19. Western Australia at the Polls: A case of resurgent regionalism

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The 2010 election affirmed Western Australia’s recent status as a conservative heartland State and one of the ALP’s most unforgiving electorates. A significant swing was recorded against the ALP (–5.6 per cent), the severity of which can be largely attributed to the Federal Government’s proposed mining tax. Labor’s failure to assuage local concerns about this impost and the Liberals’ deft exploitation of the issue served to reignite the anxieties of WA voters about Canberra’s centralist ambitions and lack of responsiveness to State concerns.

The Election Context: It’s the mining tax, stupid!

It was inevitable that Canberra’s proposed resource rent tax on mining would prove a highly contentious election issue in Western Australia, which has a local economy heavily dependent on the wealth generated by mining activities in the State. A Newspoll conducted in June 2010 revealed that West Australians were more hostile to the tax than their counterparts elsewhere (Shanahan 2010). Voters in Western Australia’s marginal electorates were not only less convinced that the tax would deliver any economic benefits but also more apprehensive about its negative effects on the economy.

While the announcement of the mining tax compromised Labor’s electoral prospects in Western Australia, it presented its Liberal rivals with unexpected fundraising opportunities. In mid-May, the Liberals were reported to have sent hundreds of letters to various mining companies seeking a financial contribution for a marginal-seats campaign to fight the tax—a request to which the mining chiefs willingly acceded. The Liberals also received significant indirect campaign support from the mining industry. One of the more persistent opponents of the Gillard Government’s policy was Andrew (Twiggy) Forrest, the CEO of the Perth-based Fortescue Metals Group, which led the push for a resumption of an advertising campaign against the proposed tax.

The anxiety the mining tax generated in Western Australia was symptomatic of deeper concerns held by its residents. The Rudd/Gillard Government’s poor management of the issue reignited longstanding grievances about the failure
of those situated east of the Nullarbor Plain to appreciate the State’s unique circumstances and its fiscal contribution to the federation. In February, the Grants Commission announced that Western Australia’s share of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) would be reduced from 8.1 per cent to 7.1 per cent of the estimated GST revenue for 2010–11 (The Australian 2010). In April, Premier, Colin Barnett, refused to relinquish one-third of the State’s GST revenue ($350 million) that was part of a proposed federal–State arrangement for funding a national health and hospitals network. Barnett—who alone of the premiers refused to agree to the deal—justified his decision on the grounds that it would ‘jeopardise the future autonomy of Western Australia to manage its own finances’ (Maher 2010). Matters were little assisted by the Rudd/Gillard Government’s decision to reopen the Curtin detention centre and to send asylum-seekers to the remote outback town of Leonora, prompting complaints from the Premier about the lack of consultation from his federal counterpart.

The Parties and their Campaigns

Coming into the election, the ALP held only four of the State’s 15 lower-house electorates. Of these seats, two were especially vulnerable: Gary Gray’s seat of Brand, which was home to a significant number of fly-in and fly-out mine workers, and Sharryn Jackson’s seat of Hasluck, which contained one of the highest concentration of mining employees in the country. It seemed that federal Labor had all but conceded Western Australia even before the commencement of the campaign. In spite of regular visits by Gillard to Western Australia, the ALP appeared to focus most of its campaigning elsewhere. For its part, State Labor managed to contain much of the intra-party factional rivalries that had destabilised previous federal campaigns (Miragliotta and Sharman 2009).

While the ALP concentrated its attentions and resources on the more populous States of New South Wales and Queensland, the Liberals ran a disciplined local campaign that spoke directly to the concerns of WA voters. Its ‘cash cow’ advertisement reinforced fears that federal Labor was using the State’s mineral wealth to underwrite its profligate spending initiatives. The Liberals’ campaign was further enhanced by the party’s incumbency at the State level, and the popularity of its premier.

The only irritant for the Liberals was The Nationals. The relationship between the parties has a long and fractious history in Western Australia. In 2006, The Nationals formally dissolved their coalition arrangement with the Liberals (Phillips and Kerr 2007, 310), although they agreed to support their former alliance partner in a minority government at the State level. The Nationals’ decision to terminate the coalition, along with their successful negotiation of
the ‘royalties for the regions’ scheme, served to reinvigorate the party’s electoral stocks at the 2008 State election. Against this backdrop—and the absence of a coalition agreement that would ordinarily have prevented The Nationals from contesting Liberal-held seats—The Nationals fielded four House of Representative candidates, which was their largest contingent since 2001.

