

# Political Turmoil in Western Australia

PETER WALSH

**I**N the month since the election, the WA Government has been in a state of double denial while wallowing in self-delusion.

Having demonized One Nation for five years and denied its political legitimacy, Labor won the election with the assistance of One Nation preferences. Labor now denies that reality. To acknowledge the truth would cast doubts on the legitimacy of Labor's win. If One Nation is illegitimate, surely a government elected on its preferences must also be illegitimate?

The second denial is that the 1,000-or-so timber workers who will be sacked when Labor locks up all the 'old-growth' forest will not have their lives disrupted. Labor will take care of them.

The dangerous self-delusion is that Labor had a landslide electoral victory. Labor was up against a tired, eight-year-old government weakened not only by internal dissent, but by Premier Richard Court's defence of both an unrepentant Doug Shave (who presided over the finance brokers' scandal), and Bob Blofwitch (who forgot to declare his 84,000 Kingstream shares), while facing an idiosyncratic One Nation decision to direct preferences against sitting members (18 Labor, 35 Coalition). Against that background, polling less than 38 per cent of the primary vote and just over 52 per cent of the two-party preferred, is a mediocre result at best.

At the next election, the Liberals will not be handicapped by Shave, Blofwitch, incumbency or

a treacherous National Party partner. Labor's 32 seats will make it more vulnerable to a preference-against-sitting-member theme. If the Liberals stop squabbling, One Nation's vote holds up and its preferences are reasonably disciplined, Labor could get little more than a twelfth man for a Caucus cricket team after the next election.

During the ABC election night coverage, Gary Gray declared that Labor had won eight seats and the election, four more seats were in

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doubt, and he estimated that six seats would be delivered to Labor with the aid of One Nation preferences. Labor finally won the 32 seats Gray had said it would or might win, but how they were won is in dispute.

The Greens claim that Labor won on their preferences. They would, wouldn't they? They always do. Labor, for reasons given above, endorses that claim, in Kim Beazley's case, with bombast or even hysteria. In *The Australian* (13 February), Dennis Shanahan quoted him saying that it was 'an out and plain simple lie' that One Nation preferences had given Labor its parliamentary majority, and 'the big story is that saving native forests, Independents and Greens put Labor into office'.

## WHAT THE VOTING FIGURES SHOW

In the 32 seats which Labor won, One Nation polled an average 9.9 per cent. The Greens stood candidates in 30 of those seats and averaged 8.4 per cent; the Democrats in 24 seats averaged only 3.3 per cent. The Green vote, adjusted for the six seats without a Democrat candidate, was 8 per cent or less.

More importantly, seven of the seats that Labor won from the Coalition were seats in which the One Nation primary vote was greater than the final two-party-preferred margin. Without a substantial proportion of One Nation preferences, Labor would not have won any of the seven seats, or the election. The One Nation primary vote in the critical seven seats was quantitatively much more important than the Greens'—14 per cent compared with the Greens 8.2 per cent in the six out of seven seats that they contested, or less than 7 per cent overall. They had no candidate in ▶

Geraldton and therefore no preferences to distribute.

The large number of candidates in each electorate, as many as eleven and rarely fewer than six, makes it impossible to identify precisely the final two-party-preferred destination of minor party and independent primary votes. Multiple teams of astute, experienced scrutineers might go close—although at least one serving State MP did not know how to count a preferential ballot—but only the Electoral Commission could do an accurate count. And it doesn't.

Preferences distributed from a candidate eliminated early in the vote-counting are more reliable indicators than preferences from more successful candidates. The primary vote of the last candidate eliminated is diluted by preferences picked up from multiple other candidates on the way through, and is generally less reliable. In five of the seven critical seats, One Nation's candidate was the last to be eliminated; in the other two seats, the last candidates eliminated were respectively a Green and an Independent.

Table 1 below shows Green candidate percentage preference distributions when they were eliminated. Table 2 shows the same for One Nation.

For reasons cited above, these tables should be treated with caution, but they do show that neither Green nor One Nation preferences were

highly disciplined. Greens always exaggerate the impact of their preferences to maximize their policy leverage with the gullible. Labor, especially Geoff Gallop and Co, has adopted a similar self-serving interpretation. Its brilliant green forest strategy was responsible for the win. Like Graham Richardson in 1990.

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#### VICTIMS OF LABOR'S VICTORY

Labor's forest policy will cost 1,000 southwest timber workers their jobs. Knowing that that cannot credibly be denied, Labor denied the problem with specious claims that timber workers could easily be retrained

for jobs in 'value adding' timber products such as furniture and 'ecotourism'. The truth, however, is that:

- The market for quality furniture is quantitatively limited, and that for cheap furniture is already filled by softwood imports from third world countries.
- Even if this were not so, only a reckless investor would sink new capital in a State with a track record of repudiating agreements and contracts. Sovereign risk is too high.
- Not only jobs will be lost. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of people have their life savings tied in logging and transport machinery for which there will be no market.
- Domestic tourism, eco or otherwise, is a zero-sum game. More overseas tourists would be a net gain, but Labor is likely to prohibit the developments that might attract them. A few days before the 'ecotourism' event, in a move designed to appease a tawdry coalition of urban greens and local NIMBYs, Gallop announced that Labor would curb or prohibit the proposed residential/tourist project at Smith's Beach near Yallingup.

