

The Right STUMBLES

Until recently, Labor looked dead and buried all around the country. The conservative decade seemed at hand. The remarkable NSW election result in May, though, offered a glimmer of hope. ALR's team of commentators ponders the result.



Managed Pain

For Rodney Cavalier, the NSW election result demonstrates the dramatic social changes of the last few decades. Labor, he argues, has to catch up or be caught out.

Immediately prior to the announcement of the NSW election in May, the conventional wisdom was a landslide win for the Greiner government: the Labor Party across Australia was said to be in such terrible odour that the NSW opposition under Bob Carr would be victims—innocent

or otherwise. For much of the term of the Greiner government, a conventional wisdom was the certainty of a first-term government gaining a virtually automatic second term. When all of this went horribly awry under the unanswerable truth of the ballot box, not a commentator was prepared.



Rather than analyse the root causes for the rejection of Greinerism, commentators took refuge in a new convention: the notion that there is a tide abroad against incumbents. Like the earlier postulates, it is balderdash. The first law of electoral politics was what counted: governments lose, oppositions do not win. With that in mind, a dissection of the fallacies of the now discredited wisdoms provide a fair degree of the explanation for the resurgence of New South Wales Labor.

Firstly, the dimensions of the Labor defeat in 1988 created a mindset in the Labor Opposition qualitatively different to their previous defeat in 1965. Truly routed, no one believed that Labor was a government in temporary exile. Labor saved itself an entire term by coming to grips with its defeat within days. Secondly, Labor did not have to sort out who was going to lead it. Once it was clear what seats the party had lost, there was only one possible leader and the Greiner government did not ever face an opposition beset with public divisions.

In 1988, Greiner was little more than a beneficiary of a forfeit for which every member of the defeated government, not just its leader, remains responsible. Having entered the Premier's office, Greiner did not ever enter the affections of the electorate. Rather, he preferred to believe that he was reinventing the culture of NSW politics.

Greiner undertook a sustained exercise in hubris when he hawked his victory in 1988 as a model for conservatives everywhere. At the heart of his rhetoric was the deification of management. At times it appeared that 'good' management was taking the place of politics and government. In and of itself, however, management means nothing. An instrument of government is worthwhile only if it delivers goods and services to its consumers efficiently. What goods and services, delivered where, in what quantities—all these remain matters of politics and politicians.

When voters suffered pain as priorities altered to reflect new political imperatives, it did not matter one whit that

the destruction of cherished services were textbook examples of paper-shuffling through chains of command. It did not matter that a raft of economists said that this was the 'correct' thing to be doing. What did matter was that the pain, being real, remained real. The substance was wrong, not the marketing. In the few weeks of the campaign, Bob Carr used his tongue to bring the memories of that pain to the forefront of voters' considerations. It was all very basic stuff, though ignored by the media, that sealed the return of pre-1988 Labor voters. Greiner gave former Labor voters reasons to drop his government, Carr provided them with reasons to return to the Labor fold.

Examined closely, the pain exacted was rather selective. Decisions announced to a chorus of approval by the leader writers and conservative columnists had a curious habit of altering on their way to the coalface. Notorious rorts in the provision of free transport for school children, for example, were as untouchable for the Coalition as they were for their Labor predecessors. User-pays was supposed to be a guiding principle: it did not apply to water usage once the Greiner government assessed the impact on the voters of increases in household water rates. Some decisions appeared gimmick-driven: one year the government compelled the electricity distribution authorities to dissolve asset reserves so that the government might send rebate cheques to consumers and then, the following year, the authorities had to increase charges and enter heavy borrowings.

For all of the cutbacks of basic services—especially in country towns—the voters discovered that the vaunted reductions in outlays and debt did not translate into reduced taxes and charges. Quite the contrary. Households had to find extra money in a time of recession for registration of motor vehicles, water rates, petrol, electricity, fares and licences. Voters were not impressed with privatisation or corporatisation of and for itself. In the railways, high-priced executives and consultants could only reduce operating expenditure by cutting staff and services—and then presented it as a novel departure in transport economics. (The same geniuses left out of their calculations the social utility of the railways—matters like the savings in motor vehicle third-party, fuel and fuel emissions, time lost in traffic jams, motor accidents, workers compensation.) Under Greinerism, a deficit is, by ideological disposition, a boo-word: investment in public works or the social welfare aspect of public utilities is noted solely for the outlay in the current fiscal year, never the potential returns in future years. When you are paying more for everything the government might still provide, it was somewhat difficult to discern exactly where the approval for the government was that the commentators liked to claim.

The actual performances of the new management was, on examination, not even adequate. In the education portfolio, for example, they attained a level of farce. On the first day of the Greiner government, the Director-General designate of Education warranted dismissal without so much as an audience. TAFE came in for wholesale demolition: the government sacked that department's respected head and replaced him with a businessman who knew nothing of education or training. Talented people departed the ranks

of TAFE or kept a low profile. In desperation, the government had to turn to the aforesaid director-general, the same man that they had sacked, to retrieve the situation. The Ministry of Education, after vast expenditures on outside consultants, moved from a presumptive pre-eminence to imminent abolition. It was difficult to see much that was efficient in the management of these human resources.

