



The great ESCAPE

Wayne Swan was campaign director for the ALP in the Queensland election victory in December, which was widely regarded as Labor's most professional campaign. In the federal election he helped organise the national campaign. He spoke from Queensland to David Burchell the day following the election.

It looks like the great escape.

I don't know about that. It was an election the Liberal Party always could have won, and they lost. It doesn't say a lot for the conservative side of politics in Australia.

The most remarkable thing seems to be that outside Victoria the Labor losses were fewer than most people were expecting.

I don't think anyone was surprised by that. Victoria was always a problem. There was an expectation that we could win seats in Queensland, and we've probably won two.

But even in Western Australia, while there are some extremely close results, the damage does seem to be quite small.

It was very much an election which concentrated on leadership. And I think overwhelmingly people preferred Hawke to Peacock. It was as simple as that.

Some would argue that state issues were the most important factors.

Clearly they were important, and they had a very bad effect in Victoria. There's no doubt about that. Otherwise why didn't the swing occur in other states?

Likewise it seems Labor's overall share of the vote nationally has fallen considerably, but also so have the National Party.

It hasn't fallen considerably.

The primary vote has.

There was obviously a strong trend towards minor parties. If you look at the two-party preferred votes in Queensland, we increased our votes in all our sitting seats. Our primary vote fell one or two percent, but you expect that when there are more candidates. So I don't know that the primary argument works. I think on a two party preferred basis you'll probably find if you disaggregated the vote from Victoria, that the Labor vote would be up.

On election night it was quite evident that scrutineers' reports were considerably more reliable than the computer estimates. Likewise during the election campaign, it seemed clear that the parties' own qualitative polling was much more reliable than the results of the major public polls.

The public polls were wrong all the way through the campaign. The parties simply employ more sophisticated polling techniques.

Was it the interest rates election?

Interest rates were obviously very important. But obviously homebuyers weren't convinced the Coalition could do any better. Even in the mortgage belt seats there weren't big swings in Queensland.

As predicted, Democrats and Greens played an important role. But did Labor lose any votes through leakages from the smaller parties?

Obviously we lost votes, but it seems they all came back to us in preferences. There were clearly quite a lot of disaffected Labor Party people, traditional Labor voters, who parked themselves in the Democrats and then came back.

Was it an election between Joh Bjelke-Petersen and John Cain? Obviously Queensland was the saviour for the ALP.

I think it's a bit more than that. The ALP in Queensland has been putting itself back together in a very effective way for well over two years. I think we're now really seeing the benefits from that. People don't move to you if they don't think you're a real alternative. And people obviously do see us as the most serious alternative in Queensland. Joh Bjelke-Petersen might be able to be blamed for some of the reasons why they're on the nose in Queensland, but it doesn't necessarily explain why the vote didn't go to the Liberals.



Paul Keating has a new set of 'beautiful numbers' to celebrate

Another obvious thing is the resilience of the Labor vote in marginal seats; even in Western Australia there was remarkable resilience.

Yes, I agree. It was indeed remarkable.

So does that suggest that Labor is the 'natural party of government' now?

No, I don't think anyone's the natural party of government in Australia. The two-party system is clearly breaking down. The party who will win elections in Australia in the years to come will be the party which is most credible, which is the best organised, with the best leadership.

So this isn't a one-off result for Democrats and Independents?

They'll come and go. I don't know that this establishes any particular trend in that sense. But I do think the traditional voting patterns are breaking down, and it's affecting the Liberal Party as much as the Labor Party.

Does this mean in the long term Labor might have to establish some closer relations with the Democrats?

I don't know about that. It's not the Democrats as such. The pool of non-swinging voters is just getting smaller all the time. And that affects both parties.

Obviously there are particular political reasons for that in the short-term. People are discouraged by the apparent inability of the parties to promise big reductions in interest rates, for instance. But over the long term are there underlying social trends?

Yes, I think so. There have been changes in the forms of political communications. People's politics aren't transmitted as much through the family as through the television set. Traditional family patterns aren't what they were. People are exposed to a much wider range of influences in terms of their political behaviour. And the electorate's more educated so it becomes more discerning.

Once upon a time you could stand outside a polling booth and more or less predict how people were going to vote by how they looked. These days it would be extremely difficult to do that, and in some parts of Australia it would be impossible.

That's right.

But in some other countries that sort of process has been taken to sound the death-knell for the old labour and social democratic parties, at least in their traditional forms. That obviously hasn't been the case here.

