



Western Australian Election 2005

On 23 January 2005 the Western Australian Labor Premier, Geoff Gallop, announced an election for 26 February. A referendum on shopping hours had already been announced, to be held on election day.

Background

The Labor Party averaged a primary vote of 48.8 per cent in four Western Australian elections in the 1980s. In the next three elections it managed only 36.7 per cent. In the 2001 election Labor again failed to reach forty per cent, and its victory therefore had been unexpected. Despite gaining only 37.2 per cent, the party took office largely because of a spectacular 11.2 per cent collapse in the Coalition vote. The victory was achieved on the back of One Nation and Green preferences, which helped it win control of the Legislative Assembly.¹

The state of the parties

At the time of the election the Government held 32 of the 57 Legislative Assembly seats, while the Liberal-National Opposition held 21 seats. There was a single Liberal for Forests MP and three independents.² In the Legislative Council the Government and Opposition each held 13 of the 34 seats and the Greens held 5 seats. The 3 One Nation MLCs were now sitting as independents.

The parties' prospects

For much of its time in office, the Gallop Government looked like being a one-term administration. The first Newspoll after its election had Labor trailing the Coalition by 7 points, and the polls continued to show the Government well behind through 2001–04 (see table):

Average Newspoll figures (%)

Year	ALP	Coalition	Green
2002	36	41	7
2003	36	41	8
2004	37	43	7

Source: <http://www.newspoll.com.au>

In late 2004 the Premier apparently considered calling an early election.³ However, when confronted by such poor polling figures, and concerned about the impact of the Commonwealth election, he reportedly delayed the election for as long as he could in the hope that Labor's fortunes would pick up during a long campaign.⁴

It seemed clear that Green preferences might again prove to be crucial to the election outcome. The Newspoll two-party preferred figures suggested this, though in the final poll for 2004, the two-party preferred margin had blown out, giving the Coalition a lead of 12 points, and potentially making the Greens irrelevant. If the Greens could not deliver for Labor, there might well be a repeat of the performance of the one-term Tonkin Labor Government of 1971–4.⁵ Election observer, Antony Green, thought Labor might well lose: 'The Labor vote in WA has hardly budged in two decades and they still struggle to win 40 per cent of the primary vote'.⁶

The Government's chances of victory thus looked slim. As well as trailing in the opinion polls over the long haul, it had been hurt by a redistribution of Legislative Assembly seats, and it had earned much criticism over such issues as taxes, failing infrastructure problems and an increasing number of power outages. A loss of four seats would see it lose control of the lower house; the Coalition needed to win eight seats to be sure of forming a government.

As 2004 drew to a close the Coalition therefore looked to have an excellent chance of winning government. It seemed as if all that was needed was for Liberal leader, Colin Barnett, to run an error-free campaign for him to become the sole Liberal Premier across the nation.

The only hint of a problem for the Opposition was that Barnett's own standing was never high during 2001–05. Poll figures throughout 2004 suggested that a majority felt Gallop was performing satisfactorily in his job. By contrast, Barnett invariably had a majority claiming dissatisfaction with the way he was performing. As one journalist put it, he was 'renowned for his lack of people skills and a demeanour that many interpret as arrogance'.⁷

Of the other parties, the Green vote was expected to increase, but One Nation was considered a spent force.

As in the recent Commonwealth election, religion and moral issues emerged as factors in the party battle. The Australian Christian Lobby spoke of being 'on the march' against those who would undermine the Australian way of life, and of placing a 'Christian values grid' over every candidate.⁸ The Family First Party, that had so unexpectedly won a Victorian Senate seat four months earlier, nominated 34 Legislative Assembly candidates and 10 candidates for the Legislative Council. It preferred against Liberal candidates in the seats of Darling Range

and Dawesville, for their pro-choice views, while the Christian Democrat Party preferred Labor ahead of the Liberals in six seats for a similar reason. Six Labor candidates publicly declared their opposition to abortion and the use of embryos in research.⁹

The shopping hours referendum

The fact of Perth having very restricted opening hours has been a controversial issue in the retail shopping industry for some time. In June 2003 Harvey Norman outlets opened illegally in a protest against the restrictions, an action that later saw the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection bring charges against eighteen Harvey Norman operators.

