

The One That Got Away

DON D'CRUZ

The defeat of the Kennett Government as a result of the Victorian State election of 18 September 1999 surprised almost all observers. A look at how defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory.

IN the aftermath of the 1999 Victorian State election and the inevitable recriminations, much of the blame was placed on the shoulders of the now former Premier, Jeff Kennett. Particularly during his premiership, Jeff Kennett was a larger-than-life figure who dominated his party and the political landscape. This profile made his style of leadership and policies an obvious lightning rod for criticism after electoral defeat.

The Kennett style and policies, however, only partially explain this defeat. A sizeable share of the Kennett loss can be attributed to a poorly, if not ineptly, structured campaign, whose shortcomings were reinforced and magnified by a series of poor tactical decisions during the campaign, and by administrative errors of judgement within the Liberal Party just before the campaign. The election once again proved the old political truism that 'Oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them'.

CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

The Kennett Government strategy relied on calling an early election. With the Premier and the party enjoying a comfortable margin of advantage over Labor, a sizeable campaign war chest, the economy prospering and the mood generally good, the situation seemed right to go to the polls. The timing mirrored the 1996 election in that it was designed to take advantage of the disruptions caused by the sporting events, in this case the AFL finals.

With Labor having just installed Steve Bracks to replace the uninspiring John Brumby, and with Bracks not making headway, the timing was also designed to exploit his lack of public profile. By forcing Bracks to compete with the football finals, it was hoped that the new Opposition leader would be starved of the oxygen of publicity he needed to get his message across.

The Kennett Government felt reasonably confident about running on its record. Aside from the usual problems of all State and Federal governments in

health and education, there was no major issue that threatened to topple the Government. Nor was there any prevailing mood for change.

The Liberals also had one considerable electoral asset—Jeff Kennett. Given the tomes of *post ipso facto* election rationalizations about the Kennett style and the vote, it is all too easy to forget just what a good politician Kennett was. With his colourful persona and capacity to use the media to communicate his message, Kennett was a formidable political weapon.

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The decision to run a very 'presidential'-style campaign was perfectly understandable. The retirement of a slew of senior ministers, most notably Alan Stockdale, was successfully portrayed by Labor as a depletion of talent. This was also not helped by the Kennett style, which seldom allowed his ministers to showcase their talents, leaving most of them with a fairly low public profile.

Most Australian elections are presidential in style. Although Australia borrows its system of government from the Westminster tradition, undue attention has always been paid to the leaders. That the Liberals used Kennett so prominently is hardly surprising. If one goes back over the election, Kennett did

perform competently. Ironically, this disciplined performance may have worked against him when it came to the expectations of the result.

Where the Liberals departed from usual practice was the infamous 'gag'. There is still some doubt as to what this exactly entailed, with some denying any such limitation on Liberal candidates. It has been explained as a 'misunderstanding' by the media. Nevertheless, it seems some sort of directive was issued that did convey the impression that some sort of gag had been imposed.

In the context of modern campaigning, this tactic had an element of logic so as to stay 'on message' and avoid embarrassing gaffes. But it was flawed in its conception and bungled in its implementation. The gag soon became a focus of criticism in a lifeless campaign.

The one serious difficulty that the Liberals faced with their strategy concerned the negative component of their message and overall strategy. At the heart of any campaign is its message. A good campaign message contains two distinct yet complementary parts. The first is the positive component, which is about the party. The second is the negative part, or point of contrast with the opponent.

The previously successful 'Guilty Party' advertisements no longer struck a responsive chord with the electorate. The rush to the polls and a new Labor leader meant that the Opposition presented an extremely small target. It also afforded the Liberals no time to flush Labor out on their policy positions. It seems that there was some difficulty in constructing a compelling negative message for the campaign.

The seriousness of this cannot be overstated, as a significant percentage of the some 20 per cent of the electorate identified by ABC election analyst Antony Green as 'swinging voters' do respond better to negative message appeals.

Labor was faced with the enormous task of reeling in the Coalition's sizeable lead. But the size of Labor's task

was also its greatest asset. As no-one, not even the staunchest Labor supporters, expected a Labor win, the ALP was spared any real scrutiny of its policies and agenda. The gimmick of the 'financial audit' by Access Economics was effective in killing-off any real interest in Labor's policy detail and in keeping the focus squarely on the Government. Neither its policies nor its shadow ministers were really tested. As a consequence, Victoria now has a Labor Government whose policies and agenda are as much a mystery to Victorians as is their frontbench.

