



## New South Wales election 2007

### Introduction

Nine days before the NSW election of 24 March 2007, an accident on the Sydney Harbour Bridge left an estimated 35,000 rush hour train commuters stranded for many hours. It was the latest in a number of serious transport problems in the capital.

Australian state and territory election arguments revolve around the issue of whether or not services are provided—and perform adequately. During 2005–2006, Newspoll had Labor trailing the Coalition parties, pointing to community unhappiness in a state with a host of government service delivery problems. Despite this, the Labor Government won a comfortable electoral victory, with the issue of poorly-performing State services clearly not persuading enough voters to support the Opposition parties. What brought enough voters back to Labor's side for it to win? Why were its opponents unable to capitalise on voter frustration?

### Changing leaders

On 3 August 2005 Morris Iemma replaced Bob Carr as Premier. Labor's leader since March 1988 and Premier since April 1995, Carr had recently celebrated the achievement of the longest continuous term as the State's Premier. Opinion polls had suggested his continuation in office was hurting his party, and his departure was seen as a necessary first step in the reinvigoration of the ALP.<sup>1</sup>

Less than a month later the Liberal Party had to cope with Liberal leader John Brogden's resignation and attempted suicide, and the election of his successor, Peter Debnam. Some journalists surmised that the Liberal Party's electoral chances were 'all but written off', reflecting a belief that the Coalition's opinion poll lead, that had opened up prior to Brogden's resignation, might not be maintained.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, for a time it seemed that a significant number of voters were prepared to give the new Liberal leader a chance to prove that he and his party were ready to assume office. Two Newspolls on either side of Christmas 2005 had the Coalition at 43 per cent and the Government nine points in arrears. The Coalition was also ahead on the two-party preferred vote.<sup>3</sup>

### A government in trouble?

The Government had many well-publicised difficulties to deal with. Among the more prominent were the apparent failure to tackle the water crisis, the refusal of motorists to

use Sydney's Cross-City tunnel, riots in Redfern, Cronulla and Dubbo, rail problems flowing from the Waterfall and Glenbrook accidents, increasingly clogged Sydney roads, and the ailing state economy. As a critic noted just five weeks from polling day: 'It is hard to make a case that this is a government that deserves to be re-elected'.<sup>4</sup>

The Government had also been embarrassed by various of its ministers. In October 2006 Carl Scully resigned his Police portfolio, admitting that he had twice lied to Parliament in relation to a police report into the Cronulla riots of 11 December 2005. Soon after, Kerry Hickey (Local Government) admitted to four speeding charges, including three with his official car, and Milton Orkopoulos (Aboriginal Affairs) was charged with thirty drug and child sex offences.

### The size of the Coalition hurdle

Although the Government was unpopular, the magnitude of the task facing the Coalition parties was immense. Labor held 55 of the 93 seats, the Liberals held 19, the Nationals held 12 and there were seven independents. The Opposition's chances of winning the required 16 seats to gain a Legislative Assembly majority were low, due to there being relatively few marginal Labor seats. It would require an extremely unlikely swing of twelve per cent for the Coalition to be able to govern in its own right. Senior Liberal MP, Barry O'Farrell, believed the hurdle too high, and suggested that it would take the Coalition at least two elections to win office.<sup>5</sup> Even when the polls were favouring the Opposition, it seemed that the cushion of votes was too great. One private poll in fact reported the Liberals as only likely to win five seats: Tweed, Port Stephens, Miranda, Manly and Pittwater.<sup>6</sup>

The plausibility of the 'win in two elections' forecast was given weight in the polls published in the months after the changes in Labor and Liberal leadership. Despite Newspoll giving the Coalition a first preference lead for much of March-April 2005 to November-December 2006, the two-party preferred figures from mid-2006 began to suggest the improbability of Labor's hold on office being broken.

### Debnam stumbles

At first there seemed to be a respectable degree of support for Peter Debnam, for early 2006 Newspoll approval figures put him within reach of the Premier. Gradually, however, polls began to indicate a growing uneasiness with his performance. This could be seen in Newspoll

findings taken twelve months apart. Debnam's 'satisfied', 'dissatisfied' and 'uncommitted' figures of January–February 2006 were 42–22–36 per cent. Twelve months later they were 29–42–29. This suggested that his drop in standing was likely to hurt his party on polling day. There were many factors, but some were highlighted:

- after the Cronulla riots his call to have 'a couple of hundred Middle Eastern thugs locked up' was criticised<sup>7</sup>
- he was criticised for calling Police Commissioner Moroney a 'clown'<sup>8</sup>
- he was attacked in the media for referring to Minister Bob Debus' claimed sexual involvement with a minor—a claim rejected in a 2003 report,<sup>9</sup> and
- Debnam spoke continually of the 20,000 public servant jobs that his government would axe, but was criticised for failing to give any detail.<sup>10</sup>

