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Ms Chantelois underwent a lie-detector test which she claimed showed her allegation was proven. The story stayed at the level of ‘she said, he said’ for the remainder of the campaign. The voters were left to decide for themselves who was telling the truth. But Mr Rann, late in the campaign, when it was obvious that the matter was a serious distraction for Labor, offered a public apology ‘for any ... distress and disappointment his “friendship” ... had caused’ (*The Australian* 4 March 2010).

Both Premier Rann and Treasurer Kevin Foley accused the Liberal party of ‘working in tandem with Ms Chantelois’. This was denied by Liberal leader Isobel Redmond, who told her campaign team and her candidates to ‘stay well away from it’ (*The Australian* 25 February 2010).

The battlefield consisted of 47 seats in the House of Assembly. Labor held 28, Liberal 14, and five were held by four independents and one National party. Winning government in its own right, was clearly a ‘bridge too far’. But if it won five seats from Labor, and held all of its own, it would produce a hung parliament. Government would then be in the hands of the independents. This could be achieved by a uniform swing of seven per cent. On the other hand, if the Liberals lost just one seat to Labor the task would be much more difficult.

The real battlefield was a small number of marginal electorates. Of the 47 seats, 20 appeared safe for Labor, requiring swings ranging from 15 to 29 per cent to be lost. On the Liberal side of the pendulum, given the polls were consistent in showing a swing to the Liberal party, 12 seats were safe. Further, the real contest was conducted in the metropolitan area. Labor held only one of the 13 country seats, and had virtually no chance of increasing this.

Seven marginal Labor electorates, the incumbents of which were all elected as the ‘class of 2006’ in the ‘Rannslide’ election, would all fall to the Liberal party with a uniform swing of seven per cent. On the other side of the pendulum, the Liberal party was defending two marginal electorates: the country seat of Stuart at 0.6 percent, and Unley in the city at 1.8 per cent.

The five independent electorates were also hard fought, but only two could affect who won government. In Mt Gambier, the independent incumbent retired, and the contest was between Liberal and another independent. In the Riverland, the safe non-Labor electorate of Chaffey, saw a National versus Liberal contest. In the city, long-term independent and former Liberal Minister Bob Such was not under any real threat.

In Mitchell, however, a former safe Labor seat, Kris Hanna was under intense attack from Labor. He was first elected as a Labor member, then defected to the Greens, then held the seat as an independent in 2006. If Labor won, it made the Liberal’s aim of a hung parliament much more difficult. In an inexplicable move, the Liberal party poured money and effort into the contest, with the result that

Hanna was relegated to third place, and Labor won the seat. That was the first Liberal error.

The fifth contest, in Frome, a country electorate which combines the industrial centre of Port Pirie with a substantial rural area, was between the incumbent independent, who won the seat in a 2009 by-election, Liberal and Labor. Again, victory to Labor would be damaging to the Liberal party's hopes.

The State was in a 'Claytons' campaign mode months before the election day. The Rann government decided that the parliament should rise at the end of November 2009, giving four months where the government would not face any formal scrutiny. The informal campaign started when the Liberal party, in July 2009, elected Isobel Redmond as its leader. It was apparent from the beginning of her reign that Labor faced something very different.

She managed to unite her party which, for years, had been at factional war with itself. She showed no evidence of being dominated by spin, a characteristic of the Rann government. On the other hand, the polls taken in the early period suggested that she had yet to convince a majority of the voters.

The months of February and March in Adelaide were filled with what has become known as March Madness. The Tour Down Under cycling race, WOMAD, the Fringe, the Festival, and the Clipsal 500 Supercar race, occupied the minds of most people. But where this would have been an advantage to a government well ahead in the polls, in 2010 it was a serious disadvantage for Labor. By January, the polls were suggesting that the electoral race was indeed tight, and that the government was having some trouble getting its message through the celebrations.

The issues followed a traditional agenda of the economy, education, hospitals and health, law and order, and the like. But there were significantly different components in 2010. The health focus was on plans for a new hospital. The Rann Labor government had announced a new hospital to be built on the Adelaide railyards for \$1.7 billion. This decision was made without public consultation, debate, or a formal inquiry. It was countered by the Liberal plan for a rebuilt Royal Adelaide Hospital on its existing site, for a saving claimed to be \$1 billion. The two parties continued the debate about costings and benefits up to the election. But on election eve, the Liberal shadow Treasurer admitted that the opposition's costings were spin. That allowed the Labor party to saturate the airwaves with a damaging campaign, especially as the Liberal party had been consistently critical of Labor's addiction to spin.

