



Victorian election 2006

Introduction—a fixed-term election

The Victorian election held on 25 November 2006 was the state's first fixed-term election. No longer could a Premier catch an opponent off-balance with a surprise announcement of an early election. *The Age* lamented the absence of a clear starting point, resulting in 'a slow, somewhat muddled campaign'. The newspaper saw the whole dynamic of an election as altered:

To appropriate a metaphor from the first Tuesday in November, there is no longer a starting gate, just an amble on to the track, a trot down the straight, curve into a canter and the hope of a gallop to the winning post...¹

The ALP (62 seats) was protecting an unusually large Legislative Assembly majority against the Liberals (17) and the Nationals (7). There were two independents. Voters were also voting for a smaller Legislative Council, with a new electoral system.

The contestants

Labor

Labor spoke of 'experience', 'vision', and a 'plan for Victoria', and unveiled several potentially-attractive policies—which caused one editorial writer to ask why they had not been announced earlier.² The most spectacular was the promise to spend \$1.9 billion for the largest school maintenance programme since 1945, in which 350 schools would be renovated or rebuilt over four years, and 20 built in growth corridors. However, the Government was open to criticism in a number of areas, especially in relation to its failure to impose earlier Stage Two water restrictions on Melbourne, and the breaking of its no-toll pledge on the Scoresby Freeway.

For all its talk of vision and achievement, one ongoing 'obsession'³ of the Government's campaign was its attempt to use the close relationship between Liberal leader Ted Baillieu and former Premier Jeff Kennett as a warning to voters not to support the Liberal Party—just as Kennett himself had once reminded voters of the iniquities of his Labor predecessors. Kennett eventually entered the public debate, defending his government of 1992–99:

I have not sought to enter this campaign but if the Labor Party want to use me, then I am quite prepared to come back and remind the public that Labor fundamentally destroyed this state.⁴

Overall, however, Labor's campaign was efficient, though there was some internal unhappiness over its upper house preference negotiations that were a reminder of its Victorian 2004 Senate deals.⁵

The Liberals

Liberals focussed on the claimed administrative mistakes, omissions and deceptions of the Government. Much was made of 'broken promises', most colourfully with a huge photograph of Bracks with a 'Pinocchio-style' elongated nose hung across a road in Bayswater, reminding voters of his failure to keep the no-tolls promise.

The Liberals made many promises, including \$1.77 billion to be spent on public health, tougher water restrictions for Melbourne, \$250 million for a desalination plant, the building of a toll-free Lilydale bypass and the abolition of Zone 3 fares on Melbourne's transport system. The Liberals also promised to reform Parliament by the appointment of an independent Speaker who would be required to relinquish all party positions, the establishment of eight-week sitting periods, and the forcing of ministers to directly answer questions without notice.⁶

It seemed probable that the Liberal Party would increase its Legislative Assembly seats, but as its 2002 performance had been its worst since the election of 1952, this was more likely to be a saving of face, than a return to a position where its parliamentary presence was significant.

The Nationals

The Nationals' major concern was to protect their official party position of 11 parliamentary seats, particularly as they were likely to lose seats in the Legislative Council due to the change in the electoral system (see below).

For much of their history the major Victorian non-Labor parties have had a much more independent existence in state elections than their colleagues in New South Wales and pre-1983 Queensland. Despite some pressure from the Prime Minister, who said he believed the only way the Liberals would be able to form a government would be in a coalition with the Nationals,⁷ the two parties reflected this history in their determination to campaign separately. Each spoke of different roles and policies and views of government. This was particularly important to the Nationals, concerned about being swamped by the larger party. It was not surprising, therefore, that 20 of the 88 seats had nominations from both parties, including the

seven held by the rural party and four of the Liberal Party's seats.

The minor parties

In 2002, Green candidates had gained an average first preference vote of 25.6 per cent in the four inner-Melbourne seats of Brunswick, Melbourne, Northcote and Richmond. With Green candidates contesting every seat for the first time, there was an expectation that the party would comfortably eclipse the 2002 vote and win its first lower house seat, with Melbourne the most likely.

In nominating in all but two seats, Family First was seeking to build on their surprise success in winning a Victorian Senate seat in the 2004 Commonwealth election. Earlier in the year they had gained a statewide vote of 5.9 per cent in the South Australian election.