### Blocking out the past

Although journalists gave the Opposition little chance of victory, Labor noted that such media views had been held prior to the surprise electoral collapses of governments in NSW and Queensland in 1995, and Victoria in 1999. An early indication of the Labor uneasiness came in mid-2006 with the Premier's demand that the Labor Party's National Executive confirm his hand-picked candidates in the seats of Newcastle, Granville, Parramatta, Shellharbour and Toongabbie. He justified this by speaking of the 'titanic battle' faced by Labor if it was to win the election.<sup>11</sup> Iemma was also reported to be doing all he could to minimise electoral damage, as in his request that the Lane Cove Tunnel not be opened till after the election.<sup>12</sup> The party's perception of its chances seemed typified by some cautious ALP candidates choosing to refrain from mentioning their party in their campaign literature. Carmel Tebbut in Marrickville and Virginia Judge in Strathfield were two examples.<sup>13</sup> Iemma sought political insurance in meetings he held with the seven independent Legislative Assembly members to discuss their likely response to a hung Parliament.<sup>14</sup> With ALP State Secretary, Mark Arbib, expressing his apparent belief that it would be 'one of the closest State elections in recent memory',<sup>15</sup> a three-part strategy was developed.

Firstly, Morris Iemma campaigned as if he led a government that began its term when he became Premier just 18 months before the 2007 election. Iemma's membership of the Carr Government from 8 April 1999 seems never to have been mentioned. Critics derided the strategy as attempting to re-write recent State history.<sup>16</sup>

Another part of the strategy was the effort to soften the Government's image, suggesting that it was led by a Premier who was keen to engage with the community. The party campaign launch—called a 'community gathering'—symbolised this, being a low-key event held at Hurstville Civic Centre with the focus very much on Iemma among

family and friends. According to one journalist, Iemma 'portrayed himself as a family man with the aspirations of ordinary folk', in a way that would resonate with the voters whose support he most needed.<sup>17</sup> Despite the journalist's cynicism, after the election it was reported that Liberal polling had suggested that this 're-modelling' of the Premier had been seen positively by voters.<sup>18</sup>

The Labor Party also broke with precedent and agreed to a debate between the leaders, though the fact it was held very early (16 February) and on a Friday night, suggested a desire to get it out of voters' minds as quickly as possible. The Premier also agreed to appear with his family in an *Australian Women's Weekly* advertisement, as Premier Carr had done in 2003. Overall, the Iemma campaign was much more low-key, and lacking in the usual triumphalism, of a long-term Australian government, typified by its campaign slogan: 'More to do but we're heading in the right direction'.<sup>19</sup>

The third significant part of Labor's strategy was its strong attack on the commercial career of Peter Debnam, accusing him of being a failure as a businessman. Voters were asked to consider that if Debnam could not cope with private business, how could he hope to manage as leader of the largest Australian state? An indication of the impact of the attack was the publication of a letter from Deborah Debnam to the voters in her husband's electorate:

... It is hard to watch when someone you love is vilified in this way and so unfairly in relentless Labor Party advertising, dishonestly attacking his Naval service, business experience and even where we live in this electorate ...<sup>20</sup>

### The Liberal campaign

A challenging party must get its leaders known and respected, have its policies well-publicised and understood, and be seen as preferable to the incumbent government. The Liberal Party failed on all three counts.

A common pattern in state elections is that the Leader of the Opposition is not well-known. Even in the last days of the 2007 NSW campaign, close to one-third of voters seemed not to know much, or have an opinion about, Peter Debnam. This was despite his hard work designed to familiarise him with voters, including visiting 31 electorates in early 2007. Perhaps significantly, however, poll figures indicated that of the voters who did know him, many were dissatisfied with his performance.<sup>21</sup> Some observers believed that the Liberal challenge was weakened by the lack of professionalism in his campaigning, seemingly symbolised by the fact that his three predecessors missed his party launch due to their invitations going astray. Apart from attacking Debus, and the promise to sack 20,000 public servants, Debnam was criticised for:

- his determination to control all aspects of the campaign;

- off-the-cuff remarks such as: ‘Well, our television advertising will start when it starts ... I’ll let you know’;<sup>22</sup>
- the Liberals’ failure to produce an integrated transport policy, combined with Debnam stumbling on his transport costings;<sup>23</sup>
- his introduction of a family who praised his tax-free threshold on investment property, but who were later found to own eight properties between them;<sup>24</sup> and
- providing photo opportunities of himself wearing Speedos—a *Daily Telegraph* editorial asserted that Debnam ‘would do well to spend less time kayaking and more times substantiating his policies’.<sup>25</sup>

