

\*FEA\*

## Lessons from WA

*John Hyde*

Although the Western Australian election is not quite certain, a Labor victory looks likely. If so, it will be another minor tragedy for democracy. The commonest cliché of this campaign was used by everybody but the candidates. It was: "We have a choice between impropriety or incompetence". The public voted for incompetence but, because of electoral malapportionment, got impropriety instead.

The outcome may not yet be certain but a few facts, which the major political parties are, as usual, working hard to have you misinterpret, are:

- | The Government has polled only 43.2 percent of the primary vote and the Coalition 46.8 percent.
- | The Democrats polled only 1.2% and Greypower 8.8%.
- | There has been a five, perhaps six, percent swing from Labor to the coalition on a two-party preferred basis.
- | The National Party appears to have lost the largely wheatbelt seat of Moore to the Liberals and were out-polled by the Libs in Roe (winning it only on ALP preferences).
- | The issue which received most attention during the campaign was overwhelmingly the impropriety of the W.A. Inc. associations of the government.
- | The Government did badly in the mortgage belt.
- | The informal vote was very high and the Labor Party is claiming that it is particularly high in Labor-held seats.
- | The Labor Party was favoured by the major local daily---  
*The West Australian.*

What can we learn from all that?

The Coalition has won considerably more of the vote than the Labor party, but are less-than-evens to win the election.

This is ironic. Every Western Australian is familiar with the bumper sticker: "Everyone's vote should be Equal". For years the Labor Party campaigned for "one vote, one value" and were opposed by a Liberal Party more concerned to appease its coalition partner, than by adherence to principle. They have now been beaten by an unfavourable redistribution. The moral here is the obvious one: people who abandon principle eventually get their come-uppance.

The Democrats performed abysmally. In an election with a big minor-party vote they could muster only 1.2% in the Lower House, while the new group, Greypower, gained 8.8%. Greypower apparently got most of the protest vote. This indicates that the true Democrat vote---the vote that prefers Democrat issues---is very small. It probably always has been. This is cheering. When it comes to policy, all political parties are promiscuous, but the Democrats have been the ultimate political harlots---bedding with every idea that was popular---confident that their inconsistent policies would never be put to the test. The most important lesson here is, perhaps, that democracy is safe after all.

The National Party and Labor votes together are more than the Liberal vote. Collectivism is apparently alive and well. However, I think the result in Moore should be seen as evidence that liberalism is gradually gaining in the bush. The lesson here may be that if we live for ever we will eventually see the farming communities believing in free enterprise.

The big Greypower vote must be interpreted as the electorate saying to both major parties, "You are unsatisfactory". The large informal vote has also been interpreted this way by Professor Geoffrey Bolton. His argument was that if the informal vote were accidental, rather than intentional, then it would not have been concentrated in Labor city electorates, unless Labor city voters are also less interested or less intelligent than Liberal country voters. He thought that unlikely. I draw no conclusion on the point, but observe that, if the Labor vote is in fact less interested, the Liberal's affection for compulsory voting is not only illiberal but it also makes no selfish sense.

The issues: If Labor wins it will be in spite of W.A. Inc. They could not have won if they had not many times during the campaign promised that "W.A. Inc. is dead". Neither could they have won if they had not blamed ex-Premier Burke, now safely removed to Ireland, for its excesses. Minister Bob Pearce, who is the sort of decent human being who would worry about such things, made plain on television during the count that he felt the ALP approach to the campaign had been unfair to Mr Burke's reputation. In view of what happened after Burke left, I couldn't agree with him more.

And they could not have won if all the facts of W.A. Inc. had been widely known. Theories about media conspiracies, popular among activists in both parties, are nearly always nonsense, but the way *The West Australian* relegated some stories than ran on front pages in Eastern States papers to

back pages and beefed up the Labor Party probably affected the outcome. Why was there little serious investigative journalism inquiring into W.A. Inc? *The West* is owned jointly by the State Government and the biggest W.A. Inc player, The Bond Corporation. Newspaper proprietors are entitled to be as partisan as they please. Indeed, as demonstrated by *The Age* newspaper's support for Federation, much good can come of campaigning newspapers. They should not, however, be owned by the government and governments ought not get into bed with newspaper proprietors.

Labor has been given a clear message that its unaccountable method of government is not acceptable. If it does not change, then Westminster-style democracy will have been seriously harmed. What is worse, the harm will not be confined to W.A. because other governments, of any political persuasion, might believe that they can get away with such partiality and secrecy. Labor is obliged to purge itself and the civil service and that will require a full and open inquiry into all that has happened---no hiding behind secrecy provisions or narrow terms of reference. It cannot purge itself without political cost.

Mr Dowding claims to have learned his lesson. He may have done so, but he also claims to have already put in place the mechanisms needed to prevent a repetition of W.A. Inc. That is nonsense. He will not, however, control one of the scrutinising mechanisms---the Upper House. It will probably have a Coalition majority. It would then have the capacity, if it has the will, to uncover the improprieties and thus prevent them continuing.

The second big issue of the election campaign was interest rates. Of course, this issue was unfairly hard on the Dowding Government. It was a Federal issue. The lesson here is for Mr. Hawke. He might do better toward the end of the year if he were to rely less heavily on monetary policy and were instead to bring down a cost-cutting mini-budget.

The other important electoral issue was competence. It could be true that Labor Party Ministers are generally brighter than Liberal Shadow Ministers. It could also be, as is widely reported, that the Labor leaders are, in some indefinable way, better. But neither of these factors seems to explain the differences between the parties as well as the tendency of modern Australian governments to use the resources of the civil service for partisan political purposes. The Western Australian Government is said to employ no less than 72 media personnel alone.

If the Dowding Government takes the steps necessary to bring accountability back to government, then a Labor victory will have done Western Australians no great harm. Labor will not, however, wish to restore full accountability to the processes of government, because it won't enjoy restraint on its powers, and because it cannot do so without creating machinery which will reveal its own past errors. Even the need for the accountability machinery will not be apparent to

people unversed in constitutional theory unless the errors are revealed. It will, therefore, need prodding by people with a strong partisan preference for Westminster-style democracy. The Upper House will carry a much greater responsibility than I think its members will appreciate.

Clutching at a straw: on the bright side, the Council's new, more democratic franchise will confer a legitimacy upon it which it has not in recent years enjoyed. There is now no inherent reason why Legislative Councillors should be less effective than Senators and it is to be hoped that their renewed legitimacy will give them the confidence to reveal and recommend.

ENDS