These processes are eroding traditional allegiances, certainly. But they're eroding the traditional base of the other parties at the same rate. Ultimately it's simply a case of which is the better led and which is the better organised.

Yet the Labor heartlands have traditionally been more homogeneous than the Liberal heartlands, surely. So one might expect that Labor's support over the long term might be at more risk.

You might think that from living in Sydney. But that's certainly not the case in states like Queensland and Western Australia.

Well, in NSW I tend to think of Wollongong and Newcastle as traditional Labor heartlands. Yet that seems to be a less automatic connection than previously.

Well, we've got different Labor heartlands, and I don't think it's been a big problem.

What should Labor be doing over the long term to try to ensure that these trends run in Labor's favour?

I suppose it's the old balancing act, really. It simply can't let itself become too dogmatic or out of touch with the community.

But it used to be that someone would instinctively say 'I'm a Labor man' or 'I'm a Labor woman'. May it not be that in the future you won't see commitment of that type or of that order?

I don't think so. You've got a different society, haven't you? Things will never be the way they were, say, thirty years ago. There aren't as many people in blue collars. But it doesn't mean to say that you won't have a white-collar Labor man or woman.

The whole theme of the media coverage was that the major parties were on the nose. And the buzz word was disenchantment.

Yes, it was true, although I don't think it was as big a trend as they said. And also I think it reflected how disenchanted they themselves were in media.

But what was it precisely that people were disenchanted with? That wasn't always made nearly so clear in the media account.

Exactly. And because it was partly their own view which they were projecting onto the electorate. A lot of people obviously would have liked Labor to say, 'The country's stuffed, but this is the way we're going to fix it up'. But it just wasn't possible to provide answers like that.

The Age ran an interesting piece where the reporter went to a qualitative market research session, and asked people if they thought politicians were telling the truth about Australia's plight. They said no. He asked did they think the leaders should come out and say, 'Look, Australia's going down the gurgler and we don't have any simple answers'. They said yes. He asked what they thought would happen to the first party to say that. They said: oh, they'd lose, of course...

Exactly. And that's the typical swinging voter: a mass of contradictions. That's why politicians are pretty reflective of the electorate. They tend to reflect the consciousness of the average swinging voter.

People now are writing off the National Party federally. After the Queensland election you cautioned against writing them off too quickly. What do you think now?

Yes, they're in deep trouble. Obviously Queensland is a different case because of the decentralised nature of the state. And they're still the major conservative party here. But after the federal result you might even have to think twice about that, because they've probably only got three

out of twenty-four seats. They're certainly never going to be what they once were.

So is the only sensible option for the Coalition to become one party?

Yes, I'm sure it's the obvious option. But, then, I don't think the Liberal Party would want them.

Several things struck me about the campaign. It seemed clear from quite early on that Labor was trying strongly to differentiate itself from the Coalition: by presenting an image of plain speaking and caution on economic promises; and over values. It was quite a while since I'd heard Paul Keating getting stuck into elements of business the way he did in this campaign. And Bob Hawke stressed social justice theme more prominently than previously. Was that a deliberate strategy?

I don't know that it was a conscious strategy. However, we certainly did try to avoid too much rhetoric because the electorate was obviously pretty cynical. I think it was important to draw the basic distinction in values between the parties as we did. That's why Medicare was so important as a theme.

And the capital gains tax. For a while it looked like a loser, yet Labor persisted.

Well, it was certainly better than talking about interest rates!

What influence did the campaign have?

I think the Liberals could have won the election if they'd won the campaign. Yet they lost the campaign. And, first and foremost, they lost it because they didn't judge the public mood; and they didn't judge the right themes.

People repeatedly said that there was something about Andrew Peacock they weren't happy with.

They could have coped with that. Peacock was certainly their biggest liability, but I still believe they could have won if they'd constructed their campaign properly, which they didn't. People didn't believe they had the answers, so they certainly shouldn't have been trying to tell them that they did. They would have been more effective if they'd simply said: 'Throw them out; it's time for a change'.

They did seem to be highlighting their weakest point.

That's exactly the point. That was the fundamental failure of their campaign. They spent the whole campaign illustrating to people why they shouldn't vote for them.

But was there another side to Peacock's low credibility? When people say they don't like particular politicians it's probably partly about personalities; but it's surely also about what they exemplify about the party's policies and image. Peacock couldn't explain things, but he wasn't given much to explain. It wasn't just his vagueness that hindered his ability to explain their industrial relations policy or their health policy.

And that came through to the electorate as a lack of substance.

So: Labor's won a clear majority?

I think so. Yes.