The Liberal Party’s concern about Debnam seemed to be shown by a mail-out to 750 000 voters three weeks prior to polling, that lacked an image of the Liberal leader.<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, Debnam had worked very hard in pushing his party’s policies. In January 2007 alone, he released 52 policies in 27 days. This may have been too much, too quickly, for there was little sign that the policies were impacting on voters. It was a reminder of the difficulty that other challenging parties have had in disturbing the place of incumbents in recent Australian elections.<sup>27</sup> The unusually low-key campaign launch, incorporated into a quarterly NSW Liberal Party Council meeting held at Cronulla, presumably did nothing to lift public awareness. A political consultant likened the Liberal difficulty in gaining traction to, ‘a movie that nobody is coming to’.<sup>28</sup>

From all accounts, the Liberal Party struggled financially through the campaign, due largely to a lack of donations from its normal supporters. It was said to be difficult to gain money from business when it was clear that the party was likely to lose the election by a wide margin. Many candidates apparently had to raise most of their funds, with the party focussing its meagre reserves on the battle to win fifteen target seats. If this were not restrictive enough, in mid-campaign it was reported that the party felt the need to redirect scarce funds to marginal Liberal seats that were reportedly in danger of being lost. The lack of money meant that three weeks from polling day Debnam could not confirm the start of the party’s television advertising.

Several writers suggested that voter dislike of the Commonwealth Government’s policies on Australian

Workplace Agreements and on environmental matters hurt the State party’s campaign efforts. Andrew Clennell of the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote of voter dislike of the current Liberal ‘brand’, whether at state or Commonwealth level.<sup>29</sup> The Nationals leader, Andrew Stoner, was sure that the industrial relations issue, ‘the key plank’ of the Labor Party’s ‘scare campaign’, had hurt the Coalition.<sup>30</sup> This was denied by NSW Liberal Senator Helen Coonan: ‘Federal issues are federal issues and State issues are State issues’.<sup>31</sup>

### The Greens

Although the Green vote had hovered between 6 and 9 per cent for some time, the party believed it had a chance of winning the seats of Balmain and Marrickville, and at least one Legislative Council seat.

### The outcome

Despite its vote falling by 3.7 per cent, Labor lost just three seats. The 2005 redistribution had weakened its hold on Murray-Darling which, with Tweed, went to the Nationals. The ALP vote in the Newcastle region fell, with the Liberals winning Port Stephens. The Liberals (+2.2 per cent) also regained Manly and John Brogden’s former seat of Pittwater, both from independent MPs.

Ostensibly, voter concerns about the major parties should have benefited the minor parties, and the Greens in particular. As is the usual Australian pattern, however, voter doubts with one major party simply pushed the typical voter across to its main rival. The final Green vote was just 9.1 per cent, barely an increase on 2003, and matching recent state election figures: WA (7.6 per cent), SA (6.5 per cent), Queensland (8 per cent) and Victoria (10 per cent). Tasmania (16.6 per cent) remains the only state where the party is able to regularly crack the 10 per cent barrier, continuing the frustration for a party unable to take advantage of major party weaknesses.

### Legislative Council

Changes to electoral legislation had made it less likely that micro-parties would be able to win seats in the upper house. The changes meant that registered preference tickets no longer were required, for voters who chose to vote above the line could now allocate preferences among the parties. Accordingly, the 21 seats were shared by just five groups: Labor, Coalition, Greens, Christian Democratic Party (CDP) and the Shooters Party. The

New South Wales Election 2007

Legislative Assembly	ALP	Lib	NP	Green	Other
<b>Votes (%)</b>	39.0 (-3.7)	26.9 (+2.2)	10.1 (+0.4)	9.0 (+0.7)	15.0 (+0.5)
<b>Seats won (change)</b>	52 (-3)	22 (+3)	13 (+1)	–	6 (-1)
Legislative Council	ALP	Lib/NP	Green	CDP	Other
<b>Votes (%)</b>	39.1 (-4.4)	34.2 (+0.9)	9.1 (+0.5)	4.4 (+1.4)	13.2 (+1.6)
<b>Seats won</b>	9	8	2	1	1
<b>Total seats (change)</b>	19 (+1)	15 (+2)	4 (+1)	2 (+1)	2 (-5)

Source: Antony Green, ‘2007 New South Wales Election: Preliminary Analysis’, *Background Paper 2/07*, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service

Government, which suffered a significant drop of 4.4 per cent in its vote, was left three seats short of controlling the Legislative Council, while the Coalition vote was 2.8 per cent less than in the Legislative Assembly contest. The Green vote was probably lower than the party would have preferred, but the party gained its fourth Legislative Council seat. The Australian Democrats' nationwide decline continued with the loss of its single seat.