But it was The Nationals’ decision to contest Wilson Tuckey’s seat of O’Connor that proved most contentious, especially in light of a redistribution that had reduced the Liberals’ margin in that electorate from 16.6 to 12.8 per cent. In a replay of previous campaigns, O’Connor became the flashpoint of disputation between the parties (Miragliotta and Sharman 2005). Tony Crook, The Nationals’ candidate, exacerbated hostilities by announcing that, should he be elected, he would not align himself with the Coalition in the federal party room. A war of words erupted between the parties, with two prominent Liberal backbenchers charging that the WA Nationals were ‘feral’, while The Nationals’ WA President countered by accusing the Liberals of putting politics ahead of the interests of regional voters (Jerga 2010).

For the Greens, the federal election began under less than propitious circumstances. In May, the Greens’ first elected representative to the Legislative Assembly, Adele Carles, resigned from the party following disclosure of an affair with Troy Buswell, a high-profile and controversial minister in the Barnett Liberal minority government. Carles claimed that she had been forced to reveal the relationship under pressure from two of her colleagues—a circumstance that Carles declared had made it untenable for her to remain in the party (Thomson 2010). But the Greens’ swift treatment of the matter appeared to suppress any negative publicity, with polling conducted in August showing that the party’s support was at 14 per cent.

The Results

The ALP attracted 31.2 per cent of the State-wide primary vote in the House of Representatives—the lowest vote recorded against the party in any State or Territory. Its vote share fell to a historic State low: the lowest primary vote that has been recorded for the ALP in Western Australia at a House of Representatives election since Federation. Similar declines were recorded in its two-party preferred vote, which fell to 43.6 per cent (–3.2 per cent). Nor could the ALP take any comfort in its Senate result. A swing of 6.3 per cent was registered against the ALP, although it did manage to secure two of the six Senate vacancies. The ALP’s share of the first-preference vote in the Senate fell to 29.7 per cent—the second-lowest Senate vote ever recorded for the ALP (the lowest was 19.5 per cent in 1901).
As a result of the collapse in its primary vote, the ALP failed to win a lower-house seat on first-preference votes. The preferences of Greens voters ensured the re-election of Gray in Brand, Parkes in Fremantle and Stephen Smith in Perth, but were insufficient to prevent the loss of Hasluck or to enable Labor to claim the potentially winnable seats of Canning and Swan. The only seat in which the ALP increased its primary vote (by 3.5 per cent) was in Canning. Labor’s strong showing in Canning can be attributed to its star recruit, Alannah McTiernan, a former high-profile minister in both the Gallop and Carpenter State ALP administrations who had resigned her safe State seat of Armadale to contest Canning against controversial Liberal incumbent Don Randall.

The Liberal’s performance in Western Australia was mixed. The Liberals won 47 per cent of the State-wide share of the primary vote in the House of Representatives and regained the seat of Hasluck—a historic event as their candidate, Ken Wyatt, was the first Indigenous person to occupy a seat in the House of Representatives. But the Liberals achieved only a slight bounce in their primary vote (0.7 per cent) and swings were recorded against their candidates in Canning (–2.2 per cent), Hasluck (–1.4 per cent) and Pearce (–0.3 per cent). The Nationals won O’Connor, despite the Liberals investing heavily in their campaign to retain the seat (–10.4 per cent). Further, a swing was registered against the Liberals in the Senate (–3.23 per cent), although they easily attained the necessary quotas to claim three seats.

The Nationals celebrated their best election outcome in more than 30 years, even if the overall increase in the State-wide share of their lower-house primary vote was comparatively small (2.4 per cent). The party achieved a strong result in Durack (formerly Kalgoorlie), gaining 17.7 per cent of the primary vote. They recorded their best result in the seat of O’Connor, where The Nationals won 28.9 per cent of the first-preference vote (a gain of 19.7 per cent) and won the seat with the assistance of ALP preferences; this was the first WA Nationals member elected to the House of Representatives since 1972. But in the Senate, the party’s performance was lacklustre; while The Nationals benefited from the swing against the Liberals in the Senate, they still gained only 3.4 per cent of the primary vote.

