

2021 WA State Election: A campaign like no other – sandwiched with tactics from previous elections.

By Hon Eric Ripper AM

3 March 2021

Most State Governments win a second term. Their senior ministers are still mentally and physically fresh. Festering problems have been blamed on their predecessors. The upside of their agenda has been announced but any downsides, including the implementation problems, are still to emerge. Meanwhile, on the ground their enthusiastic new MPs have been building their personal votes.

On the other side, many opposition politicians struggle to make the transition from government and to recover political direction, energy and aggression after their loss.

Even before COVID-19, the re-election of the McGowan Government, albeit with a smaller majority, could have been expected.

The pandemic has vastly enhanced the Government's political circumstances in at least three ways. It has created an enormous opportunity to demonstrate competence and leadership and to attract public attention to the performance of the Premier – an opportunity which the Government has fully grasped. Secondly, COVID-19 has provided an alibi for broken promises and disappointed expectations. Finally, it has provided a shield against the politics of emerging issues like public sector fraud or homelessness.

Despite the pandemic's economic impact, many voters are better off than they were in 2017, when the WA economy was in recession. JobKeeper, Federal and State economic stimulus programs, rampaging iron ore prices, a rebound in house prices and the deal on WA's share of the GST are all contributing.

Party campaigns are usually made up of 33 days of policy announcements, which the party attempts to tie into a mutually reinforcing narrative. Journalists see it as their responsibility to disrupt these narratives and to shift the focus to more difficult issues.

This election is different and it's not just the impact of COVID-19. Major policies and party campaign launches have been announced early and at least 70 per cent of the electorate is expected to have voted before 13 March.

The Labor narrative "We're working hard to keep Western Australia safe and strong" or more recently following the short COVID-19 lockdown, "Mark McGowan and WA Labor – Keep WA strong" has resonated with voters. The Liberal narrative has been a mystery.

In an echo of the 2005 election when then Opposition Leader Colin Barnett seized the initiative by announcing his Kimberley water canal proposal, Liberal Leader Zak Kirkup proposed an end to coal-fired power in Western Australia and a huge renewable energy program.

Summing up the reaction to Mr Barnett's 2005 proposal, one of Labor's marginal seat candidates at the time – now the State's Attorney General John Quigley – told me: "Our people love it, but the Liberals think it's dopey". Perhaps Mr Kirkup hoped for a similar reaction from soft Labor voters,

but his energy policy has gone nowhere politically and is increasingly absent from Liberal communications.

In any case, the Liberals have now abandoned any pretence at a positive narrative and have shifted to exhortations to vote Liberal locally and to deny Labor total control of the Parliament.

Initially some commentators described this strategy as unprecedented. In fact, Geoff Gallop's Labor conceded early in the difficult campaign against Richard Court's Government in 1996.

Back then the brunt of the argument was carried by Labor's State Secretary rather than the Leader and the switch was made three days rather than three weeks before the election. Nevertheless, after the election it was the subject of internal recriminations with some Labor politicians arguing that it reduced the party's vote – particularly in the regions where people like to have a voice in the government.

Mark McGowan, who can already claim the biggest victory in the history of the WA State Parliamentary Labor Party, is heading for an even bigger win. The chief risks Labor faces are complacency and voter resistance to giving politicians untrammelled power. As evidenced by their humble reactions to the extraordinarily positive public polling and their reassurances on potentially contentious policies – like electoral reform – party strategists are well aware of these risks.

Those interested in which seats might fall have been watching where the party leaders are campaigning as early voting gathers pace and 13 March fast approaches.

In this regard it has been staggering to see Mark McGowan campaigning in what are regarded as a relatively safe Liberal seats, Bateman and Nedlands. If this is not a feint to spook the Liberals and does in fact represent the real electoral frontline, then Labor's celebrations on election night will be stupendous.

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