Carr knew that resentment was there for the tapping and he tapped it. None of this was novel. The hollowness of the reporting of the election campaign was the presumption that the Greiner message on management was either relevant or appropriate.

NSW had its closest contest in 15 years but the media failed to report it. When an election campaign receives notices that it is 'boring' or 'uneventful', they are a signal solely of the inadequacy of the reporting tools at the disposal of the reporters. This refrain makes its appearance in any campaign when there is an absence of pyrotechnics on the trails of the respective leaders; when voters are contemplative rather than demonstrative, preferring to keep their intentions under wraps until they enter the polling booth; and when there is an absence of events or stunts that provide pictures or noise for cameras and microphones to point at. What was at play transcended single-purpose explanations.

In the 25 years since Labor lost office in 1965—government having changed twice since—the electoral landscape of NSW has transformed itself. It is the same story across Australia. In a system based on single-member electorates, shifts in individual wealth—even the perception of well-being and status—can and will transform a suburb, a town, an electorate in a remarkably short period of time. For those lost in their own mythology, the problem for Labor in the Hawke-Keating era has been the rejection of Labor by its 'traditional base'. Those who peddle such nonsense do so because it is more palatable than the truth—the base has disappeared. It disappeared forever some time between 1945 and the 1970s.

The notions of this base revolve around images of a 'Labor Movement', stranded permanently in the 19th century, a reverie of industrial workers, their spouses and families marching as one with the branches of the Labor Party. For its adherents, theologians all, the structure of the Labor Party does not change, cannot change, must not change. The phantasm requires an ahistorical understanding of the circumstances of the party's birth: the founders of the Labor Party deliberately created a party that was based on Labor Leagues of the towns and suburbs, open to all Labor supporters, who would manage their own affairs through a self-governing federation of leagues. It was not until 1916, in the midst of Conscription, that the present debauched structure came into effect. The most enduring feature of the Conscription tragedy for Australian Labor was the forfeiture of the control of the party's destiny by the party membership.

In the past 75 years, society has changed beyond recognition, and so has the structure of the workforce. In this centenary year of Labor, nine out of ten voters cannot—

repeat *cannot*—belong to unions affiliated to the ALP. A majority of workers do not belong to unions; a majority of unionists cannot belong to ALP-affiliated unions; a majority of Labor voters are neither industrial workers nor unionists. Labor voters vote Labor not because of tradition. They certainly do not vote Labor because their union is affiliated to the ALP—a party with such an electoral base would be smaller than the Democrats.

Labor voters vote Labor because the Labor Party offers policies that appeal to their material self-interests or transcendent values (or both). 'Traditional' loyalties matter only for as long as Labor governments do not offend the perceptions of 'traditional' Labor voters and for as long as nothing has altered the perceptions of material circumstance or values of those voters. In 1991 Labor reversed its worst losses because the reality of Greinerism hurt former Labor voters most of all. Bob Carr has been busy saying thanks to those who came back; he knows how impermanent voter loyalties now are.

The Labor Party will survive into the next century only if its structure changes to match the changes in its policies and internal culture. Already, at branch level, the Labor Party has died in much of NSW. Contrary to simplistic notions of a widespread disillusionment with Hawke government policies, the attrition rate of new members of the party has been a constant down the postwar decades: about half of new members do not renew within three years, about 70 per cent within five years. New members leave because the ALP does not fulfil the hopes that they

had for it. In the 1980s new members failed to provide replacements for the non-renewals.

People join a party like the ALP, one that is in serious competition for state power, because they are wanting to have a say in the exercise of that power. The ailments of modern Labor do not come down to communication, that is a convenient pretence for those in power. The ailment is fundamental: the members of the ALP do not control their own party. At some point of time new members apprehend that unhappy truth and wonder why they are bothering.

Technology will not be a substitute for a declining membership—nor will party identification on ballot papers, nor public funding. The processes of party decline will continue unless the ALP re-enters the affairs of the community. For that it will need a wholly different governance at the top. Across the world, notably in the former eastern bloc, the trend is toward empowerment of the individual. Labour parties will follow that trend by handing control to their own members or Labour parties will perish. For an increasing number of people who are interested in political action there are attractive alternatives to party membership; for an increasing number interested in social change, politics does not provide the answer. Potential members of the ALP in the future are even less likely to long endure a party whose destiny is in outside hands.

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Reason and Imagination in Modern Culture

The early modern period fragmented the world of experience - and ways of conceptualising this experience - in three directions: the aesthetic, the rational and the ethical. But underlying this fragmentation is a broader and deeper division between reason and imagination. The aim of this conference is to present competing contemporary perspectives that explore this division and its impact on modern culture.

Speakers include:
Cornelius Castoriadis, Ferenc Feher,
Agnes Heller, Axel Honneth,
Peter Hohendahl, Martin Jay,
Niklas Luhman.



**A Thesis Eleven
Conference**

Dates:
Tuesday 6th - Friday 9th August, 1991

Place:
Sir John Monash Business Centre,
5th Floor, 253 Flinders Lane
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Registration:
\$90, \$45 (students, unemployed)
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