

Introduction ■

It is wrong to characterise the loss of government in 2008 as losing the un-loseable election. The over confident view of certain re-election could only be based on the continuing presence of Troy Buswell as Liberal Leader. His lack of credibility disguised the electorate's true appraisal of the Labor government.

A succession of errors and misjudgements by WA Labor led to a narrow loss. Apportioning blame and electing scapegoats will not bring back government. Learning lessons from past mistakes will contribute to future success. There's nothing to be gained by pulling punches or proffering a whitewashed analysis.

That some individuals will be affronted by criticism in this report is inevitable; responsibility for defeat must be accepted.

An essential first step is to accept the verdict of the electorate; to publicly question the judgement of voters is fatal and they will mark Labor down for doing so.

The next step is to resist the demonising of the defeated Labor Government. Talk about the great legacy left to the new administration. Praise the leadership of Gallop and Carpenter. Restate the infrastructure investments 2001–2008. Emphasise the record economic growth during the 21st century. Stress the sound budgetary position achieved.

Most Election Reviews get pigeon-holed. There is no obligation on the WA branch to accept all the recommendations, but all should be thoroughly discussed.

Too often the WA branch lacks self confidence; it is a great contributor to Labor politics but it desperately needs to become a more professional outfit. Campaign skills need to be developed in depth and constantly monitored. Training should become the centrepiece of this process.

Revival of the fortunes of WA Labor rests primarily with the State Parliamentary Labor Party but its monumental task will be made easier by a sophisticated Party campaign team.

Cyclical Politics ■

The former Speaker of the US House of Representatives once said that all politics is local. An equal truism is that all politics is cyclical. The electorate has an unshakeable belief that the rotation of political power is beneficial.

There is no magic formula in regard to political cycles – historically, three terms was a reasonable benchmark. With the introduction of four year terms, governments become vulnerable after just two – especially if their initial victory was overwhelming.

Federally, Fraser got eight years, Hawke/Keating thirteen and Howard almost twelve. In Victoria Cain/Kirner got ten years and Kennett seven and a half years. In WA Labor got almost ten years from 1983 with the Liberals then getting a similar time.

One needs to highlight the Borbidge Government as one of the few short term administrations in the last three decades.

To swim against the tide of cyclical politics, political parties have changed leadership and presented themselves as a different government to that which preceded them. This meant that Keating, lemma and, potentially, Brumby could win an extra term against the trend.

Given all the factors at work in Western Australian politics, defeat cannot be blamed on cyclical politics. There is no doubt that it was a factor, but it was not insurmountable.

Incumbency ■

It is generally agreed that incumbency has been a very strong factor in the re-election of governments. The ability of governments to stress their achievements through public information campaigns, the massive staffing advantage over Opposition parties, the ability to set the agenda and manage media relations all contribute to a political hegemony that Oppositions can only dream of.

The downside of incumbency is the alienation of specific groups because the government is held responsible for failing to meet their expectations. Sometimes this is an entire cohort of voters (eg non-metropolitan Perth). Other times it is occupations (eg teachers). This can be somewhat ameliorated by the careful working of sub-groups such as ethnic groups so that they see it as being in their interest to support an existing government.

The last four elections in Australia have seen incumbent governments take a horrible beating. Both the Howard and Carpenter governments were defeated and the Henderson and Stanhope governments both suffered massive swings against them.

The 2007 Federal Election saw a 5.44% swing away from the incumbent Howard Government. A 2.69% swing away from the incumbent Northern Territory Government saw Labor win by a fingernail. In the ACT, where no two party preferred figures are produced, the swing against the incumbent Stanhope Government was 9.45% (on primaries). While final preferred vote swing figures are not yet available, Labor was down 6.04% on primaries in the last WA Election.

In New Zealand the Clark Labour Government suffered large swings and was thrown out of office after a 9 year run.

A formerly inviolable rule of politics was that if opinion polls showed the country or State "heading in the right direction" by more than 55%, re-election was a certainty.

In 2007 polling consistently showed that 58% and above thought the country was heading in the right direction.

In WA, on the day before polling day, 54% thought that the State was on the right track and only 34% thought it was on the wrong track – a nett positive of 20%. The very same polled voters indicated that 53% thought it was time to give someone else a go and only 35% thought the government deserved to be re-elected. Finally, 52% of polled voters said no to the question of whether the WA Liberal State Opposition was ready to govern. 36% said yes.

Effectively, the electorate was saying that the State was on the right track, Labor would win, the Liberals weren't ready for government and Alan Carpenter was the preferred Premier – but then went ahead and elected a Liberal Government.