In March 2004 the Premier expressed his determination to ease the restrictions, and he called on the other parties to support his stand.¹⁰ Neither the Liberals nor the Greens were sympathetic, however, and the Government's legislation was defeated in the Legislative Council in August. Gallop said he would pursue the reforms and that the issue would feature strongly in the forthcoming election.¹¹

On 9 November the Premier announced that two referenda on shopping hours would be held concurrently with the election. One would ask voters if they were in favour of extended weeknight shopping (until 9 pm Monday to Friday), while the other sought views on allowing general retail shops to be open for six hours on Sundays. The *Western Australian* was not impressed, warning that the referenda would add confusion during the chaos of the election. The newspaper also wanted to know why there was just a single question: why were other important issues such as daylight saving or one-vote-one-value not included?¹² It remained to be seen if the shopping hours issue would count against the government, though the Liberal Party was also vulnerable, largely due to internal differences over the issue.¹³

During the campaign much more seemed to be heard from opponents of extended hours than from its supporters. The opponents included champion tennis player and well-known committed Christian, Margaret Court, Peter Fitzpatrick, CEO of the Motor Traders' Association, and Jim McGiveron, Secretary of the TWU. The Presbyterian Church cited the Fourth Commandment as grounds for opposing such a change: 'Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy'.¹⁴

The election campaign

The 28–30 January Newpoll, taken soon after the announcement of the election, suggested that the calling of the election had focussed respondents' minds upon the battle between the major parties. While the Coalition vote barely moved (44 per cent), Labor's tally (42 per cent) climbed above 40 per cent for the first time since the previous election. The campaign seemed likely to play an important role in determining the outcome.

Despite the Government's recovery in the polls it still seemed vulnerable. There were many major ongoing problems about which it had earned a great deal of criticism:

- a nurses' strike over a new pay deal
- very high stamp duty costs
- greatly lengthening hospital waiting lists
- declining water resources for Perth and many country towns
- restrictive tourism policies
- the declining condition of coastal wetlands, and
- electricity provision difficulties, symbolised by the power blackouts of February 2004.

There was therefore a great deal in the Government's performance that the Opposition could attack, while promising to improve the overall delivery of government services. 'Delivery, not delays' was its slogan throughout the campaign. As one journalist commented, it was an election where a 'small target' approach by the challengers seemed to give the most chance of electoral victory.¹⁵ There were some suggestions in the press about the Liberal Party being 'a dangerously divided team', but any differences between Barnett and certain colleagues did not seem to affect the Coalition campaign in any public way.¹⁶

The Kimberley canal

The future of Perth's water supply has been an issue of growing importance. In mid-November 2004 the Government spoke of setting up a study to investigate the possibility of piping water from the Kimberley region, a proposal devised by technology firm, Tenix. Colin Barnett criticised the proposal, saying that if the canal project was feasible, the Government should be starting work immediately rather than wasting money on a feasibility study.¹⁷ He also described the announcement as 'blatant opportunism' in the pre-election period, and asked just who would own the water if a canal was constructed:

The water is publicly owned now ... my understanding of Tenix's plan is they would access the water from the Fitzroy [river] and sell it back to the State.¹⁸

After a brief public discussion, the issue disappeared, seemingly for the duration of the election, at least.

The television debate between the leaders took place on 2 February. On a night when a panel of voters gave the debate to Barnett for his overall performance, the Leader of the Opposition stunned the Premier by announcing that a Barnett Government would build the Kimberley canal.

A sceptical *Western Australian* set the tone of the ensuing debate. An editorial describing the plan as 'a vision on a grand scale', also spoke of it being 'controversial and fraught with uncertainties':

West Australians have cause for fearing that Mr Barnett, if he wins office, is set to lead them into a venture in which the costs could far outweigh the benefits – and that ultimately they could be burdened with the price of economic folly.¹⁹

In the same edition, the newspaper reminded its readers that in 1993 Barnett as Minister for Resources Development, Energy and Tourism had wound up a Labor-appointed committee that had been set up to analyse a similar water-transfer plan.²⁰

From this point in the campaign the canal issue dominated the election. The Liberal Party placed a full-page press advertisement to spell out the case for the dam, but this was criticised for not addressing the cost of construction, the price of water or the construction time.²¹ Interestingly, a poll suggested that many Western Australians supported the idea of a canal – even a majority of Labor voters apparently supported it. Unfortunately for the Liberals, though, support for the proposal did not seem likely to translate into votes.²²

On the eve of the election, Edith Cowan University academic, Peter van Onselen, likened the canal proposal to John Hewson’s Goods and Services Tax plan in the 1993 Commonwealth election. If the Opposition lost, he said, it might be seen as another ‘textbook example of how to throw away an election-winning lead’.²³ Whether that was the case or not, the focus of much of the remainder of the campaign was on the Opposition rather than the Government, blurring the effort by the Coalition to draw attention to Government weaknesses. Liberal MLA, Rob Johnson, later complained that Barnett’s announcement ‘took the focus away from Gallop and put it on him [Barnett]’.²⁴ The Westpoll taken soon after, suggested that in the week after Barnett’s announcement, the Coalition lost its lead.²⁵

