



Understanding State elections: South Australia and Tasmania 2006

The 2006 South Australian and Tasmanian elections were both held on 18 March 2006. This paper looks at each election campaign and result, and discusses several features which are relevant to the analysis of Australian state elections.

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Executive summary

The 2006 South Australian and Tasmanian elections, both held on 18 March 2006, saw the comfortable return of the incumbent Australian Labor Party (ALP) governments. The two elections had several features which are relevant to the analysis of state elections.

In South Australia, the Labor Government needed to win two additional seats to achieve majority government status. A shift of less than three per cent would achieve this—assuming no seats were lost—and opinion polls showed that this seemed certain.

The Tasmanian Labor Government also looked safe with the only doubt being whether Premier Lennon's team would remain a majority government. Two late-2005 polls had indicated that support for the Government had fallen sufficiently low as to suggest that it might lose control of the House of Assembly. One unpredictable factor seemed to be whether several self-inflicted problems might hurt the Premier's relationship with the electorate.

In both states the Liberal Party seemed unlikely to regain the government benches, despite having sets of policies that earned some media praise. In South Australia, the party held 20 seats and needed only four seats to achieve majority status, but the task appeared beyond it. Polls suggested that even among intending Liberal voters the Liberal leader, Rob Kerin, had a lower standing than did Premier Mike Rann. Although opinion polls suggested that the Tasmanian Liberal Party's vote had improved, it was still said to be 10 per cent behind Labor, and would require a record swing to gain majority status.

Each government was returned, with the ALP winning a majority in each House of Assembly, though in South Australia the Government was unable to turn its popularity into a Legislative Council majority. The Premier has announced a referendum on the future of the upper house to be held at the time of the 2010 election.

The South Australian result was obvious well before the campaign began. By contrast, in Tasmania the three major parties all saw the campaign period as the key to the final result. Labor claimed that its warnings of the probable disasters of minority government were crucial to the final outcome; the Liberals said the same, but described the increase in their vote as a rap over the knuckles for the Government; and the Greens blamed the 'grubbiest, most vicious' smear campaign, run by their opponents and others, for halting their surge to replacing the Liberals as the second-largest parliamentary party. The analysis of many elections in Australia has concluded that most voters have made up their minds about how they will vote well before the commencement of the campaign. If the Tasmanian parties were correct in their analyses, the 2006 election was perhaps unusual in that enough people may have shifted their vote during the campaign period to have significantly affected the final result.

Every state election adds to our understanding of politics in this country. In 2006 the rare occurrence of two State elections being held on the same day—the first such occurrence since

1986—helped highlight certain factors that the two elections had in common. The most obvious was the difficulty that challenging parties have when they attempt to win office.

Opinion poll findings taken between the 2002 elections and the 2006 elections in each state indicated the general public acceptance of work done by the Rann and Bacon/Lennon Governments. This was despite there being a number of areas of administrative controversy, particularly the delivery of health services in both states, as well as the performance of South Australia's electricity service. The fact that the governments' challengers seemed unable to make up ground on such matters, suggested that many voters preferred to stay with the 'devil they knew' rather than to shift to their opponents. This indicates that few voters changed their votes during either campaign.

State/territory administrations typically rely a great deal on the Premier or Chief Minister. As head of the government, as the main spokesperson for that government, and the main focus of attention at election time, the standing of the Premier/Chief Minister is usually central to the standing of the government. In South Australia and Tasmania the polls had indicated since the previous election that the standing of the Labor leaders remained high, even though Paul Lennon had been embarrassed by a number of controversial personal decisions. Leaders of the Opposition can find it difficult to make their mark against such opponents, who, once they are settled into office, are hard to shift.

In 2006 the buoyant national economy seemed to make the re-election chances of the two state governments much easier than might otherwise have been the case. The *Adelaide Advertiser* asked: who deserved credit for a good economy, the state government or the Commonwealth? To an important extent the question was irrelevant. If voters were prepared to reward a government for the economic good times—only 18 per cent of those polled described the Rann Government's handling of the economy as 'poor'—arguments over who should gain the credit were beside the point.

The cards were thus stacked against the two state Oppositions. One might wonder just what, if anything, the two state Liberal divisions might have done that might have produced a different election outcome.

Introduction

Each election is unique, but the 2006 South Australian and Tasmanian elections had several features which were relevant to the analysis of such elections. This paper looks at each of the electoral contests separately, then makes some general observations about state elections in this country.

