

New South Wales Election 2003

On 22 March 2003 the people of New South Wales voted for a new parliament.

The Legislative Assembly

A Re-run?

In many ways the election was a re-run of the election held in Victoria just 16 weeks before:

- a Labor government's popularity had remained solid since the previous election
- a popular, but policy-cautious premier retained a high degree of community support
- the Liberal Party had undermined, then replaced, its leader relatively late in the parliamentary term
- the National Party was under pressure to retain its seats
- the Greens seemed likely to strip votes from the major parties
- the Liberals attempted a scare campaign largely based on law and order issues.

The Campaign

According to Newspoll, at the time of the overthrow of Kerry Chikarovski as Liberal leader in March 2002 the Coalition held a one percentage point lead over the ALP.¹ Until the end of 2002 there was never more than a three point margin between the parties.

By the time Premier Bob Carr had begun his campaign, however, a five point gap had opened up, and from January to polling day the margin between Labor and Coalition was never less than nine percentage points. Labor's campaign reinforced the government's standing, with Carr

dominating the government's efforts—as modern premiers do.

A great deal of the Liberal focus was on law and order issues, but leader John Brogden spoke of his difficulty in 'getting the message out'. This was said to be at least partly due to the way in which conflict in Iraq had pushed election news from the front pages. The Coalition also attacked Labor's spending on the campaign, claiming that although the Coalition won the 'grass roots' campaign, the ALP had won the 'advertising campaign'.²

The Election Outcome³

The table overleaf shows that the major party vote barely moved from the previous election. The Legislative Assembly contest was remarkable for the lack of change to party numbers:

- Labor won Camden and Monaro, but lost Clarence and South Coast
- the Liberals won South Coast, but lost Camden
- the Nationals won Clarence, but lost Monaro and Tamworth
- an independent won Tamworth, taking the number of independent MPs to six.

Explaining the Result

Premier and Government

One set of Newspoll figures may go some distance to explaining the result of this election. Throughout 2002 the approval rating for Carr remained comfortably over 50 per cent. This climbed during the campaign to peak at 66 per cent on the eve of polling day. The popularity of many premiers

declines the longer they stay in office, but so far Carr has been able to avoid this. According to former Liberal leader Peter Collins the Premier has been able to 'rust himself' onto the State's voters.⁴

The high standing of the Premier was no doubt important, but it is likely that his government's standing also played a part in the outcome. In the months prior to the election the Labor Government received poor press over such matters as railway security, train accidents, the Callan Park redevelopment, a flawed land tax system and disputed decisions over school closures. Despite this, the Coalition was never able to convince a significant number of voters that it could do better. In fact, it can be argued that it was immaterial who held the Liberal leadership, so settled was the government's position once the campaign began. State governments tend to be hard to defeat, and the Carr Government is proving to be no exception. The fact that Labor has governed NSW for about 70 per cent of the time since 1941 suggests an inbuilt party advantage as well.⁵

Liberal Leadership

On Channel 9's election night coverage, a prominent Liberal, Michael Kroger, criticised his party for its tendency to tear itself apart over its state leaders. Kroger believed that this severely weakened Liberal chances of breaking Labor's control of government at this level.

At the time of Chikarovski's overthrow her party was rating at

38 per cent; at the time of the 2003 election, the Liberal figure was nine percentage points lower. Brogden's own approval rating had reached a respectable 44 per cent, but this had only impacted on the party's standing prior to the election. It is difficult to sustain the case that the new leadership benefited the party. Having argued publicly for three years over the leadership without making a change, the Liberals might have done better to retain Chikarovski, making a leadership change after the election.

Deciding Early?

The standard view used to be that election campaigns made little overall impact on election results. Voters, it was said, tended to make up their minds well before the start of the campaign period.⁶

In recent years the view has switched to one that states that a great many votes are to be picked up on polling day. The campaign period is therefore likely to be crucial to the outcome. This is a view expressed particularly by journalists and party officials.⁷ It was implicit in the Coalition's

claims that Labor had effectively 'bought' the NSW election and that it was only a lack of clear media air that stood between John Brogden and victory.

In fact, so marked was the drop in support for the Liberals prior to the election that it seems as if this election fitted the earlier theory. That is, the electorate had decided the result of the 2003 election before the campaign had begun, with the campaign itself being irrelevant.

The Future

Many marginal Labor seats are now safer for the party. Much has been made of Labor having thus given itself a greater 'buffer' to protect against a loss of support in the next election.⁸

In fact, a redistribution of seats must occur prior to the next election, so that the extent of Labor's 'buffer' remains to be seen.

The Legislative Council

Twenty-one seats were contested for the upper house:

- Labor won an extra 2 seats giving it 18

- the Coalition's numbers were unaltered at 10
- the Greens won two seats
- One Nation failed to win a seat
- former One Nation leader, Pauline Hanson, stood on a separate ticket but was unsuccessful
- the Australian Democrat vote fell to a negligible 1.6 per cent and the party failed to win a seat
- the Christian Democratic Party and Shooters Party each won a seat.

Labor is therefore in a stronger position in the upper house than before the election. Instead of needing six votes to pass legislation, it now needs four: the three Greens and one Australian Democrat being sufficient for the government's purposes.

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Legislative Assembly	ALP	Lib	NP	Green	Other
Votes (%)	42.6 (+0.4)	24.9 (+0.1)	9.7 (+0.8)	8.3 (+4.4)	14.5 (-5.7)
Seats won (change)	54 (-)	20 (-)	12 (-1)	-	6 (+1)

Legislative Council	ALP	Lib/NP	AD	Green	Other
Votes (%)	43.5 (+6.3)	33.3 (+5.9)	1.6 (-2.4)	8.6 (+5.7)	14.6 (-17.8)
Seats won (change)	10 (+2)	7 (-)	-	2 (+1)	2
Total seats	18 (+2)	13 (-)	1	3	7

Source: A Green, '2003 New South Wales Election—Preliminary analysis'

Endnotes

1. For these and other Newspoll figures, see <http://newspoll.com.au>.
2. S. Gibbs, 'Bruises and lipstick all Brogden has to show', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 2003.
3. The figures come from A Green, '2003 New South Wales Election—Preliminary analysis', <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/parliamentaryservices>. They do not include figures for Londonderry, for which a by-election was called due to the death of a candidate on election day.
4. Q. Dempster, 'The cult of personality', <http://www.abc.net.au/public/s815675.htm>.
5. There have been only seven one-term State governments in the last 50 years. None has been in New South Wales.
6. For example, D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, ANUP, Canberra, 1977, p. 256.
7. For example, L. Crosby, 'The Liberal Party', in J. Warhurst and M. Simms (eds), *2001: The Centenary Election*, UQP, St Lucia, 2002, p. 123.
8. A. Green, 'Surface calm masks the currents flowing Labor's way', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 April 2003.