Labor's WA Primary Drought ■

The 2008 election was fought against the background of a relatively low primary vote dating back to 1992 – be it at a State or Federal level. In those 16 years Labor only once achieved a primary vote in excess of 40%.

At the last Federal election the swing to the Rudd Labor team in WA was well below the national average. Federally, Labor holds over 50% of seats in every state except WA where the figure is a little above 25%. Too many Labor strategists overlook the fact that WA Labor's 2005 vote was boosted by catastrophic mistakes made by our opponents in the last week of that campaign.

Another indicator of our low vote is that every other state in Australia, at some stage since 1996, has returned three Labor Senators in a half-Senate election. Western Australia has struggled to return two.

As a rule, the higher the voter turnout, the better Labor does. There was a much lower turnout in 2008 than in the two previous elections.

Was the Labor vote lower because of the reduced turnout or was the loss of community support for Labor a driver of lower turnout? So far, no plausible explanation has been offered.

Federal/State Balancing Act ■

Some electors are motivated by the desire for political balance in Australia. The concept of wall-to-wall government of a particular persuasion grates with them. The perceived isolation of WA and its tendency towards parochialism magnifies the effect of governments of the same persuasion in Perth and Canberra.

In the 2007 Federal campaign, the Coalition, albeit in a desultory way, tried to exploit the wall-to-wall government argument.

It did have some traction in the polling and was of concern to Labor strategists given they had no effective countervailing arguments. It was certainly a factor in play at the 2008 state election and was accentuated by the fact that Kevin Rudd was less popular in WA than he was in the rest of the country.

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Gallop to Carpenter ■

The loss of Geoff Gallop to WA politics was a major blow. If there had been planning for succession politics, this event severely disrupted it.

At the time, and now with hindsight, it is clear that Alan Carpenter was the best choice. He was presented as a new-style leader, with no factional baggage and no opponents for his leadership. His naivete about the culture of the ALP and his lack of central campaign experience would always be a problem but the rest of the team needed to fill some of those vacuums and didn't.

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Any assessment of the Carpenter leadership style must be made against a background of mistrust engendered by the unethical behaviour of lobbyists. Too often the initial response by those facing allegations was to mislead and deceive. This left the Premier in the invidious position of not knowing whom to trust. Little wonder a degree of isolation descended on the Premier and his office.

Round Up the Usual Suspects ■

The exposure of the lobbying activities of Brian Burke and Julian Grill and their suborning of Cabinet Ministers, public servants and other key players, contributed more than anything else to the destruction of the Labor Government.

The constant adverse publicity corroded Labor's vote. The suspension or dismissal of Ministers disrupted Government and imposed a massive burden on the Premier, thus subsuming all other positive measures taken by the Government.

Alan Carpenter's management of this crisis was nothing short of superb. What would have destroyed other governments just badly dented this one. One shouldn't underestimate the long term drip effect of this crisis; nor the potential for the Crime Commission to make adverse findings that would affect the standing of the Government.

By the time of the election the damage was done and it didn't rate in the top five issues for voters. However, had it not existed, Labor would have been in a better position to proselytise on the top five issues.

Federal Election Review/ Arbib Report ■

Following WA Labor's less than satisfactory performance in the 2007 Federal election, the WA Administrative Committee, in consultation with the National Secretariat, commissioned a Review to be headed by Senator-elect Mark Arbib.

Arbib produced a fifty page report and finished with six recommendations. Very few in the WA Branch appear to have read the report, much less acted upon any of its recommendations.

Whilst the tenor of the recommendations is Federal, there are implications for the state campaign. The very last recommendation about going on to an early campaign-footing was clearly ignored to the detriment of the Branch. The organisational failings of the WA Party Office were not properly addressed in the Arbib Report; it is essential that they be tackled immediately.

2008 Government Positioning ■

The Carpenter Labor Government started 2008 in a positive manner with a headland speech outlining the infrastructure strategy for the State. Not long before, a major Arts package had also been announced.

The concept of Building WA was positive and resonated with the electorate. Not merely with hindsight, it is possible to say that this was a theme that should have been retained throughout the campaign and not the chosen theme of Vision, Stability and Leadership.

The biggest downside was the failure to properly characterise the Budget surplus. In most jurisdictions a surplus means the difference between expenditure and revenue and is not spent. In WA the surplus is committed to new major capital works programs.

Too many in the electorate thought that the surplus was just sitting around, unused. They readily formed the view that they, as individuals, had not benefitted from the boom and were resentful that the Government was not spending some of the surplus on them.

Getting credit for fiscal responsibility is helpful, but not at the expense of appearing miserly.