South Australia

The South Australian Constitution was amended in 2001 to create a fixed term for the House of Assembly. Coming into operation on the first day of the 50th Parliament, elections were henceforth to be held on the third Saturday in March in the fourth year since the previous election. The first such election was therefore to be held on 18 March 2006 for the House of Assembly and half of the Legislative Council. A journalist lamented the passing of an era, claiming that the fixed term meant that the first day after the Premier's traditional visit to the Governor was 'robbed of impact, excitement and policy by the changed nature of South Australian elections'.¹

The state of the parties

In 2002 Mike Rann became the state's 12th Australian Labor Party (ALP) Premier when his party formed a minority government with 23 of 47 seats, though with 3.7 per cent fewer votes than their opponents.² Labor's position was buttressed by their giving the Speakership to an independent MP, and including both an independent MP and the solitary Nationals MP in the Ministry. Remarkably, the Rann Government survived a full term, entering the 2006 contest with 22 seats³, but confident of achieving majority status by winning two additional seats. A shift of less than three per cent would achieve this—assuming no seats were lost. With opinion polls showing Labor about 15 per cent ahead of the Liberals in seats across the capital, its election as a majority government seemed certain.⁴

The Liberal Party held 20 seats and although it needed only four seats to regain office, their task seemed harder than the Government's, for Newspoll had them trailing on first preferences by 11 points in December.⁵ Their leader, Rob Kerin, was well behind Rann in the 'preferred Premier' category—polls suggested that even among intending Liberal voters Rann had a higher standing than did the Leader of the Opposition.⁶

Among the other parties there was interest in the performance of the Family First Party, buoyed by the election of one Senator, and the near election of another (in South Australia) in the 2004 Commonwealth election. Family First had two aims: to support Labor or Liberal MPs who shared its family and religious-based values, and to win a second Legislative Council seat. Party members reportedly believed there was 'a strong possibility' that in doing so the party would achieve the balance of power in the upper house.⁷ In the lower house contest, the party made second preference deals with the Liberals in eight seats, and claimed that its preferences would be 'vital' in two of them—Hartley and Sturt. Family First also

made a Legislative Council preference deal with the ALP, wherein it gave that party its upper house second preferences in return for a conscience vote on the same-sex rights Bill that had stalled in the Parliament in the previous year.⁸

With a 2004 South Australian Senate vote of just 2.4 per cent, the election was expected to confirm the apparent terminal decline of the Australian Democrats, notwithstanding the long-term good health of the party in South Australia.

In the House of Assembly contest, great interest lay in whether the independent MP, Rory McEwen, could retain Mount Gambier in the face of a strong challenge from the Liberal Party which was said to have made local promises estimated to cost \$16 million.⁹ The contest was given extra interest by reports that the editor of Mt Gambier's *Border Watch* had been stood down, apparently because of the newspaper's 'anti-Liberal' stance.¹⁰ Other candidates of interest included Kris Hanna, former Labor member who had retired from the party to sit as a Green in early 2003, now re-contesting Mitchell as an independent, and former football champion, Nigel Smart, Liberal candidate for Norwood.

Among the multitude of Legislative Council candidates were former Speaker of the House of Assembly (2002–05) Peter Lewis, and former Labor MHA, Ralph Clarke, who was calling for the State to purchase back the Electricity Trust of South Australia. Of greatest interest was Nick Xenophon the 'No-Pokies' MLC—would he be returned or not? Neither of the major parties would mourn his defeat.¹¹

Redistribution of seats

Unusually of the states, South Australia's electorates must be redistributed after every election. In the 2002 redistribution, 22 electorates were effectively unchanged, but the chances of the parties in some others seemed to be lessened by the changes, particularly the Liberal Party in Newland, Bright, Morialta, Mawson and Light, and the ALP in Stuart and Hartley.¹²

Stable, popular government

The assumption of office seemed to have turned around voters' perception of the Rann-led ALP. In the year prior to the 2002 election Labor had averaged only 38 per cent in Newspoll returns, trailing the Liberal Party by an average four per cent. The 2002 election confirmed this level of popular support, with the Liberals failing to retain office despite their first preference vote being higher than their challenger's.

Remarkably, these figures had been reversed by the time of the first Newspoll after the election, and this never altered. Between April–June 2002 and January–February 2006 the average Labor opinion poll support was 44.3 per cent, 6.7 per cent ahead of the Liberal Party.¹³ The Government's standing was strengthened by voter satisfaction with the Premier. On the eve of the election, Newspoll was indicating that two-thirds of those surveyed

approved of Rann's performance. Another poll had him over 80 per cent, with Rob Kerin's rating at 40 per cent.¹⁴

The campaign

In a move unusual in state-level elections, the Liberal Party unexpectedly began campaigning on 6 February—40 days before polling day. The party produced a number of policies that earned it some media praise, including a \$3000 grant to first home buyers, land tax cuts and the construction of a four-lane highway to Victor Harbor. Most controversially, there was also the promise to shed 4000 public servant positions so as to slash 'Labor waste'.¹⁵ The Liberals were severely limited by a shortage of funds, and were reported to be sending out pleas for donations—to business interests for cash, and to farmers for grain—to help raise money for the party. The party was said to have been warned two years before of a pending funds crisis, but apparently nothing had been done to avert this.¹⁶

The Government ran a tightly-controlled, apparently error-free, campaign in which few promises were made. As is usual in such contests, the campaign was focused very much on the Government leader: 'Rann Gets Results'. Labor appeared vulnerable in the policy areas of health and electricity—areas where polls suggested they had a satisfaction rating lower than 50 per cent. Despite this, the early Liberal campaigning seemed to have no impact on voters. Labor's strength was three-fold: it had a government that had made few errors, it was governing in a time of economic prosperity, and it was led by a Premier with a high approval rating.¹⁷