The issue sparked the formation of a Save the RAH party by a group of senior doctors, but it managed only an average of two per cent in the eleven seats it contested. The government had claimed that the election was a 'referendum' on the hospital, but that was made before the polls started to move against Labor, and before the election showed a two-party vote of 52 per cent for the Liberal party.

Parallel to the hospital debate was a Liberal proposal to build a multi-purpose sports stadium on the railyards site. As Adelaide's sports infrastructure is seriously under-developed, this received strong public support. A series of crisis meetings with sports organisations allowed the Rann government to counter it with a proposal to turn Adelaide oval onto a stadium.

Two issues were central to the contests for the Labor dominated western suburbs. The sale of Cheltenham racecourse had originally been justified on the basis of 'open space' and water catchment for wetlands. The government then allowed a significant proportion of the land to be sold to private interests for housing development. A second land issue concerned the swap of the St Clair public area in Woodville for an equivalent area of wasteland. This brought a further outcry. Both issues played a large role in the massive swings against incumbent Labor members in the election.

A third problem for the Rann government was its agreement to sell a significant part of the Glenside mental health hospital area to retail development, and to use part of the building complex for film studios. As mental health was a key issue in the campaign, this also brought impassioned debate.

For years, the Rann government had been totally opposed to the establishment of an Independent Commission Against Corruption in South Australia. It argued this on two grounds: that there was a different culture in this State, there was no evidence of corruption; and the existing agencies such as the Auditor General, the police Complaints Authority and the Onbudsman were doing the job.

But increasing public support, and a commitment to an ICAC by all other political parties became a problem for Labor. Premier Rann then changed his position to be in favour of an ICAC as long as it was a national one. Given the very low likelihood of that in the near future did not quell the public criticism.

Water has been a constant issue in South Australian politics. It became a crucial issue in the election. The Rann government had trumpeted that the 2008 agreement would save the Murray, but the Premier was forced not only to go begging to other States for more water, but he was forced to initiate a High Court actions against Victoria. During the campaign, his claim that he had brokered a deal with Queensland for more water was clarified when his own most senior public servant admitted that 'no deal has been done' (*The Australian* 17 March 2010). This also added substance to the claim by the Opposition that the Rann approach was essentially based on spin.

Attorney-General Mick Atkinson embarrassed for the Rann government. He announced that a new law requiring that all blogs and comments on the web during the campaign would have to include the correct name and postcode of the author. This brought opposition from the media and the public. But what forced him to re-think was his assertion that a serial anti-Atkinson web commentator was a Liberal

stooge, and the person did not exist. It took only one day for *The Advertiser* to find and interview the person.

The Attorney-General announced that the law would be retrospectively withdrawn after the election. That raised eyebrows, as not only did it assume Labor would win, but that its commitment against any retrospective legislation no longer applied. When faced with questions suggesting that his proposal was a nonsense, he moved to deal with the problem by short-term regulations.

The style of the Rann government became an issue. For eight years, it had been dominated by hubris and spin. For the first three years after the 2006 election, this was not a problem, as the Liberal party was far from electable. But two polls in February and early March shocked the Labor party. An *Advertiser* poll (5 February 2010) asked: ‘Who do you regard as more trustworthy?’ The answer was Isobel Redmond 50 per cent, Mike Rann 34 per cent. A *Sunday Mail* poll (14 March 2010) increased the shock: the Liberal party had a two-party preferred vote of 51 per cent.

On the other hand, it was ironic that the issue which was good news for the Rann government became overwhelmed by other matters. The South Australian economy was healthy, and had weathered the GFC. Infrastructure was finally receiving some attention. Mining developments are about to come on stream with some welcome royalties. The defence sector was growing. South Australia’s unemployment was the lowest in the nation. Normally, this scenario would be a plus for the government, especially in an election campaign.

The Premier had built much of his campaign on the sound economic policies of the Labor government, but the Sunday Mail survey showed that 49 per cent of the respondents stated that the Liberal party would be best for the State’s economic prosperity, compared to 43 per cent for Labor.

It was increasingly clear that the Rann Labor party was in trouble. A summary of the State-wide polls from early 2009 shows how a seemingly stable and unbeatable Labor party in 2009 became very vulnerable by the election.

Poll	Two-party preferred ‘votes’		
	Labor (%)	Liberal (%)	
Newspoll	Jan.-March 2009	56	44
	July-August 2009	56	44
	Oct- Dec 2009	53	47
Advertiser	5 Feb. 2010	52	48
Newspoll	9 March 2010	50	50
	18 March 2010	48	52

Further, the polls showed that levels of satisfaction with Premier Rann, once the most popular Premier in the State, had slumped to negative territory. The speed of the change in mood is shown by comparing the data for ‘better Premier’: Rann 48

per cent, Redmond 31 per cent in December 2009; Rann 43 per cent, Redmond 45 per cent in March 2010. It was indeed a new ball game.