On 23 February, Gallop appeared on a Perth ABC talkback programme. A timber worker rang in, asking whether Labor's policy was to log regrowth forests but ban logging in

**Table 1—The Greens\***

Seat	Labor	Coalition	One Nation
Albany	27	10	9
Bunbury	28	18	10
Collie	52	28	19
Geraldton	No Green Candidate		
Roleystone	55	24	19
Southern River	48	26	22
Swan Hills	68	30	-
<b>Average</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>16</b>

\*NB: None of the totals reach 100 because the votes were exhausted. Where the totals are very low, for example, Bunbury, there was a significant independent.

**Table 2—One Nation\***

Seat	Labor	Coalition
Albany	58	39
Bunbury	18	23
Collie	49	48
Geraldton	53	43
Roleystone	55	41
Southern River	14	27
Swan Hills	57	39
<b>Average</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>37</b>

\*As for Note in Table 1.

old-growth forests. When told that this was accurate, the caller said that he was looking, apparently from the Pemberton town site, at degraded old-growth forest with dead trees sticking up all over the place, while across the road there was a beautiful healthy regrowth forest clear-felled about 70 years before. Why not log the old growth and leave the regrowth, he asked?

In reply, Gallop claimed that regrowth forest has less bio-diversity. In fact, despite repeated invitations to do so, nobody has been able to name a single flora or fauna species that has been lost or endangered by more than 100 years of logging and clear-felling.

Gallop was then asked whether he *knew* old-growth forest would die. He evaded the question by waffling on about the prolonged and thorough forest policy discussion held in Labor's Parliamentary Caucus and State Conference, from which the election policy had emerged.

In fact, Gallop's election policy went well beyond what the 1999 Conference had authorized, and the issue has not been debated in Caucus for nearly four years. Not since the matter was adjourned when Gallop appeared not to have the numbers—Malcolm Fraser's trick.

This sordid episode exposes the depths of Labor's intellectual and moral bankruptcy. Gallop would accrue less contempt if he had the honesty to admit that the policy is bereft of scientific, economic or environmental merit, and acknowledge instead that Labor believed it would garner votes from privileged urban greens and forest ferals.

A more widely based example of moral vanity and double standards can be found in the dairy industry. In all of Australia, about 3,000 of the less than 13,000 dairy farmers will drop out of dairying—and be generously compensated with the proceeds of an 11 cents per litre tax on milk. But they will not necessarily drop out of farming. For this situation the 'economic rationalists' are

found guilty by the censorious classes.

In WA alone, Labor's forest policy will have more than 1,000 timber workers sacked. Economic rationalists certainly did not cause that. And the censorious classes care not a fig.

### **FEDERAL IMPLICATIONS**

If the One Nation vote is maintained and its preferences directed against the Coalition, the Howard Government is facing near-certain—and probably overwhelming—defeat. If it refuses to recognize One Nation voters' legitimate grievances and fails to negotiate on preferences, the latter will be directed to Labor.

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The manipulators posing as moral guardians, who conned the Liberals initially, will try to bully them again, by saying that deals with One Nation cost them seats in Bris-

bane in 1998, and will do so again in spades.

That con is flawed. In 2001, Liberals joined in the witch-hunt, ostracized One Nation and lost five of their eight Brisbane seats.

### **THE 'TICK-A-BOX' RORT**

One final feature of the recent election warrants mention here: the distortions which arise from the voting system for WA's Legislative Council.

The Upper House of Western Australia has 34 members elected from four provinces with five seats, and two provinces with seven seats. The electoral system is a debauched variant of proportional representation which delivers disproportionate outcomes and elects candidates who get only 4 per cent of the primary vote.

The Greens and One Nation contested all six provinces. The Greens, with an aggregate 2.9 primary quota (average 0.48) got five seats. One Nation's aggregate 4.8 primary quota (average 0.8) won three seats.

One Nation had well over a primary vote quota in two provinces. Greens did not get above 0.77 primary quota in any province.

Behind this gross malapportionment is the iniquitous 'tick a box' voting system (also used for the Senate) used by 93 per cent of electors, who believed they were voting for the party of their choice, when in fact more than 20 per cent actually voted as decreed by party apparatchiks.

In the agricultural area, 18 per cent of people who believed they voted Labor actually voted Green, and thereby elected a candidate who not only managed to secure a mere 4 per cent of the primary vote but is completely disconnected from the views and beliefs of the people she purports to represent.

*The Hon. Peter Walsh was a WA Labor Senator and Minister for Finance in the Hawke Government.*

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