The ALP *was* criticised for 'playing the man', with some of its advertisements focusing on the weaknesses of the Leader of the Opposition, but this seemed not to rebound on the Government. When Kerin's wife claimed in a press story that the criticism of her husband was hurting their family, *The Advertiser* simply responded with the headline 'Rob, grow a thicker skin'.¹⁸

Although criticising Labor's policy launch as lacking vision, the Adelaide newspaper had no doubt as to which side deserved public support. It described the Rann Government as having 'much to boast about', including its sound and disciplined economic management, its education, and law and order administration, its refreshing approach to federal relations, and its determined effort to achieve health reform. It was a government which had performed 'consistently well in its four years of power'. By contrast, their opponents had long been exposed as 'lacking stamina, courage, strategy, adequate policies or leadership'. The newspaper was dismissive of the Opposition as having 'left the ball in the locker a long time ago'.¹⁹

House of Assembly result

The ALP Government's consistently high standing in the opinion polls was reflected by a first preference tally of 45.2 per cent, its largest popular vote since the 1985 election. The

vote was 8.9 per cent higher than four years before. The Liberal vote of 34 per cent was the party's second-lowest return since 1950, with only its 1975 vote being lower.

Labor won an additional six seats, giving it a total of 28 in the House of Assembly of 47. The Liberal Party won 15 seats, Karlene Maywald retained Chaffey for the Nationals, and three independents were elected, including Rory McEwen in Mount Gambier, Kris Hanna in Mitchell and Bob Such in Fisher. In Norwood, Nigel Smart almost equalled Labor's first preference vote, but lost comfortably after the distribution of preferences. The Australian Democrats' vote slid further, being 13.5 per cent below its highest House of Assembly vote achieved in 1997. The Family First Party contested all seats (20 more than in 2002), more than doubling its percentage of the vote, with its highest individual vote being the 15.7 per cent in Kavel gained by Tom Playford, son of the former Liberal Premier (1938–65). The Greens also contested all seats (22 in 2002), with a consequential increase in their first preference vote (Table 1).

Table 1: South Australia 2006—House of Assembly

Party	Vote (%)	Swing (1 st prefs)	Seats won	Two-Party Preferred	Swing (2PP)
ALP	45.2	+8.9	28	56.8	7.7
Liberal	34.0	-6.0	15	43.2	-7.7
Greens	6.5	+4.1	-		
Family First	5.9	+3.2	-		
Aust Dem	2.9	-4.6	-		
Nationals	2.1	+0.6	1		
Other	3.4	-6.3	3		

Source: State Electoral Office, South Australia

In the seat of Unley, won narrowly by the Liberal Party, the Labor Party had objected to a particular Liberal advertisement as 'untrue and misleading'. The Liberal candidate had refused to accede to the Electoral Commissioner's request to cease the advertisement and air a retraction. Labor had 40 days after the return of the writs on 28 April to make a formal challenge to the result, but had not made any formal announcement at the time of the publication of this paper.²⁰

South Australia now has the largest proportion of female MPs in the various state parliaments; it also has the largest proportion of female MPs in any of the state lower houses.

Legislative Council result

Remarkably, the Government's Legislative Council vote of 36.6 per cent was 8.6 per cent lower than its House of Assembly vote, with it winning only four of the 11 upper house seats. The Liberal Party gained barely one-quarter of the vote—14.1 per cent less than its vote in 2002—yet still managed to win three seats. This was the lowest Liberal Party vote since 1975.

An important factor in the major parties' poor performances was the remarkably healthy vote (20.5 per cent) for the ticket that included the 'No-Pokies' MLC, Nick Xenophon. The ticket's vote eclipsed the combined Family First, Greens and Australian Democrat votes, and was within six per cent of the Liberal total. Xenophon's preferences helped his running mate, Ann Bressington, win a seat despite her gaining only 32 first preference votes. The remaining two seats were won by Family First and the Greens—Mark Parnell was the first Green candidate elected to the South Australian Parliament.

With only 1.8 per cent of the vote, a fall of 5.5 per cent since the previous election, and 14.9 per cent less than their best-ever vote in 1997, the Australian Democrats have nearly slipped from view in the state where they performed best over the years. The party won its first South Australian seat in 1977.

Peter Lewis (0.6 per cent) and Ralph Clarke (0.1 per cent) failed to win seats.

The new Legislative Council will have eight members from each of the Labor and Liberal parties. The remaining six members share the balance of power—two from each of Family First and the 'No-Pokies' tickets, a single Green and the remaining Australian Democrat. To be sure of the passage of each piece of legislation, the Government will require the support of four of these six MPs (Table 2).

Table 2: South Australia 2006—Legislative Council

Party	Vote (%)	Swing	Seats won	Seats held
ALP	36.6	+3.7	4	8
Liberal	26.0	-14.1	3	8
Family First	5.0	+1.0	1	2
Greens	4.3	+1.5	1	1
Aust Dem	1.8	-5.5	-	1
Nationals	0.7	+0.2	-	-
Other	25.6*	+13.2	2	2

* includes 20.5% for Independent Nick Xenophon–No Pokies

Source: State Electoral Office, South Australia

The future

Two issues associated with this election will play a part in the future of the Rann Government.