Barnett’s costs blunder

It seems that it is now a standard part of Australian election campaigns for Oppositions to delay the publication of their policy costings until the last possible moment. In this case the figures were not revealed until the Thursday before polling day. Unfortunately, the costings document contained a discrepancy of over \$200m that was discovered during Barnett’s press conference to announce the figures. The evening television bulletins covered his public humiliation. A journalist suggested that Barnett’s ‘harrowing half-hour’ had probably ‘transformed a feisty underdog into political roadkill’.²⁶ Under the headline: ‘Barnett does a number as a snake oil salesman’, the *Western Australian* criticised the document for falling ‘woefully short of the level of detail required to give the coalition any financial credibility’.²⁷

The final Newspoll, was good news for the Government, giving it a 45–39.5 primary vote margin over the Coalition, with a two-party

preferred figure of 54–46. The announcement of the canal, plus Barnett’s costings embarrassment, may not in themselves have proved the difference between the Government and the Opposition. However, these two extraordinary events might have been enough to have given the Government a percent or two more which enabled it to overcome voters’ doubts, and reduce the burden of a large, post-redistribution parcel of marginal seats.²⁸ Unnamed Liberals blamed the last-minute costing blunder for their failure to win at least four northern Perth marginals, Wanneroo, Joondalup, Mindarie and Kingsley.²⁹ The Labor campaign ran remarkably smoothly and free from any serious error. There is no doubt that Barnett helped smooth the way for the Government’s re-election.

The outcome—the Legislative Assembly

The table below shows that both the Labor and Liberal parties experienced healthy increases in their primary votes, while the National and Green votes altered little. The major parties’ increase came largely from the collapse of One Nation which had received 9.6 per cent of the vote in 2001. The Family First Party gained a 2 per cent vote. The Liberal Party increased its Legislative Assembly numbers by two, but the three other parties’ numbers were unaltered. Only in Albany were Green preferences significant in helping Labor win the seat.

Premier Gallop had expressed a concern that the nearness of the Commonwealth election – where the Labor vote in the West had fallen to little more than a third of the total vote – would hurt his team. Gallop spoke of the danger of the so-called ‘Howard Halo’.³⁰ The result suggests that the Commonwealth result had minimal impact, as is usually the case. Most Australian voters seem well able to distinguish between elections, parties and leaders.

The outcome—the Legislative Council

Labor won a higher share of the Legislative Council vote, with the Liberal Party also gaining an increase. Each party gained an extra three seats. Here also, One Nation’s vote collapsed, and its three seats were lost. The Green vote fell slightly, with the party losing three of its five seats.

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Legislative Assembly	ALP	Lib	NP	Green	ON	FF	Other
Votes won	41.9	35.6	3.7	7.6	1.6	2.0	7.6
(change)	(+4.7)	(+4.4)	(+0.4)	(+0.3)	(-8.0)	(+2.0)	(-3.8)
Seats won	32	18	5	-	-	-	2
(change)	(-)	(+3)	(-)				(-3)
Legislative Council	ALP	Lib	NP	Green	ON	FF	Other
Votes won	43.4	37.1	2.2	7.5	1.6	2.0	6.2
(change)	(+5.5)	(+3.1)	(-0.2)	(-0.5)	(-8.3)	(+2.0)	(-1.6)
Seats won	16	15	1	2	-	-	-
(change)	(+3)	(+4)	(-)	(-3)			(-4)

The shopping hours referenda

The shopping hours referenda were soundly defeated, with 58.7 per cent opposing extended weeknight shopping, and 61.4 per cent opposing Sunday trading.³¹

An electoral law footnote

In 2003 the High Court ruled that one-vote-one-value legislation passed by the Western Australian Parliament was invalid, due to its not being passed by an absolute majority of Legislative Councillors. Prior to the election, Liberal MLC, Alan Cadby, was put in an unwinnable position on his party's North Metropolitan ticket. Cadby's reaction was to leave the party and offer Geoff Gallop his vote if he sought to reintroduce the one vote one value legislation, an offer the Premier declined.

After the election, the Western Australian Parliament first met on 29 March, at which time the Premier announced that 'one vote one value' legislation would be re-introduced. Legislative Council members have fixed terms, with the newly-elected members not due to take their seats until 21 May. Between the resumption of Parliament and 21 May, the Government would have an absolute majority on this issue, assuming Cadby's offer still stood.³²

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