The WA Liberals/Barnett ■

Post the 2005 election, the Liberal Opposition was constantly unstable and led by unpopular politicians – one could say, totally unelectable.

All public opinion polls and ALP research demonstrated that Troy Buswell was regarded with contempt by the electorate; with many long-time Liberal voters refusing to vote for him.

His refusal to stand aside artificially inflated Labor's support. His eventual decision to step down was almost certainly guided by disastrous Liberal internal polling.

Had an election been called with Buswell as Leader the Liberals would have faced a horrible choice – spend the first week of the campaign getting rid of him or suffering the consequences of an unelectable Leader.

Negative attacks on Barnett were bound to fail – he had not been in the political spotlight (not on the frontbench) for four years. He looked like he had made a personal sacrifice to resume the leadership and had been unfairly ambushed by the calling of the election.

The Early Election ■

The early WA election was a decision of the Premier alone (excluding the urgings of sycophantic staff members).

Indications given the previous week suggested that the election would be held later this year or in February of next year. On this basis, the Deputy Leader went on leave.

The decision to call an election came just one day after the change of Liberal leadership. There were three or four other factors that affected the Premier's decision.

The early election decision was a serious misjudgement by the Leader. An equally serious failure was that of Party Office officials who, when informed of the decision, readily complied with it even though they knew it to be the wrong decision.

The Premier did not ask Party Office if they were ready to run a campaign; Party officials did not inform the Premier that they were inadequately prepared.

The crucial mistake was to not commission some polling to establish the effect of the change of Liberal leadership on the mood of the electorate.

True, there wasn't time for effective quantitative polling. An alternative – say, 10 focus groups – could have been completed and reported on by the following Friday morning.

At no point before the decision for an early election was made on the Tuesday were the pollsters consulted.

The calling of an early election was perceived by the voters as a cynical exercise; that it abrogated the principle of fair play and that there was no valid reason for going early. Virtually everyone on the Labor team believed that this would wash away in a matter of days – it lasted for the whole campaign.

Coinciding the first two weeks of the campaign with the Olympics only added to the cynicism, blocked out Labor's positive message and gave the Opposition two weeks to get their act together.

The inability to settle the teachers' dispute before the Election was called was a substantial vote switcher that may have cost Labor Riverton and reduced the pool of campaign volunteers.

Party Office Preparedness ■

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Put simply, the WA office was ill-prepared for an election:

- **Finances** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Campaign audits** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Training of Campaign Directors** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Postal Vote Campaign** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Strategy Group** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Computer systems** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Volunteers** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Polling** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**
- **Advertising** **CLASSIFIED TEXT**

Essentially, the campaign office lacked cohesion, professionalism and above all, the necessary hunger for victory. It also lacked bottle – it's all very well to slap around candidates and their campaign teams but, at times, senior members of the Party needed to be fronted – and they weren't.

There was consistent criticism of Bill Johnston being both the Campaign Director and a candidate.

No evidence was adduced before this Review that he neglected his duties as Campaign Director in order to be a candidate. Further, there is no sustainable argument that there was an actual conflict of interest. Several senior Party members specifically urged Johnston to stay on as Campaign Director.

Any campaign weaknesses in Party Office must be sheeted home to the State Secretary but not on the basis of him being a candidate.

Factional Divisions ■

Factionalism in the Western Australia Branch of the ALP has been a major negative for the Party's status. Its modus operandi incorporates hatred, patronage and revenge. It's not that dissimilar to the Party in other States; just more intense.

Factional instability owes much to the Balkanisation of the Party, with up to five separate factional sub-groupings operating and the resultant shifting alliances. It resembles the 30 years war.

What tends to emerge is an "In" faction and an "Out" faction after which some form of stability grows. Internal Party fracas are generally ignored by the public as a matter of no interest. It is only when they become repetitive and constantly within the focus of the media that they have a debilitating effect.

There are several instances of those who have lost the internal factional battle taking it into the public domain. This not only weakens the authority of the Leader but saps the confidence of the electorate in the Labor Party.

This situation has occurred on several occasions in other States with Queensland and Victoria setting high standards of bastardry. Yet it has been possible for factional aggrandisement to be curbed for long periods of time and for factions to be harnessed to work in the interests of the Party and not undermine them.

Power sharing means that the rights of minority (Out) factions must be protected and those in a minority must understand that internal defeat isn't an invitation to leave the reservation.

Preselections/Quality Candidates/ Parachuting ■

The 2008 list of candidates was of good quality. They represented a reinvigoration of the State Parliamentary Labor Party and their failure to get elected was a major setback.