Upper House abolition?

The Government was frustrated during its first term by Legislative Council alterations and delays to its legislative program. In November 2005 the Premier announced a referendum on the future of the upper house to be held at the time of the 2010 election. Noting that his preferred option was 'total abolition', Mike Rann said that his announcement ensured that there would be four years for the issue to be debated. Voters will be given three alternatives:

- abolition of the Legislative Council
- major changes, including a reduction in the number of upper house members and a reduction of the term from eight to four years, or
- no change.

With the Liberal Party signalling its opposition,²¹ in 2010 the Premier will have to judge whether or not a referendum should be held if that seems likely to weaken the chances of his Government's re-election.²²

Redistribution

As noted earlier, South Australian electoral law requires the redrawing of House of Assembly boundaries after each election. The Boundaries Commission is required, as far as is possible, to draw boundaries that ensure that in the following election the party or group with the largest number of votes wins a majority of the lower house seats.²³ Over time, the commission has developed a redistribution methodology, the impact of which is to regularly increase the number of marginal seats. This means elections have often had more marginal seats than might be the case if a redistribution had not been held. The Commissioners will need to make adjustments to at least four Labor seats 'that will make those seats less easy for the ALP to retain in 2010'.²⁴ The Labor Government will have to cope with this in the 2010 election.²⁵

Tasmania

After much speculation about the election date, Tasmanian Labor Premier, Paul Lennon, announced that it would be held on 18 March 2006. This was the same day as the South Australian election, but, as noted by some critics, would be during the distraction of the Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

State of the parties

Labor held 14 of the 25 seats, the Liberal Opposition held seven and the Tasmanian Greens held four. Polls suggested that Lennon would regain office, with the only doubt being whether he would still be leading a majority government.²⁶ The ALP was not helped by the resignation of former Attorney-General, Judy Jackson (Denison), nor by the decision of its second-highest 2002 Bass vote-winner, Kathryn Hay, not to re-contest, though former MHR (1998–2004), Michelle O'Byrne, had nominated for the party and was expected to replace Hay in Bass. In the July 2002 election the ALP had gained 51.9 per cent of the statewide vote, but two late-2005 local polls suggested that support for the Government had fallen sufficiently low as to suggest that it would not retain majority status (see below pp. 12–14).²⁷

In 2002 the Liberals' 27.4 per cent vote was the party's lowest on record. Although opinion polls suggested that its popular standing had improved since then, the party was still said to be ten per cent behind Labor, and would require a record swing to gain majority status.²⁸

The Tasmanian Greens had been reduced to one seat in 1998, thanks in large part to the reduction in the size of the House of Assembly from 35 to 25 seats, but had regained strength with a vote of 18.1 per cent and four seats in 2002. Support for the Greens had not varied a great deal in the years since, so the party had a strong chance of at least retaining its four seats. There was some speculation that the party might pick up a seat in Braddon, and possibly even win an unprecedented second seat in Denison.

Focus on the Premier

In March 2004 Paul Lennon was thrust into office following the resignation of Premier Jim Bacon due to terminal illness. Lennon later described his feelings at taking on the state's top political job in this way:

I don't think many people could hope to understand how difficult it was for me, how emotional it was for me and my family to become Premier under the circumstances I did ...

Lennon saw the forthcoming election as helping put his 'caretaker premier' days behind him.²⁹ However, he also acknowledged that recent adverse publicity brought about by several self-inflicted problems might hurt his relationship with the electorate.³⁰ These included the \$650 000 payout to former Governor Richard Butler when he left office in 2004, the receipt of 'thousands of dollars' free hospitality from Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd (PBL) shortly before the Tasmanian Government granted a \$700 million internet betting licence to Betfair which was part-owned by PBL, the Government's granting of contracts to a firm owned by Lennon's brother, and the renovations done to the Lennon family house by a firm linked to Tasmania-based Gunns Ltd, Australia's largest hardwood forest products company. Predictably, the Liberal and Green parties called for Lennon's resignation over his lack of judgment, with Liberal leader, Rene Hidding, claiming in regard to the PBL issue that it was:

by any political measure, a scandal if a senior Government member accepts unusual hospitality on the eve of a major deal.³¹

While acknowledging some errors of judgment, the Premier expressed his determination to remain: 'We make mistakes from time to time and we move on'.³² An editorial noted that when Tasmanians went to the poll on 18 March and considered the evidence provided by 'this mess', they would probably conclude 'that while Mr Lennon is not a crook he is certainly a klutz'. Despite this, the editorial writer believed there was no need for him to resign.³³

The wisdom of Lennon's decision to go to the people early—an election could have been held as late as 23 September—was also questioned. Associate Professor Richard Herr of the University of Tasmania noted that this meant that the Parliament would not reconvene in

March, and surmised that the Premier was seeking to deny his political opponents the publicity that comes when Parliament is sitting.³⁴

The campaign

The balance of power to the Greens?