The style of the Rann government, since its landslide victory in 2006, had become dominated by hubris, arrogance and spin. While the Liberal party continued to indulge in internal warfare, this had no real effect. But by the start of the campaign, it was clear that many voters had become tired of the approach. In the final week of the campaign, the Treasurer, Kevin Foley, who had been one of the ‘hard men’ of the government, apologized to the voters for his past belligerence.

In the last weeks of the campaign, the Labor party pulled out all stops in an attempt to reverse the trend in the polls. It blanketed the media with anti-Liberal advertisements, and especially targeted the Liberal slogan of ‘Redmond is ready’. But the overwhelming negative approach did not encourage voters to swing back to Labor.

Two months before the election it was clear that the Rann government was in trouble. It had governed for four years on the basis of hubris, arrogance and spin, and there was clear evidence in the polls that a solid proportion of the electorate had become tired of the approach. Labor’s TV advertising was overwhelmingly negative, which probably worked against reversing the trend of the polls.

Results Summary

	First Preference Votes (%)			Two-Party votes(%)			Seats Won	
	2006	2010	Swing	2006	2010	Swing	2006	2010
ALP	45.2	37.4	-7.8	56.8	48.4	- 8.4	28	26
LIB	34.0	41.7	+7.7	43.2	51.6	+ 8.4	14	18
Green	6.5	8.1	+1.6				-	-
Family First	5.9	5.4	- 0.5				-	-
Independent	2.8	4.7	+ 1.9				4	3
National	2.1	1.0	- 1.1				1	-
Others	3.5	1.7	- 1.8				-	-

Conventional wisdom is that a strong swing will usually be reflected across the electorates. The overall swing to the Liberal party was over eight per cent — certainly classified as strong. But it was far from uniform. The largest swings occurred in the safe seats, especially those held by the Labor Ministers (average two-party -11.6%; high 15.2%), with one Minister, Jane Lomax-Smith in Adelaide losing her seat. That was of no significance in terms of the election result, but it was a comment on the standing of the government in its own very safe seats.

One event, late in the campaign, could well have reduced the anti-Labor swing. The refusal by Liberal member Vickie Chapman to rule out a challenge for the leadership was a gift to Labor’s campaign team — and they made the most of it.

In the key marginal Labor seats, the average swing against the Labor party was a meager 4.2 per cent, with two showing a swing to the Labor party. Of the seven marginal Labor seats which required a swing of less than 7 per cent to lose, only two shifted to Labor: Norwood and Mordialta.

But the major reason for Labor overcoming the strong swing was a focus on the 'local', and especially on the marginal seats. The Liberal party had made this easier in two Labor marginals, Hartley and Newland, where they pre-selected re-cycled candidates, both of whom had been defeated in previous elections. Hartley showed a significantly lower swing to Labor, and Newland a swing to the Labor sitting member. These reiterated the point that politics can very much be local.

This marginal campaign was not matched by a similar effort by the Liberal party. It spent too much effort and money on its State-wide campaign, and in electorates where the result would not have any affect in its aim of winning government, or at least forcing a hung parliament.

The theme of 'trust' which had permeated the campaign was given a major test on polling day. The Labor party, in some of its key marginal electorates, distributed a how to vote card which was deliberately designed to mislead voters. It was handed out by Labor supporters dressed in blue T-shirts showing the slogan 'Put Your FAMILY FIRST'.

The cards were headed 'Put Your FAMILY FIRST', creating the impression that they were from that minor party. But where the official Family First card showed second preferences to the Liberal party, the Labor fake document showed second preferences to the Labor party. When the tactic was exposed, the Labor party machine dismissed any criticism by referring to the fact that the card showed an authorisation 'by Michael Brown ... for the Australian Labor party'.

It is worth noting that the relevant section of the Electoral Act (S. 113 (2)) states: 'a person who authorizes, causes or permits the publication of an electoral *advertisement* is guilty of an offence if the advertisement contains a *statement of fact* that is *inaccurate and misleading to a material extent*.'

In summary, the Liberal party won the votes in both first preference and two-party terms. But it lost the tactical battle, and a real chance to force a hung parliament, by pre-selecting the wrong candidates in two marginal Labor seats, by not matching Labor's marginal local campaigns, by silly statements from senior members of the party late in the campaign, and by focusing too much money and effort in electorates which would have not affected the numbers in the parliament.

As a result, while the majority of voters did not want the Rann Labor government, they now have it for another four years. ▲