The likely outcome

In the 2002 election the first preference margin between the Government and its Liberal opponent was 14.1 per cent. Although opinion polls suggested that this lead had lessened, by late 2006 the Government's popularity was still high enough for its comfortable return to seem certain. In final polls before the election the margin was only slightly less than at the 2002 election, with Newspoll, ACNielsen and Galaxy suggesting that although a significant number of voters had shifted their support from Labor, the Government was very likely to be returned—though with a loss of seats.⁸ It seemed that the closer the election date loomed, the less certain that voters were about turning to the Liberals. During 2005, Newspoll was reporting a decline in Premier Bracks' popularity, but in 2006 the Premier's satisfaction rating climbed back to a healthy 52 per cent, giving him a comfortable margin over his challenger.

The Legislative Assembly result

Party	Seats	%
ALP	55 (-7)	43.1 (-4.9)
Lib	23 (+6)	34.4 (+0.5)
Nats	9 (+2)	5.2 (+0.9)
Green	-	10.0 (+0.7)
FF	-	4.3 (+4.3)
Other	1 (-1)	3.0 (-1.5)

The Government is returned

Labor lost 4.9 per cent of its support. It won 55 seats, a loss of seven, but retained a Legislative Assembly majority of 22. The major factors accounting for this result have become familiar in recent Australian state elections.

An *Age* journalist has described 'the House of Bracks' as having been built on 'the three pillars of integrity, competence and cohesion',⁹ and opinion polls in the years between the 2002 and 2006 elections repeatedly confirmed that this was how it was seen by a majority of voters. Despite his opponents' description of Premier Bracks as a 'do-nothing' administrator, the Premier's standing

remained relatively high for most of the four years between the elections, and this no doubt played a part in his party's remaining electorally healthy enough to win its third consecutive victory.

Opinion polls and election results suggest that economic growth has helped the Howard Commonwealth Government and the state and territory governments retain office in recent elections. Victorian evidence for this was a Newspoll finding that 53 per cent believed that Bracks was 'more capable of handling the Victorian economy' than Baillieu, who scored only 33 per cent on economic management.¹⁰

In all Australian state elections during 2006, the issue of the use and preservation of water featured prominently. In the Victorian battle Baillieu accused the Government of failing to act quickly enough to face the issue of permanent reductions in water availability, due largely to inadequate resources being put into the Victorian dam system. As in the other states, however, where it was clear that the respective governments and oppositions were very much in the early days of establishing how best to deal with this emerging issue, water policy seemed not to be a major factor in the Victorian outcome.

The Liberals mark time

Although the Liberal Party gained six seats, giving it 23 of the 88 in the Legislative Assembly, its vote barely moved—just an increase of 0.5 per cent. Most voters who deserted Labor seem to have moved to The Nationals, the Greens or Family First, than to the Liberals. It can be argued that this was a poor return for a party which was in power from 1955 to 1982 and for most of the 1990s. Since the party's creation in the mid 1940s, only its first preference votes of 1952 and 2002 have been lower.

For the second election running, the Liberals' chances seemed not to be helped by controversy and uncertainty concerning their leader. In 2002, such uncertainty had led to the replacement of Denis Napthine by Robert Doyle barely three months before polling day.

Six months before the 2006 poll, Ted Baillieu replaced Doyle, giving voters little time to accept such an important change. A journalist claimed that various 'suspicions' attached to Baillieu and his party.¹¹ One was the belief that the party had written off its chances for 2006, seeing this election as part of a two-campaign election strategy designed to return it to office in 2010. Another criticism was that internal party divisions had resulted in the Liberals focusing more on personality and political infighting, rather than on putting in the 'hard yards' needed to develop sound policies. This was the same claim made about the party in South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland during the recent campaigns in those states. There was also concern about the Liberal leader's 'privileged' background. Media consensus was that Baillieu—the so-called 'Toff from Toorak'¹²—needed to

convince voters that he was committed to putting in the hard work needed to oust the Labor Party from office. Attention was paid to his wealth, and his refusal to make public any details of his shareholding portfolio.¹³ In some unexplained way, all of this seemed to suggest that the challenger lacked ‘the hunger necessary for the job [of Premier]’.¹⁴

The Nationals and party status

During the campaign there was speculation that the Nationals might retain only two of their seven seats. In fact, the party’s final vote of 5.2 per cent was its highest for three elections, though lower than its relatively healthy years of 1985 to 1992. Most importantly, the party’s gaining of the seats of Mildura and Morwell (see below) gave it a total parliamentary representation of 11 seats. Official party status was thus retained. There was satisfaction in the party over the decision to stand apart from the Liberals in the campaigning, Queensland’s Senator Barnaby Joyce claiming that voters will support a party ‘that stands up for itself’.¹⁵

