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Labor emerged from the 2007 federal election with an overwhelming victory in the House of Representatives—commanding a substantial majority of some 16 seats over and above the Coalition plus the two Independents. Labor had captured an additional 23 seats across the land and secured swings towards it across all States (although in Western Australia Labor still managed to lose a seat). Prime Minister John Howard’s stunning loss to Labor’s Maxine McKew in Bennelong was a fascinating microcosm of the election, but the result was actually predicted by very few (and turned only on Greens preferences). The ‘battle for Bennelong’ subsequently became the leitmotiv of the election especially as it was only the second time since Federation that a prime minister had lost his seat. At the time, it was widely believed that the 2007 election campaign had become ‘a testing ground for the Liberal leadership team of John Howard and Peter Costello and a proving ground for the new Opposition leadership team of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard’ (Simms 2009a, 2009b). And the Liberals were found wanting by an electorate eager for a change of government.

Labor’s gains in the Senate were more modest, with an additional four seats captured to bring Labor up to 32 seats but still needing the support of the Greens (with five seats) as well as Family First and the Independent Nick Xenophon. New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria divided their six seats between the major parties. In Queensland, Ron Boswell was re-elected on a separate Nationals ticket. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was weaker in South Australia and Western Australia; and the Liberals were weaker in South Australia and Tasmania. Overall, the major-party vote in the Senate was higher than at any time in the preceding decade. In South Australia, an Independent, Nick Xenophon, and a Green, Sarah Hanson-Young, were elected to fill the fifth and sixth quotas. In Tasmania, Greens leader Bob Brown was re-elected, and in the west a Green was also elected as the sixth senator. The Australian Democrats—first formed in 1977 and, at the height of their influence, controlling nine Senate seats—had entirely disappeared.

In office, Labor had attempted an ambitious political and policy agenda (see Aulich 2010; Wanna 2010) driven largely by the somewhat mercurial interests of the Prime Minister and exacerbated by his renowned short attention span.
when dealing with fluctuating priorities. Rudd was accused of not providing a coherent strategy or ‘guiding thread’ to his government (Burchell 2008) and of repeatedly initiating new agendas but then not completing them; he was famously portrayed as a ‘home handyman in a house full of half-finished jobs, while still eager to begin more’ (Phillip Coorey, cited in Marr 2010, 73). Arguably, all first-term governments take time to settle, but not all deliberately crank up the policy expectations as high as did the Rudd Government over its short, two-and-a-half-year lifespan. Rudd made governing a highwire act, with all the risks associated with such performances.

After being commissioned in December 2007, Labor’s unique challenge once it settled into office was to manage its escalating policy commitments whilst facing the sudden onset of the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008–09. Two timely stimulus packages injecting about $60 billion in three successive tranches were critical in maintaining effective demand and reassuring business and consumer confidence. But once the eye of the crisis passed, Labor found itself with substantial deficits (almost $85 billion over two years, meaning no new money for programs) and mounting debt levels of up to $365 billion. Some stimulus injection programs with a ‘long tail’ were compromised in implementation, including the $2.7 billion home insulation program, the green loans program, and the $16 billion Building the Education Revolution (BER) school infrastructural projects (where value for money was widely questioned). Suddenly, Rudd was being accused of being profligate and irresponsible and of spending for the sake of it by a resurgent Opposition now under its third leader, Tony Abbott. Rudd was also facing political difficulties in getting his carbon pollution reduction scheme (CPRS) into law, being twice rejected by the Senate (at the time it was seen as a ‘manageable stuff up’; Penberthy 2010).

The Prime Minister opted not to call a double dissolution but instead chose to jettison the initiative entirely. By April, Newspoll data indicated that New South Wales and Queensland were ‘turning to the Liberals’ and Labor’s support was ‘fractured’ in Queensland (Shanahan 2010, 1). Labor’s primary vote had fallen to 40 per cent. As Kevin Rudd began the election year of 2010, writing and launching a children’s picture book about Jasper and Abby, the poll ratings for ‘Kevin 07’ began to decline dramatically, never to recover. In contrast, in the first three months after Abbott’s election as Liberal leader in December 2010, the Coalition had ‘picked up support in every mainland State and every age group’ (Shanahan 2010, 1).