The tenor of the campaign was set by several local polls taken at the end of 2005 and early in 2006. In November, the Government's first preference support had apparently slipped to 40 per cent, 12.3 per cent lower than in the 2002 election, the Liberals were within 4 per cent of them (+7 per cent), and the Greens had risen to 20 per cent (+3 per cent). The *Mercury* referred to there having been a 'leap' in Greens support.³⁵ The suggestion of a sudden rise in the popularity of the Greens seemed to be confirmed two months later, when another poll appeared to be showing the Greens out-polling a languishing Government in the seat of Denison, 36 to 35 per cent.

The Greens thus seemed to be entering the election in a strengthening position. The party began to speak of the party's public support 'surging', and therefore of the likelihood of Labor not winning control of the House of Assembly.³⁶ As a consequence, the probability that Lennon would be forced to grant concessions to the Greens in return for their support of a minority government became widely accepted.³⁷ The party's euphoria was short-lived, however, due to what its opponents described as its leader's 'arrogance'. In December 2005 Greens leader Peg Putt angered Lennon and Hidding by declaring her preparedness to take the deputy Premier position in a minority government.³⁸ Shortly before the election she went further, when she seemed to suggest that the passage of supply legislation might be part of any negotiations over the maintenance of a minority government in office. Putt stated she was not prepared to ensure that a government could expect the passage of its budget without a political cost:

We're not here to be beautiful losers. We are here in politics to achieve our policy agenda, just like the other parties, and we have just as much right off the back of our vote to try and secure the things that we stand for.³⁹

Perhaps inadvertently, Putt generated much public debate on the question of just how safe a minority government's supply legislation would be.

Whatever the motivation for her choice of words, Putt's reply gave her opponents grounds to warn that they were not prepared to deal with her or her party. She later moderated her statement, but to veteran political journalist, Wayne Crawford, it was a rare case of the Green leader's 'usually acute political aptitude' having failed her.⁴⁰

Minority governments are a relatively common feature in Tasmania—there have been three since 1980—but familiarity has not endeared them to the Labor or Liberal parties. According to the Premier:

A return to the uncertainty and insecurity of minority government would see the decision-makers in the boardrooms of Melbourne, Sydney and internationally give Tasmania a wide berth.⁴¹

For Rene Hidding, the Greens sharing in minority government would mean ‘the very start of the rot for Tasmania’.⁴² Hidding in fact insisted that all the Liberal MPs sign a declaration that they would not join a minority government with the party.⁴³

Symbolic of the major parties’ determination to reject the Greens, was the cancelling of a televised debate between the three party leaders scheduled to be aired on ABC television. Lennon maintained that only the leaders who had a chance of becoming Premier should be allowed to participate, and he noted that the Government had ‘expressed grave concerns to the ABC’ over the issue.⁴⁴ The *Mercury* was not impressed by this view. Apart from a front page banner proclaiming, ‘Lennon dodges Greens debate’, the newspaper noted the strong possibility of there being a minority government after polling day. In such a setting, the Greens would be major players, and for this reason, it was important ‘for the three main players to be exposed to the blowtorch of a public debate’.⁴⁵ Despite this, the debate did not eventuate.

In the wider community there was controversy over the entry into the ‘minority government’ debate of other, non-party-political, interests. John Gay, chair of Gunns Ltd, spoke of taking his firm’s proposed Tamar Valley pulp mill offshore to Malaysia or China.⁴⁶ There was speculation about the interests behind ‘Tasmanians for a Better Future’, who ran a so-called ‘mystery’ advertising campaign which called for the return of stable majority government. Advertisements stated that the election was ‘vitally important’ for Tasmania, for the state had suffered badly under past minority governments:

Development was lost and investment dried up. Unemployment was high, young people were leaving and families were packing up and heading for the mainland, the property market was a basket case.⁴⁷

Such advertisements continued until polling day, and apart from the head of the advertising agency that prepared them, who put his name to their authorisation, and several ‘ordinary’ Tasmanians who appeared in photographs in the advertisements, the key player or players remained unknown. Another source of annoyance to the Greens were advertisements and letter box drops attacking their policies as ‘socially destructive’. Among those authorising the advertisements were members of the Exclusive Brethren Christian sect. Peg Putt and Senator Bob Brown later blamed these advertisements as the reason for the apparent fall in the Greens’ public support during the campaign.⁴⁸

Labor

As is usual in Australian State elections, the Premier carried the burden of his party’s campaign. To an unusual extent, however, Lennon’s personal controversies meant that there

was much focus on his personality and judgment, with former Premier Bacon's 'head-kicker' forced to acknowledge weaknesses in his own performance:

I'm human. I make mistakes and I try to learn from them. But every decision I have ever made since becoming Premier was made with the best interests of Tasmania in mind [and] ultimately I think we will be judged on how well we manage the economy and our responsibilities.⁴⁹

The Government promised a continuation of policies that they claimed were clearly working, with relatively few new promises. Perhaps the most eye-catching promise was the Premier's announcement of a \$30 million pledge to restore, preserve and redevelop the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, a famous old building located on the site of the first white settlement at Sullivan's Cove in 1804.