The Greens continued to strengthen their support in Western Australia, attracting 13.1 per cent of the State-wide first-preference vote—the third-highest State-wide vote attained by the Greens at this election. The Greens recorded increases in all 15 lower-house seats and, in 10 of these seats, the party managed to gain more than 10 per cent of the primary vote—an outcome assisted by them drawing the number-one position on eight of the 15 lower-house ballot papers. The party’s solid performance in the House of Representatives was mirrored in the Senate. The Greens attained 14 per cent of the vote and recorded a 4.7 per
cent increase in their vote share, only narrowly failing to re-elect their number-one Senate candidate on a full quota. The result confirms that Western Australia is one of the Greens’ most reliable strongholds.

There was the usual assortment of Independents and small parties contesting the election, although 33 fewer than in 2007. Family First fielded candidates in 14 of the 15 lower-house seats, managing to attract 1.7 per cent of the first-preference vote. Although Family First achieved a swing of 0.5 per cent, the party’s poor result might suggest it has exhausted its electoral appeal. The Australian Democrats managed to organise candidates for the Senate contest but attracted only 0.4 per cent of the primary vote.

Conclusion

The WA branch of the ALP paid a high price for the failure of its federal counterparts to address local concerns about the proposed resource rents tax. Not only had federal Labor failed to consult the State branch prior to the announcement of the proposed tax, it had also issued a directive to its candidates to not speak about the levy. Instead, the ALP campaigned on the threat of a return to the unpopular WorkChoices policy under an elected Abbott government—a campaign that had failed to resonate with WA voters in 2007. In the aftermath of the campaign, one senior WA Labor member condemned the federal office’s excessive reliance ‘on a set of political clichés’ and directives from ‘Sussex Street [in Sydney]’ (Parker 2010).

The ALP’s poor result cannot, however, be attributed solely to its mismanagement of the mining tax. Over the previous two decades, the ALP’s electoral record in Western Australia at both House of Representatives and Senate elections has been one of persistent and long-term decline in its primary vote. Since 1990, the ALP’s State-wide share of the primary vote has not exceeded 40 per cent—down from 47.5 per cent in 1987—and it has not achieved a majority of the two-party preferred vote since 1987 (50.9 per cent).

Some of this loss of support can be traced to the rise in popularity of the Greens, but the WA trend also affirms that State’s economic and political differences have effects on the outcome of federal electoral contests. When writing on the condition of Australian federalism in the 1970s, Epstein noted that Australia’s social and cultural homogeneity might weaken the structural basis of its federal system but that the ‘outlying states’ possessed ‘distinctive economic interests’ that could provide the basis for ‘centre–periphery conflict’ (1977, 2–3). It seems that Epstein’s observations remain valid and that Australia’s State and Territory political communities continue to respond in ways that reflect their differing histories and socioeconomic concerns.
Table 19.1 Results for the House of Representatives, Western Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>First-preference vote (%)</th>
<th>Two-party preferred (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
<td>47.02 (+0.71)</td>
<td>56.41 (+3.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>31.18 (−5.62)</td>
<td>43.59 (−3.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Greens</td>
<td>13.13 (+4.21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Nationals</td>
<td>3.58 (−2.44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family First</td>
<td>1.72 (0.51)</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3.36 (−2.25)</td>
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Table 19.2 Results for the Senate, Western Australia

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Party</th>
<th>First-preference vote (%)</th>
<th>Quotas</th>
<th>Seats</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
<td>42.99 (−3.23)</td>
<td>3.0092</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>29.70 (−6.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Greens</td>
<td>13.96 (+4.66)</td>
<td>0.9774</td>
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<td>The Nationals</td>
<td>3.43 (−1.99)</td>
<td>0.2401</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family First</td>
<td>1.15 (−0.29)</td>
<td>0.0808</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Democrats</td>
<td>0.38 (−0.67)</td>
<td>0.0268</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

References


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