### Conclusion—the next four years

How might the Labor Government be defeated? Soon after the election, the Liberal Party replaced Peter Debnam with Barry O'Farrell as the party leader. O'Farrell expressed his optimism for the future, describing the party leadership as 'new people and new ideas'.<sup>32</sup> Time will tell whether the new team with its new ideas is able to solve what has become a state Opposition electoral conundrum: how to turn out an incumbent government.

1. 'History to judge Carr's legacy', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 2005.
2. Robert Wainwright, Andrew Clennell and Jonathan Pearlman, 'Bewildered Libs hit rock bottom', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 2005.
3. Newspan, <http://www.newspan.com.au/>.
4. Mike Steketee, 'Iemma in fear of dull blow', *Weekend Australian*, 17–18 February 2007.
5. Anne Davies, 'Why Debnam won't face a challenge before the poll', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 November 2006.
6. Sharri Markson and Linda Silmalis, 'Polls say Libs can only win five seats', *Sunday Telegraph*, 28 January 2007.
7. Andrew Clennell, 'Lock up more thugs, urges Debnam', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January 2006.
8. David Humphries and Robert Wainwright, 'The party that ate itself alive', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2007.
9. Joe Hildebrand and Simon Benson, 'Debus was cleared of claim he paid teen boy for sex', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 November 2006.
10. Joe Hildebrand, 'Liberal costing comes up short', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 2007.
11. 'Iemma's choices get the nod', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 September 2006.
12. Jordan Baker, 'More to do, so wait until the election', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 2007.
13. 'Party's over for team Iemma', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 2007.
14. Andrew Clennell and Jonathan Pearlman, 'Iemma to woo independents over fears of deadlock', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 2006.
15. Linda Silmalis, 'Nats facing big losses in crunch poll', *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 October 2006.
16. Joe Hildebrand, 'Trust me I'm not Bob Carr', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 2007.
17. Damien Murphy, 'Love my family, love youse all', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2007.
18. Humphries and Wainwright, op. cit.
19. 'Credibility sunk without a trace', editorial, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 2007, italics in original.
20. A Personal Message from Deborah Denham, <http://www.smh.com.au/multimedia/2007/national/debdebnam.pdf>, accessed 2 May 2007.

Robert Doyle, Victorian Liberal leader during 2002–06, has been more direct in his comments than O'Farrell. After noting that NSW was 'the one that got away', Doyle has stated that 'three things are crucial' for state oppositions to succeed. First, the leader has to be protected from endless intra-party squabbling, and be out among voters 'talking positives, big issues, constructive ideas and alternatives'. Second, and echoing the Prime Minister's view, the parties must undertake 'the hard policy work' so that something constructive can be offered to voters as the next election looms. Finally, governments must be held to account for their weaknesses and failures, or as Doyle put it: 'work the politics hard'. With the next state election not due until early 2009 in Western Australia, it will be some time before we can judge whether Doyle's advice has been heeded, and if so, whether it bears fruit.

21. Humphries and Wainwright, op. cit.
22. Alan Mascarenhas, 'Day from hell: red-faced leader gets bogged in detail', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 2007.
23. Anne Davies, Alex Smith and Jordan Baker, 'Debnam misses crucial poll bus', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 2007.
24. Alan Mascarenhas, op. cit.
25. 'Polls prove a pox on both houses', editorial, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 2007.
26. Alan Mascarenhas, 'An air of defeat as Mr Fix-it faces off to rival in brochure', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 2007.
27. Scott Bennett, 'Understanding State elections: South Australia and Tasmania 2006', *Research Brief*, no. 17, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2005–06.
28. Ian Kortlang, quoted in Christopher Kremmer, 'The secret life of us', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 2007.
29. Andrew Clennell, 'West urged to slip into something more comfy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 2007.
30. Laurie Oakes, 'Unfair dismissal', *Bulletin*, 3 April 2007, p. 16.
31. Matt Price, 'Libs start federal scare campaign', *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 March 2007.
32. Steven Scott, 'O'Farrell: new people and ideas', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 April 2007.

**Scott Bennett**  
**Politics and Public Administration Section**  
**Parliamentary Library**

*Except to the extent of the uses permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means including information storage and retrieval systems, without the prior written consent of the Department of Parliamentary Services, other than by senators and members of the Australian Parliament in the course of their official duties.*

*This brief has been prepared to support the work of the Australian Parliament using information available at the time of production. The views expressed do not reflect an official position of the Parliamentary Library, nor do they constitute professional legal opinion.*

© Commonwealth of Australia 2007