When some of Labor’s factional leaders moved against Kevin Rudd in June 2010, an early election was suddenly on the agenda—supposedly to give the new Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, a mandate in her own right; she wanted to be an ‘elected prime minister’. The subsequent election turned into an odd affair, showing that the historic decision (or rash gamble) to replace a first-term prime
minister with his loyal deputy leader was not the circuit-breaker predicted by Labor strategists and some media pundits. Under Gillard, Labor’s primary vote at the election sank to 37.99 per cent—a substantial swing away from the party of 5.4 per cent. This compared with a primary vote of 43.62 per cent for the Coalition even though the conservatives managed only a small positive swing of 1.5 per cent. In two-party preferred terms, Labor nosed in front with just 50.1 per cent to the Coalition’s 49.9 per cent. It was an electoral mauling for both sides of politics, with perhaps only the Greens (recording 11.76 per cent and a 4 per cent swing) and a few Independents emerging as the unlikely winners (and ‘king-makers’).

How well the major protagonists managed the unique combination of events will be answered in the six parts of this book, which draw upon a range of perspectives from a diverse array of experts including some of the actual players in the fray of the battle. There are many questions that inform the in-depth analysis and help explain the unusual outcome. Some of the more thematic and recurring questions are the following.

• Was leadership the pivotal issue in the campaign? (And how did the electorate warm to the first-ever female Prime Minister?)
• How did the change of leadership on both sides of politics (from Malcolm Turnbull to Tony Abbott in the Liberal camp, and from Kevin Rudd to Julia Gillard in Labor’s) influence the campaign and the eventual outcome? (And were the abrupt changes of leadership on both sides unsettling to the electoral nerve?)
• How did the parties gear up for the election and pitch their appeal to voters (especially given that they were seemingly unprepared and without much room to manoeuvre)?
• How did the alleged ‘spoiler tactics’ of Kevin Rudd and his supporters affect the election? (The Coalition maintained a fairly disciplined campaign, in contrast with Labor, which appeared desperate and divided.)
• How did the various States and regions of Australia respond to the political messages of the electoral protagonists (especially given the two-speed economy, changing State political complexions and regional sentiments of neglect)?
• How did the various media, cartoonists and commentators represent the campaign and what was the influence of opinion polls, the diagnoses of focus groups and the hastily organised town-hall meetings on the protagonists and on the sizeable proportion of undecided voters throughout the campaign?
• What happened to the battle over policy ideas in the campaign? (Was the election fought about nothing in particular except for differences over a couple of policy proposals?)
• How did various social movements and sectional interest groups respond to
  the electoral contest fought out between two inexperienced but determined
  leaders?

These questions will be approached in a range of complementary ways by various
authors in each section, as outlined below. Sources will include interviews and
observations; published material, including televised interviews, transcripts of
speeches and published opinion polls, internal party research, the Australian
Election Survey (AES) and aggregate data, including previous results and
census data.

In Part 1, Marian Simms, Rodney Cavalier and Carol Johnson present their
overview assessments of the campaign, including a diary of events, important
time lines and campaign highlights, the perception of a leadership vacuum or
flawed governmental performance, and the ideological contest. They quickly
cut to the essential explanations of why we ended with a ‘caretaker election’
and why a hung parliament resulted from the contest.

In Part 2, focusing on the media coverage, public events and polling, Peter
Chen traces the influence of new social media in reinforcing voting preferences.
Murray Goot tries to explain the incredible accuracy of the opinion polls and
the fact that almost all the reputable polls converged within a very narrow band
of prediction. Geoff Craig records one of the more noteworthy aspects of the
campaign: the resort to impromptu town-hall meetings with non-aligned voters
held in sporting clubs and halls. Haydon Manning and Robert Phiddian present
their selection of the best or most evocative cartoons covering the poll.

Part 3 brings to the fore the perspectives of the campaign directors from the
major parties. Brian Loughnane traces the Liberal strategy, which he considers
stuck to plan and was relatively successful. It managed to harness the strengths
of Tony Abbott while effectively containing his weaknesses, and at the same time
kept the focus on the negative aspects of Gillard’s incumbency. Elias Hallaj from
the ALP recalls how Labor was knocked off its strategy while other distractions
occupied centre stage and were hard to budge. These distractions included the
early phoney campaigning that was seen as too dull and stage-managed (leading
to the release of the ‘Real Julia’), the damage of the ‘leaks’ to Labor’s message,
the distraction of having the former Prime Minister gain considerable media
attention, and the final ‘end run’, which descended into meaningless gimmicks.
Andrew Bartlett explains the Greens’ campaign strategy as focussed on the
Senate and on developing a strong base vote across a number of seats, notably
Brisbane, not just a Senate plus Melbourne approach.