Green frustration

Although the election had many issues such as climate change, water and nuclear power that might have helped increase support for the Greens, the party’s statewide vote of 10 per cent was only 0.3 per cent above its 2002 figure, even though Green candidates contested all seats for the first time. This was barely an increase of 15 000 votes across the state. Apart from Tasmania, the Greens have been unable to push their statewide first preference vote above ten per cent in the recent run of state elections, and do not have a presence in any of the seven legislatures elected from single-member electorates. The party did not really come close to winning a seat, despite being in the final count in the seats of Brunswick, Melbourne and Richmond, and receiving an average 75 per cent of Liberal preferences in the those seats. The narrowest final margin was in Melbourne, where the Green two-candidate preferred vote was 48 per cent.

Family First

Family First’s vote of 4.3 per cent was described in the media as ‘the most significant swing of the election’.¹⁶ It was claimed that this was a great improvement on the party’s performance in the recent Queensland state election.¹⁷ In fact, although in that election the party’s statewide vote was just 1.9 per cent, its average vote per seat was 2 per cent higher than in Victoria.

The Independent MPs

Craig Ingram retained Gippsland East comfortably, but Russell Savage lost Mildura to the Nationals’ Peter Crisp. Crisp was the focus of some attention due to the fact that he had previously lived in Dareton across the New South Wales border, and was a member of the Wentworth Shire Council in that state. Critics asked: was Crisp truly a Victorian?

Seats which moved

The relative ineffectiveness of the Liberal Party can be seen in the different seats that the Government lost.

The marginals—a return to normality?

In losing Evelyn, Hastings, Kilsyth, Ferntree Gully and Bayswater, the Government lost five of its seven most marginal seats, suggesting that the statewide fall in its vote was sufficient to account for these losses. Labor’s losses could easily have been greater, for in its third most marginal seat (Gembrook) and its sixth most marginal seat (Mount Waverley), the Labor sitting members were behind on first preferences, but regained each seat narrowly after preferences.

Apart from marginality, there were also issues specific to some seats that probably helped bring about their loss.

The Scoresby Freeway

A matter of great controversy was the Scoresby Freeway being built to link Ringwood, Dandenong and Frankston from mid-2008. Labor candidates in Melbourne’s south-east had to cope with the fallout from the Government’s decision to break its promise that the proposed freeway would be toll-free. However, although the issue may have played a part in the loss of Bayswater, Evelyn and Ferntree Gully, it is probably misleading to suggest that this was the sole factor. Across the state there was a drop of 4.9 per cent in the Government vote, but the loss of votes in the various ‘Scoresby’ seats was only 0.5 per cent higher, far less than was being predicted. Labor’s general loss of Melbourne votes, plus the seats’ marginality, may have been a more important factor than the Freeway issue.

Gippsland water

Although the water issue seems not to have had a major impact as a statewide issue, Tim Colebatch of *The Age* has claimed that the seats of Narracan and Morwell ‘sank partly because of [Minister for Water] John Thwaites’ water recycling plan’.¹⁸ This was a proposal to secure a drinking water supply for Melbourne and Geelong for the next 50 years. The plan involved replacing fresh water used by Latrobe Valley power stations with treated effluent from the capital. This was widely criticised, with the Government also attacked for its plan to treat Latrobe Valley power stations’ water at lower than the required standard. The Nationals’ leader spoke of the Government treating the Latrobe Valley as a ‘receptacle for Melbourne’s waste’.¹⁹ This issue seems to have been crucial in Labor’s loss of Morwell. ALP strategists believe the issue also stripped the party of the neighbouring, marginal seat of Narracan, because that seat shared the same TV news service and newspaper as Morwell.

The Nowingi dump

Russell Savage had won Mildura as an independent in 1996, retaining the seat three years later when he achieved notoriety in rural Victoria for joining with two other

independents in supporting the advent of the minority Bracks Government. Despite this, in 2002 Savage retained Mildura on first preferences. After maintaining a reasonably comfortable relationship with the Government, by October 2005 Savage was calling its ministers ‘miserable bastards’ and accusing the Premier of betraying him over a plan for a toxic waste dump at Nowingi, 50 km south of Mildura.²⁰ Savage was criticised by many in the Mildura community for not standing up to the Government, and in the election his first preferences plummeted by 17.7 per cent, with him well beaten.