Labor waged a fairly strong negative campaign. It was an improvement on their last outing, arguably one of the most inept campaigns in modern Australian politics. It sought to limit key points of differentiation, such as privatization and the Grand Prix, which had borne little fruit and instead concentrated on the issues, such as health and education, that promised greater electoral returns.

EXPECTATIONS MANAGEMENT

Expectations management has become a crucial part of Australian election campaign strategy—for reasons ranging from increased volatility, alienation and distrust (not to mention dislike) of politicians to the system of compulsory voting and the traditional Australian love of the underdog. Today, perceptions of a politician's complacency and smugness can be his or her greatest weakness. Everyone wants to be the underdog.

The failure of the Liberal Party to structure its campaign carefully to allow for this was undoubtedly one of the campaign's great flaws. Ultimately, it may have cost them government.

Kennett did make a practice of warning against complacency and that the election would be close, but they were basically just a few throw-away lines and were contradicted by various Liberal actions. Liberals seemed complacent about the dangers. This is surprising because, with no 'hot button' issues, expectations of a big win were always going to be one of the campaign's major problems.

The entirely wrong tone was set by the Party's State Director, who told journalists at a press conference at the start of the campaign that this was the most sophisticated campaign ever in Australia, if not the world. Given what we now know about the way in which the campaign was planned and implemented, this statement borders on the laughable. But the hubris also reinforced the media's belief that Labor would be battling merely to hang on to its own seats.

The news media are a primary target audience in their own right. The failure to impress upon the media the dangers inherent in such a lead manifested itself more subtly in the way that reporters covered the campaign. It also helped Bracks and Labor avoid any scrutiny—basically, journalists did not consider they were talking to a likely next Premier when interviewing Steve Bracks.

During the campaign, the Liberals made forays into various Labor seats and conveyed the impression that they were seriously targeting them. I'm unsure exactly how genuine these efforts were, or whether they were just a ploy to keep Labor guessing about where to divert its resources, but the effect was damaging to any expectations-management strategy the Liberals might have had.

The absence of advertising to assist with minimizing expectations is one of the more puzzling features of the Liberal campaign. With the opinion polls showing a comfortable victory, the only conceivable bump in the road, barring some enormous gaffe, was always going to be the expectation of an easy Kennett victory. With the warning

about a close result not getting through to the media, advertising was the one communication tool at the party's disposal. But they failed to use it.

The Liberals simply allowed Victorians to give Jeff a bit of a shock, after which he would return, suitably chastened, and govern accordingly. But things went awry.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING

The Liberal Party's advertising (particularly on television) was subjected to intense internal criticism. Many party members felt the advertising was too 'soft'.

The Liberals relied on a combination of positive advertisements where their message was illustrated thematically using various issues. The 'negative' advertisements were implied comparative advertisements where images of Victoria now were juxtaposed with negative images from the Cain-Kirner years. The advertising was implied-comparative because Labor was not mentioned until the very end.

At the State Council meeting following the election, the State Director argued that harsher negative advertising had not tested well with target audiences. Fearing a backlash effect, these commercials were shelved. Given that the Labor Party made themselves a particularly small target, harsh negative advertising was ill-advised. Bracks was an even smaller target. Not only was he pitted against Jeff, but he simply had not done anything significant in his life to use as ammunition. It is an interesting reflection on Australian political life when not having achieved anything in one's life can 'qualify' one for high public office and can indeed be a political virtue.

This still does not totally explain why, in a presidential-style campaign, the Liberals chose not to respond to Labor attacks, particularly on the Premier.

Broadly, the Liberals could have adopted two approaches to combat Labor's attack: a proactive inoculation strategy (that is, a pre-emptive defensive measure used to prepare for known or presumed opposition attacks by raising and framing them first in a manner that may deflect subsequent attacks); or a reactive responsive strategy.

Party strategists probably felt that a proactive inoculation strategy was ill-advised. Any attempt to put an unfavourable issue on the agenda was dangerous as it would give credence to Labor's charges. And any effort to do a



bit of 'backburning' could see such a fire rage out of control with a sudden change of the political wind.

The other broad approach is reactive response, of which there are a number of different modes such as refutation, counterattack, and admission, among others. The reactive response approach was probably the Liberals' best option, but it was not used.