Despite the perceived difficulties that Lennon was forced to deal with, it still seemed clear that his party would regain office. While acknowledging the Premier's 'bumblefootedness' *The Mercury* was still lavish in its praise of Labor's 'fiscally and socially responsible state Budgets', as well as for its overall performance in office:

Tasmanians have enjoyed unprecedented growth and prosperity of the last four years ... We have gone from an economic basket case to a vibrant, confident community ... The present Labor Government can take credit for much of what has been achieved ...⁵⁰

The key unknown, then, was whether Labor could win at least 13 of the 25 House of Assembly seats.

Liberal difficulties

By September 2005 the Liberals had announced teams of candidates for each of the five electorates, and had begun to make regular policy announcements. Apart from over 160 policies that Hidding claimed had been released since the previous election, during the campaign the Liberal leader spoke of a 'Five Point Plan' to move Tasmania out of the mess that the Premier—who was too busy 'doing special deals for special mates'—and his government had created.⁵¹ Under this 'Plan' the Liberals would:

- secure Tasmania's economy
- improve education standards
- manage health better
- safeguard the community, and
- protect Tasmanian lifestyles.⁵²

However the Liberal Party's major difficulty seemed to be a failure to convince voters that they could improve on the Government's performance in the most controversial policy areas of hospitals, health, education and public housing.⁵³ In many areas Liberal and Labor policies were quite close, but there seemed little the challengers could do to attract substantial numbers of new voters, so steady did the parties' poll figures remain throughout the campaign.

Unfortunately for the Liberals, a central part of their campaign was nullified in surprising fashion mid-campaign. Polls indicated that 65 per cent of Tasmanian voters regarded the state of the health system as the major issue facing an incoming government. In particular, the parlous state of the Royal Hobart Hospital (RHH) was highlighted, with the Liberal Party promising that a Liberal government would consider building a new RHH on a new greenfield site. Instead, the party was embarrassed by Lennon's revelation that when the Rundle Liberal Government sold part of the RHH to private operators in 1998, it committed a future government to a large compensation payment to the private operator if the RHH were to be moved to a new site before 2018.⁵⁴ The Liberal health spokesperson, Will Hodgman, confessed to being unaware of the arrangement, and his leader further embarrassed the party when he stated that it was 'not the role of a minister, nor the shadow minister, to know about all of these contracts'. To media observers this reinforced the unelectability of the Opposition.⁵⁵

By voting day it was clear that the Liberal Party would have trouble increasing its parliamentary numbers.

The result

The final first preference figures showed a clear victory for the Labor Party despite a small fall in its vote, a healthy increase in the Liberal vote, and a slight fall in support for the Greens. Party strengths did not alter (Table 3).

Table 3: Tasmania 2006—votes and seats

	ALP	Liberal	Greens	Other
Statewide vote	49.2	31.8	16.6	2.4
(%)	(-2.7)	(+4.4)	(-1.5)	(-0.2)
Seats	14	7	4	-
Bass	49.6	33.8	13.6	3.0
	2	2	1	-
Braddon	50.8	37.3	10.3	1.6
	3	2	-	-
Denison	46.9	26.6	24.1	2.4
	3	1	1	-
Franklin	47.2	31.4	19.4	2.0
	3	1	1	-
Lyons	51.9	30.0	15.8	2.3
	3	1	1	-

Source: Tasmanian Electoral Commission

Despite the doubts about its strength, the ALP was one seat off what is realistically the best-possible tally of 15 seats under the current Tasmanian voting arrangements.⁵⁶ Labor has averaged 48.6 per cent in the last three elections. Its 2006 vote is, in fact, very close to the 50.7 per cent it averaged in the nine elections between 1950 and 1979, when it lost only one election (1969). It is well out of its trough of 1982–1996, when it averaged 35.2 per cent in five elections.

Rene Hidding resigned the Liberal leadership soon after the election, to be replaced by Will Hodgman, who was elected unopposed. Despite the new leader's stated satisfaction with the Liberals being the only party to increase its vote in 2006, the Liberal performance was poor. In all elections since its first in 1946, the Liberal Party has fallen below 41 per cent on only six occasions, with the lowest two votes occurring in 2002 and 2006. The 2006 result was 22.3 per cent lower than its vote in 1992. Perhaps most remarkably of all, Liberal candidates have won only a single seat in each of Denison, Franklin and Lyons in the last two elections. To put this in perspective, the party has been unable to secure the 33.4 per cent needed in each of these electorates to win two seats, a target that should be reached with little difficulty by both Labor and Liberal parties in every election.

Peg Putt may have been misled by the excitement engendered by the predicted balance-of-power role that was predicted for the Greens, for she expressed great disappointment at her party's vote of 16.6 per cent. In fact, although the Green vote fell fractionally, it was still its third-best performance, comfortably ahead of its average of 11.5 per cent in the three elections between 1992 and 1998. The Greens do very well in Tasmania, no doubt due to the use of proportional representation for lower house elections, but it is difficult to see how they can do better when the rusted-on nature of the major party vote is taken into account. In the six elections since the Greens first became a significant force in 1989, the major party vote has averaged 81.6 per cent—even taking into account Labor's 28.9 per cent in 1992 and the Liberals' 27.4 per cent in 2002. It is difficult to see how the Greens can increase their statewide vote any higher than 20 per cent, a figure they have not yet reached in any House of Assembly election—though they have done so in particular electorates.