The Legislative Council election

Constitutional changes

Previously, each of 22 provinces had elected two MLCs, one at each state election. This was now altered. The Legislative Council was reduced to 40 members, with all to be elected at each State election. Five members were to be elected from each of eight regions, the boundaries of which were to include 11 of the Legislative Assembly electoral districts.

Proportional representation, as used for Senate elections, was to be the method of election, and, as in Senate elections, the ballot paper was to be divided by a horizontal line, meaning that there were two ways to vote—above or below the line. However, a Victorian Legislative Council below-the-line vote would require a minimum of five boxes to be marked. The required quota of votes to win a seat was 16.7 per cent. The use of proportional representation made it less likely that a major party could gain control of the upper house. A minor party that could gain at least 10 per cent in any region, had a good chance of winning the fifth seat in that region.

The Legislative Council result

Region	ALP	Lib	Nat	Grn	DLP
E Metro	2	3	-	-	-
N Metro	3	1	-	1	-
SE Metro	3	2	-	-	-
S Metro	2	2	-	1	-
W Metro	3	1	-	1	-
E Vic	2	2	1	-	-
N Vic	2	2	1	-	-
W Vic	2	2	-	-	1
Total	19	15	2	3	1

The Government fell two seats short of winning an upper house majority. A major surprise was the Democratic Labor Party winning a seat in the Western Victorian region, despite winning just 2.7 per cent of the vote in that region. This was achieved as a result of the ALP’s preference deals with various parties, in which the DLP had been put ahead of the Greens on Labor’s group voting ticket. Labor thus helped achieve the election of a candidate of the party which had been so important in keeping it out of office in Victoria for about twenty years after the party split in the mid-1950s.

Conclusion

The Bracks Government’s 55 Legislative Assembly seats leaves it in a healthy position. For Labor to be displaced in 2010 the Liberals need either to work in coalition with the Nationals and gain a 5 per cent two-party preferred swing, or else achieve a 6.7 per cent swing to be able to govern alone. Through most of the 20th century the ALP’s weakest state party was to be found in Victoria—it was not until 1982 that John Cain jr led the party to its second majority ministry. Such has been the change in Victorian politics since, that by the time of the 2010 election Labor will have governed for 21 of the previous 28 years, and Steve Bracks, presently the fifth-longest serving Premier, will be second only to the Liberals’ Henry Bolte.

1. ‘Small earthquake in Victoria, not many voters shaken’, *The Age*, 24 October 2006.
2. ‘Choose not to settle for less than we deserve,’ editorial, *Sunday Age*, 19 November 2006.
3. Stuart Rintoul, ‘Steve conjures up Jeff’s ghost to spook the voters’, *The Australian*, 1 November 2006.
4. Michael Warner, ‘Ad ambush on schools’, *Herald Sun*, 3 November 2006.
5. Ellen Whinnett, ‘ALP urged to forget Family First’, *Herald Sun*, 31 October 2006.
6. Michael Warner, ‘Big Ted thrives on the campaign trail’, *Herald Sun*, 21 November 2006.
7. Michael Warner, ‘PM pulls rug from Baillieu’, *Herald Sun*, 11 November 2006.
8. Kenneth Nguyen, ‘Polls, and the only one that counts’, *The Age*, 25 October 2006.
9. Paul Austin, ‘Cracks open in Bracks’ house’, *The Age*, 26 August 2005.
10. Newspoll 13 November 2006, <http://www.newspoll.com.au/>, accessed on 15 January 2006.
11. Paul Austin, ‘Plenty of promises, but will premier-in-waiting deliver?’, *The Age*, 13 November 2006.
12. Ashley Gardiner and Ellen Whinnett, ‘A blueblood pin-up’, *Herald Sun*, 6 May 2006.
13. Michael Bachelard, ‘Baillieu share silence may be hurting campaign’, *Age*, 8 November 2006.
14. Austin, op. cit.
15. Ewin Hannan, ‘Defeat sparks push for coalition’, *The Australian*, 27 November 2006.
16. ‘Major parties lose support to the Nationals, Family First’, *The Australian*, 27 November 2006.
17. *ibid.*
18. Tim Colebatch, ‘The ghosts of polls past’, *The Age*, 28 November 2006.
19. Richard Baker, ‘Water fight’ fury over \$1.5bn plan’, *The Age*, 13 September 2006.
20. Jason Dowling, ‘Independent savages Bracks’, *The Age*, 23 October 2005.

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