The failure to initiate any advertising to combat the harsh negative content of Labor's was clearly a miscalculation. Kennett was the Liberals' greatest electoral asset, but that image was not unbreakable. It was essential that the Liberals protected their chief political asset, if they were unwilling or unable to do anything to drive up the negatives on Bracks. As the negatives on Kennett increased, the positives on Bracks increased. So much so that, on polling day, Labor supporters were handing out Labor 'how-to-vote' cards and saying Steve Bracks' name instead of the Labor candidate's. The damage to Kennett had been done.

Instead, the Liberals persisted with their positive advertisements but the published empirical evidence supporting the value of purely positive political advertising is not strong. Most of this data comes from the United States where some degree of positive advertising is necessary for name recognition and ensuring voter turnout of supporters. But in Australia, the value of such advertising is considerably less.

In contrast, Labor adopted a form of negative advertising known as direct comparative advertising. In its advertisements, negative messages on health, education and law and order were juxtaposed with a positive grab from Bracks. This solved Labor's problem of raising his profile while, at the same time, delivering a harsh negative message without being labelled as too negative by the media.

THE MARGINAL SEATS STRATEGY

A detailed discussion of the marginal seats campaign is not possible here, but a few of the administrative and tactical mistakes do explain the Liberals' relatively poor showing.

The administrative party errors that cost the Liberals dearly were the decision to preselect candidates relatively close to the election and the decision to divert valuable resources into a number of three-cornered contests.

Generally, three-cornered contests do favour the Coalition parties by in-

creasing their share of the votes. However, the free-for-all that ensued placed tremendous strain on the Coalition partnership. The ferocity of some of these contests got out of hand and fed into Labor's line that the Liberals and Nationals were simply fighting over the spoils of an expected victory.

Preselecting candidates shortly before the election cost the Liberals seats in regional and rural areas, where, unlike their metropolitan counterparts, candidates usually enjoy higher profiles.

Also, for many undecided voters in many of these electorates, the manner in which the candidates address and engage in local issues is as important as any specific election promise. They are looking for a strong local voice that will best represent them in Parliament.

Without candidates in place, the Liberal Party was denied the opportunity to campaign with them well before the election campaign, when the clutter of campaign messages and the cynicism of the electorate are at their highest. It was also impossible to initi-

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ate low- and high-intensity direct voter contact activities due to the absence of a local candidate in many seats.

If one looks at some of the better marginal seat campaigns waged by the Liberals—Leonie Burke (Pahran) and David Lean (Carrum)—the decision to run prolonged grassroots campaigns, as much as a year preceding the poll, illustrated the value of a 'permanent campaign' in limiting the size of any anti-Government swing. Preselected Liberal candidates did not have this necessary advantage.

In contrast, Labor candidates were preselected at least a year in advance and had plenty of time to make themselves known to the local media and public. In seats such as Seymour, this was crucial to the final result.

Finally, a tactical decision to use the gag was received negatively in the

marginals. This was designed to keep MPs' comments to major news outlets to an absolute minimum and keep the focus on the leader—all part and parcel of a presidential style of campaign.

The gag had a number of other unfavourable consequences, besides antagonizing journalists and becoming a distraction in its own right. Aside from being rather insulting to Liberal MPs, given what it implied, it severely undermined the efforts of local MPs and candidates who had worked hard to establish themselves as a strong voice for their local communities. Labor simply portrayed them as muzzled. And it also fed into Labor's 'Restoring Democracy' theme. The image of being muzzled was the most damaging aspect of the gag to local MPs, with the front page of the *Herald Sun* ruthlessly exposing this perception.

POLLING

Following the election, the accuracy of the Liberal polling was also criticized. It is impossible to provide any reasoned analysis without access to it, other than to say that poor polling would partially explain the poor standard of advertising, because good polling is prescriptive not just descriptive. The interactive use of polling and advertising is what modern campaigning is all about. In *The New Machine Men*, Stephen Mills observed that 'separately, each half of the relationship is like a blunt scissor blade'.

So why did it apparently fail? Given that polling is always a closely-guarded secret, it is impossible to say. The review being conducted by past Liberal Federal President Tony Staley might provide some answers.

CONCLUSION

The sense of despair among Victorian Liberals has only intensified since election night with the subsequent heavy defeats in the Frankston East and Burwood by-elections and Steve Bracks flying high in the opinion polls. But what Labor's victory has shown is that things are never irretrievable. And government is never that far away.

The challenge for the Liberals is whether the party that has done so much to reform Victoria to make it competitive and dynamic can do the same to itself.

Don D'Cruz is doing a PhD on communication strategies in Australian elections at RMIT.

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