The main imperative for preselection was factional patronage. In the recent Federal election, factional patronage delivered many quality candidates – Gary Gray, Greg Combet, Bill Shorten, Melissa Parke, Mark Dreyfus, Maxine McKew, Mark Butler and Richard Marles to name but some. Where the system failed (Franklin and Latrobe), factions replaced vulnerable candidates before the election. It can therefore be said that factional patronage is no barrier to producing quality candidates.

There is no question that Western Australian factions are obsessed with patronage to the point of it being of detriment to the Party.

When Premier Carpenter requested accommodation for some of his hand-picked candidates the factions acquiesced but not in the seats that were most suitable. The knock-on consequences of this cost Labor Government in WA.

The Carpenter “Dream Team” bears many similarities to what other State Premiers had already implemented. One unfortunate side-effect was that they were seen as “parachuted” in and hence were vulnerable to campaigns that portrayed them as outsiders and not locals.

The promotion and exposure of the “Dream Team” meant that those candidates who were not part of that Team were seen as stale and perhaps just a touch grubby.

Preselection shenanigans led to the exclusion of Bob Kucera and the subsequent loss of the Mount Lawley seat. Not one witness to this Review suggested that Kucera would not have won the seat.

It must be conceded that the seat of Morley was more complicated but Labor Party principle, supplemented by a good dose of revenge, meant that this seat was lost when all equivalent seats were won.

The near-loss of Kwinana doesn’t reflect on the candidate but rather on the preselection process that preceded it.

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Preselections/Quality Candidates/Parachuting (*continued*)

The timing of preselections made Labor's task of winning the election difficult and was exacerbated by the calling of the election six months early. Much of the delay was due to the timing of the redistribution but some preselections were not completed until some six months after the final boundaries were released.

Given the number of new notionally-Labor seats candidates had little chance to embed themselves.

Narrative/Strategy/Tactics/ Strategy Group ■

In modern political jargon the 2008 campaign lacked a narrative. The theme of early 2008 of "Building WA" drifted into other, ill-defined, messages. There needed to be a positive narrative that was stated and re-stated throughout 2008.

It is equally difficult to define what the strategy was. Certainly, the "Don't touch the Liberals while Buswell is Leader" approach worked and would have been effective if he had remained Leader through the campaign. His departure left the ALP stranded; not knowing whether to run a positive or a negative campaign. In the end the Party did both in as inept manner as possible.

When it came to tactics Labor was nearly always reactive, bordering on amateurish.

The policy of having daily Strategy Group meetings was sound although it could be said that the Strategy Group itself was too large and that decision-making therefore reverted to a much smaller group based in Party Office. In the end, the lack of preparedness of the Party Office and the hubris of the Premier's staff conspired to neutralise Strategy Group outcomes.

Western Australia's most experienced campaign operatives, Stephen Smith and Gary Gray, were not utilised at all. Clearly Smith's obligations as Foreign Minister meant that he was unavailable. Either of them would have brought not only experience but also an outsider's reality check to the campaign.

It may not have been possible to use other Party campaigners but, in retrospect, it would have been advisable – Mark Arbib, Luke Foley, Mike Kaiser, Nick Martin, Michael Brown and David Feeney could have been of great assistance. This is not to say that any of them would have been available full-time.

Polling ■

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Advertising ■

The electronic advertising campaign by the Labor Party in 2008 was abysmal. Production was of poor quality thus adding to the burden of hopeless concepts. The advertising was badly themed and had an erratic narrative.

The negative ads missed their target and irritated the electorate.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with negative ads – these ones were just badly executed.

For budgetary reasons a new Advertising Director was recruited; one who had no previous experience of political campaigns.

Put bluntly, having a novice Creative Director and an uncommunicative apparatchik State Secretary designing all the ads was a recipe for disaster.

There is little evidence that Liberal Party ads were evaluated or that, with one exception, Labor ads were quality tested.

The failure to have an ad ready to go when the election was announced can be sheeted home to the Premier's precipitate decision to call it.

Overall, the Labor ads were inept and a major factor in its election loss.

Fundraising ■

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Media/*West Australian*/ Media Director ■

Labor's election prospects were constantly undermined by the intensely negative attitude of the media.

In particular, the *West Australian* was toxic; displaying a bias not seen since the Murdoch excesses of 1975. The spite that emanated from the *West Australian* spread to the rest of the media as though it was the norm.

It is easy to blame the Premier or Jim McGinty for these poor relations but any attempts by them to repair the relationship were constantly rebuffed.

More thought needed to be given to by-passing hostile media and using alternative means of communication.

Not having a high profile Media Director was a handicap – it was a pity that David Britton could only assume that role for the last week of the campaign.