The outcome—how important was the campaign period?

The three parties all saw the campaign period as the key to the final result. Labor claimed that its warnings of the probable disasters of minority government were crucial to the final outcome; the Liberals said the same, but described the increase in their vote as a rap over the knuckles for the Government; and the Greens blamed the 'grubbiest, most vicious' smear campaign, run by their opponents and others, for halting their surge to replacing the Liberals as the second-largest parliamentary party. The analysis of many elections in Australia has concluded that most voters have made up their minds how they will vote well before the commencement of the campaign. If the Tasmanian parties were correct in their analyses, the 2006 election was perhaps unusual in that enough people may have shifted their vote during the campaign period to have significantly affected the final result.

Such an analysis depends on the acceptance of the accuracy of the two Tasmanian polls—referred to above—published in November and February prior to the election, that seemed to have coloured all parties’ views. In the first, a poll conducted by the Tasmanian polling firm EMRS put Labor support at 33 per cent, with the Greens (17 per cent statewide) said to be outpolling Labor in Denison. In the second, a *Mercury*/TasPoll gave Labor 41.8 per cent (10 per cent lower than in the previous election) but had the Greens at 19.8 per cent. Together, these polls seemed to suggest that Labor was sliding badly, while the Greens were on the rise. The strategy of the parties indicated that they all were affected by these findings.

On the other hand, the long-term poll standing of the three parties suggested that minority government was always less likely than the return of a majority Labor government. During the period between the 2002 election and the death of former Premier Bacon (June 2004), the Morgan Poll showed little movement in party support, with the ALP comfortably ahead of the Liberal Party—with an average of 51.3 per cent to 24.6 per cent. After Bacon’s death the gap narrowed slightly, though the Government still enjoyed a margin of about 16 per cent over its main rival. In addition, throughout the entire period between the elections, the Greens’ vote remained very close to the 18.2 per cent that they gained in 2002. The claimed ‘surge’ of late-2005 and early 2006 may well have been non-existent (see Table 4).

Table 4: Morgan Polls Tasmania 2002–06

Elections/Polls	ALP	Liberal	Greens
Election 2002	52.3	26.9	18.2
Morgan Polls 2002–05	49.0	26.6	16.3
Election 2006	49.3	31.8	16.6

Whichever view one takes of the campaign, the 2006 Tasmanian election will remain an important case-study on the impact of political campaigning.

Despite the inevitable closeness in seat margins when proportional representation is used, in Tasmanian House of Assembly elections there have been only three minority governments elected in the past 14 elections.⁵⁷ Generally, one major party will have enough support across the five electorates for it to be able to form a majority government. The 2006 election was no different.

Understanding Australian state elections

Every state election adds to our understanding of politics in this country. In 2006 the rare occurrence of two State elections being held on the same day—the first such occurrence since 1986—helped highlight certain factors that the two elections had in common. The most obvious was the difficulty that challenging parties have when they attempt to win office in the Australian states.

Administrative competence

Opinion poll findings taken between the 2002 elections and the 2006 elections in each state indicated the general public acceptance of work done by the Rann and Bacon/Lennon Governments. This was despite there being a number of areas of administrative controversy, particularly the delivery of health services in both states, as well as the performance of South Australia's electricity service. The fact that their challengers seemed unable to make up ground on such matters, suggested that many voters preferred to stay with 'the devil they knew' rather than to shift to their opponents. This suggests that few voters changed their votes during either campaign—there is little evidence that the state Labor governments gained votes from voter rejection of the Commonwealth Government's industrial relations legislation as claimed by the federal Labor Party.⁵⁸

Electors must have a reason to change their vote. How can a challenging team persuade people that they can do a better job than the government of running the state? A reading of policies of the two major parties in each state indicates a not unsurprising similarity between each parcel.⁵⁹ For the voter, an important question was whether the challengers should be given the chance to govern, or whether it was better to remain with the party that had governed with apparent competence since the previous election in South Australia, and since 1998 in Tasmania. It has been said of voters in state elections that they tend 'to judge political parties on the basis of performance in government rather than ideology'.⁶⁰ A decade ago this writer wrote of state government that:

If a government appeared to be in control of events and could successfully portray itself as more competent than its rivals it was often able to entrench itself for a long period of rule.⁶¹

Therein was the hurdle that the Liberal Party failed to clear in both South Australia and Tasmania in 2006—as one South Australian observer noted: 'South Australians were given absolutely no reason to change government'.⁶²

The leaders

State/territory administrations typically rely a great deal on the Premier or Chief Minister. As head of the government, as the main spokesperson for that government, and the main focus of attention at election time, the standing of the Premier/Chief Minister is usually central to the standing of the government. In South Australia and Tasmania the polls had indicated since the previous election that the standing of the Labor leaders remained high. This was so even in the case of Paul Lennon on the eve of the Tasmanian election, where a Newspoll taken on 14–15 March gave him a 54 per cent 'satisfied' to a 36 per cent 'dissatisfied' rating, very close to the 61 per cent enjoyed by Bacon before he died.⁶³ Mike Rann's effort was even more highly regarded by voters.⁶⁴ As one writer noted of such Premiers:

... they constantly make virtues of their longevity, experience and fiscal rectitude. Their hands are scarred, callused and safe and the electorate finds this comforting.⁶⁵

Leaders of the Opposition can find it difficult to make their mark against such opponents, as measured in the fact that their 'Don't Know' figure in opinion polls is invariably much higher than for the Premier. In fact, a number of Opposition leaders have come to power by virtue of close, sometimes 'lucky' results (e.g. Bolte, Nicklin, Brand, Wran, Carr, Beattie, Bracks, Rann), rather than through sweeping, landslide victories. Once in power, however, they have been able to use the power of the office to help them consolidate their position and broaden their appeal, and then to win comfortable victories in the following election. In other words, once they are settled, they are hard to shift.

Weak Oppositions

The other side of strong, competent government is often the presence of weak and divided Opposition, something that seems to have been a factor in these two elections. The Liberal parties in South Australia and Tasmania had crumbled in the years since their loss of office, partly, it seems, because of internal wrangling, and partly because of ineffectual leadership.⁶⁶ As noted above, Labor focused on Kerin's ineffectual leadership during the South Australian campaign. In Tasmania the previous Liberal leader, Bob Cheek, had actually lost his own seat in the 2002 election, and Hidding's insistence in 2006 on being unprepared even to talk with the Greens if they were to hold the balance of power, seemed to deal the Liberals out of any post-election negotiations that might occur.⁶⁷

Federalism: the economy

There has seldom been a better time to be in office in Australia. Good economic conditions spelt economic stability...⁶⁸

The difficult task of defeating a state government is likely to be particularly hard to achieve in times of economic prosperity, for voters may be quite happy to 'reward' the state government for the good times they are enjoying.

In 2006 the buoyant national economy seemed to make the re-election chances of the two state governments much easier than might otherwise have been the case. Both states have had recent histories of stagnant economies and static population growth. By 2006, however, South Australia's economy was showing good signs of recovery, helped particularly by the awarding of a \$6 billion Air Warfare Destroyer contract to the state, and confirmed by the state's regaining of its AAA credit rating. In Tasmania's case the local economy was said to be performing better than for many years, as indicated by the number of people moving to the island state, and its booming house prices. Premier Lennon's warning that this could all be lost were a minority government to be returned, may well have helped shore up his Government's vote.

The *Adelaide Advertiser* asked: who deserved credit for a good economy, the state government or the Commonwealth? To an important extent the question was irrelevant. If voters were prepared to reward a government for the economic good times—only 18 per cent of those polled described the Rann Government's handling of the economy as 'poor'—

arguments over who should gain the credit were beside the point.⁶⁹ It certainly made the South Australian Opposition's determination to fight the campaign on the 'poor' state of the local economy, a puzzling one.

Federalism: the blurring of borders

The intertwined politics of the Australian federal system means that an occasional factor in elections is the 'seepage' of issues from one government level to another. A state issue can impinge upon a Commonwealth election—as in the case of the Franklin Dam in 1983—but Commonwealth-level issues can also affect State elections, for good or ill. In these two state-level elections the issue of the quality of health services was spoken of as being a major government weakness, yet it seems not to have had an impact on either result. One can speculate that this is an example of the blurring of administrative borders that is a well-known factor in federal systems.

The state of the health systems were a weak link for both governments, particularly in regard to the difficulties of service-provision in public hospitals. Half of those polled in an *Advertiser* poll described the Government's performance as poor in this policy area, while about two-thirds of Tasmanians polled had similar views about the health system in their state. The South Australian Government moved a poorly-performing Minister in the November preceding the election. In both states, however, the government simply agreed that the health system was not working as well as it might, promised to do better, but claimed that this was a consequence of Commonwealth policy as much as poor administration by the state government. As a Senate committee noted in 2001, it has been easy for governments 'to simply "blame shift" to each other the responsibility for perceived shortfalls in the funding available for public hospital services'.⁷⁰ Do voters accept that it may be Commonwealth policy as much as state policy that explains the standards of such services? If so, it must help a state government achieve re-election if people are as likely to blame the Commonwealth for poor services in which they play an important part, as the state itself.

In retrospect

On 1 December 2002, the Prime Minister warned the South Australian Liberal Party of the need to improve its performance after its electoral defeat earlier in the year:

Unless a state opposition develops and maintains an alternative sense of energy the likelihood is that at the subsequent election it'll have an even bigger loss.⁷¹

Despite some unhappiness in the South Australian Liberal camp, it is clear that in 2006 the party had put together a reasonably attractive set of policies, an effort that bore no fruit at all on election day. Immediately afterwards, the Prime Minister spoke again, inferring that the South Australian Liberals had paid little heed to his earlier words:

Unless state Oppositions have worked at building a case for change a long time before the election campaign starts, it's going to be very difficult to bring about change at a state level.⁷²

One might wonder just what, if anything, the two state Liberal divisions might have done that might have produced a different election outcome. Some observers might contend that the Prime Minister was being a little too hard on his party colleagues.

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