Nine chapters in Part 4 discuss the detailed campaigns and results in the six
States and two Territories, plus a special examination of the rural and regional
dimensions of the campaign. Labor managed to attract swings towards itself
in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania; the Coalition received significant swings towards it in Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and a small increment in the Australian Capital Territory. In the important measure of changing seats, the Liberals won 11 from Labor but lost one in Western Australia to the Nationals. Seven of the Liberal wins were in Queensland seats, two in New South Wales and one each in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Labor lost 13 seats (11 seats net), 11 of which were lost to the Liberals, and one each to an Independent (Andrew Wilkie in Dennison, Tasmania) and the Greens (Adam Bandt in Melbourne, Victoria). Labor also won three seats, all from the Liberals: two in Victoria and one in New South Wales. The Nationals won one seat from Labor and one from the Liberals (O’Connor in Western Australia), but lost one to the Independent Robert Oakeshott (a former NSW Independent and National Party MP) who had captured Lyne at the by-election of September 2008. Four seats were retaken by former members who recontested (Ross Vasta, Teresa Gambaro and Warren Entsch in Queensland and Louise Markus in New South Wales). Interestingly, the swing against Labor was greater in the metropolitan seats than in the non-metropolitan ones, while the Liberals and Nationals largely held their own.

In Part 5, we examine a selection of important policy areas and issues, including: gender issues, immigration and ethnic influences, the economy through the eyes of business and the unions, the environment, and finally the significance of religion in the campaign. Overall in the 2010 election, gender was a factor in the debates due to Julia Gillard being Australia’s first woman Prime Minister, and because Tony Abbott was often perceived as having a ‘problem with women voters’ (Shanahan 2010, 1). Immigration and refugees featured in the discourses and in the Coalition’s advertising, and Gillard was forced to commit to getting tougher on boat people if not stopping the boats entirely. The ‘boats’ issue was one that Labor was perceived as having difficulty managing. The unions and business groups played a lesser role in the 2010 election than in the 2007 ‘WorkChoices’ election, and religion and the environment were more muted than they had previously been.

The final section, Part 6, commences with an assessment of the electoral results in historical perspective, comparing the close result in 2010 with the similar outcome in 1961. Malcolm Mackerras traces the detailed results according to the seats won and lost, commenting on the pattern of seats to change hands in both directions that has generally applied since 1972. He analyses the representational patterns in the Senate where the larger parties are over-represented. Clive Bean and Ian McAllister’s chapter presents the findings of the 2010 AES, and the key features were that Labor’s support had dropped off with the old and the young, and that the economy was the most significant issue across the board. Traditionally, Labor had scored well with young voters but in 2010 it was losing
them to the Greens. Finally, Brian Costar describes the 17 days it took to form a minority government, between 21 August and 7 September. He recounts the pork-barrelling, the deals and negotiations, and the limited reforms proposed to parliamentary procedure. He also briefly canvasses the stability and likely longevity of the minority Gillard second government.

Julia Gillard had wanted to be an ‘elected prime minister’, yet she led Labor into minority government—interestingly, with one seat less than the Coalition parties. The primary vote of Labor, as incumbents, collapsed to 37.99 per cent, sinking back to the poor results it had achieved in Opposition in 2001 and 2004. Yet, as Paul Kelly (2010, 1) reminded his readers immediately after the election and while the final results were still unclear, the critical issue in determining government was seats, not votes. In this respect, Gillard’s achievements in cobbled together a disparate group of one Green, two rural ‘mavericks’ and the enigmatic Andrew Wilkie cannot be underestimated. The Greens victory in Lindsay Tanner’s vacated seat of Melbourne was a historic win as no minor party had previously achieved a breakthrough into the House of Representatives at a general election in the post–World War II era.

The Gillard Government has been in office for just over a year and, despite media reports of backbenchers—on both sides—feeling left out and apparently envious of the ready access accorded to the Independents and the Greens, the governing arrangements appear stable. One of the reasons Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott gave in supporting a Gillard government was that in their opinion it was more likely to deliver stability and integrity. But there are difficult days ahead for Prime Minister Gillard, not least in terms of securing budgets, getting contentious policies adopted by the legislature (such as a carbon reduction tax, the Murray–Darling Basin plan, flood levies, the new resource tax and tax reform more generally), and all the while managing Labor’s nervous caucus. Her forays into international relations might assist her to develop a more rounded image as a national leader, but she will have to deliver on the domestic front to win plaudits and keep her opponents at bay. Her principal opponent, Tony Abbott, remains trapped in the politics of adversarial campaigning, looking to oppose the government on almost every issue. Even though the next election is not due until 2013, it is beginning to look likely that the next election will be a rerun of 2010, even if the results next time around might play out differently.
1. The Caretaker Election of 2010: ‘Julia 10’ versus ‘Tony 10’ and the onset of minority government

References

Aulich, Chris. 2010. ‘It was the best of times; it was the worst of times’. In Chris Aulich and Mark Evans (eds). *The Rudd Government*. Canberra: ANU E Press.