Staff ■

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Interstate Staff ■

Of recent times the various State election campaigns have been buttressed by the recruiting of staff from interstate. This is not only of benefit to the recipient but helps to skill-up staff for future campaigns.

In the two previous successful WA campaigns, quite a number of talented individuals came over to help. While several did come over in 2008, they were fewer in numbers and had far less experience.

The timing of the WA election made it difficult for interstate volunteers as there were many concurrent activities in other states. The timing of previous elections in WA made it relatively easier for volunteers to come over in January/February. The ambush poll in 2008 made matters even more difficult for prospective volunteers.

More effort should have been made to recruit campaign specialists from interstate. In particular, the National Secretariat was remiss in not being more active in recruitment of assistance to the WA campaign.

Policy ■

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Uranium/GM Crops/ Parliamentary Bar ■

The decision to change the course of the campaign and highlight the issues of uranium and GM crops has been highly criticised by nearly all of those who made submissions or appeared before the Review.

Given that there wasn't a strong campaign narrative, given that the strategy was poorly thought through and finally, given that the tactical appreciation was always flawed – was this a gamble worth taking?

This switch in emphasis comes from fairly shallow work in focus groups. It certainly had the imprimatur of pollsters and was endorsed by those giving strategic advice. It appears to have had little (or even a negative) effect on the campaign.

The decision to advocate the closure of the Parliamentary Bar backfired as it implied cheap opportunism and reinforced the perception of politicians as layabout drunks.

This unnecessary encumbrance was dictated by a desire to knock the Liberal Health Policy off the front page – too clever by half.

The Lib Negative Ad ■

The Liberal Party was able to run a simple campaign based on limited funds, fragile unity and a small target philosophy.

Their most effective electronic advertisement was the "Name 3 things ..." advertisement.

This ad was crying out for a response.

None was forthcoming.

Given the rapid response of the national ALP to the Liberal negative ads in 2007, this was eminently do-able.

There was no logistical reason why a response was not on the air within 24 hours.

It is true that some negative ads don't require a response or that you simply can't respond.

This Liberal ad should have been an own-goal.

Carpenter's Popularity – Polling v Doorknocking ■

In analysing the 2008 poll result, it is clear that much of the campaign was run as a Presidential campaign using Alan Carpenter up-front and leaving other Ministers to deal with lesser tasks.

Given the relative unpopularity of several senior Ministers, this seemed to be a logical approach. In retrospect, and given Alannah McTiernan's positive ratings, a better role for her could have been found.

Throughout the campaign, Alan Carpenter's nett approval ratings stayed in double figures and, at times, blew out to 19%.

In terms of Better Premier, he had a +8% lead over Barnett at the end – having led by over 18% at the mid-point of the campaign.

In contradiction to these positive figures, we had feedback from over 30 candidates who doorknocked to the effect that Carpenter's standing with the electorate was in decline.

This viewpoint is not entirely with the benefit of hindsight – quite a few of these candidates responded to the feedback by removing the Premier's photo from their literature and quietly dumping similar posters and bunting.

Future polling must drill down into the approval/non-approval category by probing the strength of their views rather than simply approval/disapproval.

The biggest factor in the doorknock feedback was their perception of the Premier as "arrogant". Much of this can be attributed to the unrelenting campaign of the *West Australian* and the rest of the media pack.

Carpenter's decisiveness was evinced as proof of his arrogance. If he had been indecisive he would have been characterised as weak.

Given that the Party knew that the "arrogance" charge was sticking as early as the beginning of 2008, why were strategies not adopted to counter this perception and if they were adopted, why were they ineffective?

Leaking the Polling ■

The entrenched view of who would win the 2008 election meant that the electorate was disengaged; it encouraged unthinking protest votes.

At its campaign peak, 62% thought Labor would win and only 15% picked the Liberals.

The tactical decision to leak the polling deflated the expectations of a Labor victory, although they remained substantial.

The treacherous leaking of later polling sabotaged this tactic and weakened Labor's credibility. It looked like Labor was "crying wolf". It also meant that using this as a tactic in future would become more difficult.

Rural WA/Nats Campaign ■

The disciplined National Party campaign hammered the ALP in rural areas.

They had a simple message, promoted it for 18 months and were allowed to get away with the fiscal irresponsibility of their promises and the illusion of their independence from the Liberal Party.

Their cause was helped by the ALP running a very Perth-centric campaign as opposed to a totally distinct "Country Labor" campaign as well.

The electorate never gave the ALP credit for all the investment it had made in non-metro WA, with Geraldton being a prime example of this.