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Election Retrospect

by David Butler

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Cartoons in this article courtesy of Patrick Cook

Once an election has changed a country's government, it is always tempting to overdo the explanation. Reason is piled on reason to show why voters switched to the opposition party. Usually the factors are so numerous that, if all were valid, the victor would have totally obliterated the defeated government. It is always necessary to record how limited is the proportion of voters that have changed sides. A swing of five per cent means a net movement of only one in twenty; if there are no cross-switches, nineteen voters out of twenty stayed with their old party.

This is a necessary preface to any account of the 1983 Australian election, which put Labor into office with its biggest-ever majority (in terms of seats¹) giving it power for only the second time in 34 years. Malcolm Fraser's debacle was spectacular and self-inflicted. But, let us remember, the swing was only four per cent. If we consider Australia's economic decline over the previous three years, and in particular the rise in unemployment, and if we bear in mind the charisma of Bob Hawke in his leadership honeymoon, we should perhaps be asking not why Labor won, but why the swing was only four per cent, or less than in 1961, 1966, 1969, or 1975 and, in fact, not even as large as in 1980. We should recall that only two weeks before the poll the bookmakers were quoting even odds. In retrospect Labor's victory may be seen as inevitable. It did not look like that when Malcolm Fraser called the election.

The timing of the dissolution appears with hindsight as a monumental miscalculation —

¹ As a proportion of the total number of seats in the House of Representatives Labor's present majority is not as large as that of either the Scullin or Curtin Labor governments

but a wholly understandable one. 'For years they've lived by tactics and now they've died of tactics.' Campbell-Bannerman's indictment of the British Conservatives' debacle in 1905 could apply to Malcolm Fraser in 1983. In 1975 he had ingeniously forced a premature election. In 1977 he had asked for an early dissolution, ostensibly in order to get House and Senate elections into phase but actually in order to go to the country before Labor removed the target

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that Gough Whitlam offered and substituted the less alienating Bill Hayden. In 1983 Malcolm Fraser called an early election (a double dissolution that would put House and Senate elections out of phase again) on the spurious ground of Senate obstructionism; in reality he wanted to go to the country before Labor replaced the somewhat discredited Bill Hayden with the more formidable Bob Hawke.

But his plans went awry. The give-away Budget of August 1982 was designed for an early election. But the Costigan report, revealing the bottom-of-the-harbour tax scandals which smirched influential people, made a September election impolitic. Mr Fraser's own back trouble precluded an election in either November or December. March and May offered the only remaining slots before the constitutional pre-conditions for a double

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dissolution expired; moreover the deficit forecasts were growing more ominous. So, when rumours of a Labor leadership spill loomed up, Mr Fraser moved fast. He seems in the first days of February to have committed himself to an election before he knew for certain that Mr Hayden had decided to go. By the time the news reached him it was too late to draw back. He may in any case have believed that the handover to Mr Hawke could not be achieved swiftly or without acrimony — after all, the Labor party's history would give plenty of support to such an expectation.

Memories of the events at Government House on November 11, 1975 enhanced the irony of what happened when Mr Fraser went unannounced to Yarralumla on February 3, 1983 to request a double dissolution. The Governor-General, busy with a diplomatic lunch, delayed him by asking for a formal justification. So the insiders, expecting the lunch-time announcement of the election, were startled by the headline, 'HAYDEN RESIGNS. HAWKE TO SUCCEED'.

That was not the only irony about the situation. It is plain that some friends of Mr Hayden had urged him to resign quickly on the ground that a change of leader would forestall an early election which they did not want. They assumed that Mr Fraser would choose to give Bob Hawke time to lose face in Parliament, where after all he had not particularly distinguished himself in the last two years.

No one could have predicted that the Labor hierarchy would organise an instant and uncontentious switch of leadership, or that Bob Hawke would move so smoothly into his new role. Apart from an abrasive first interview with Richard Carleton on *Nationwide*, he performed almost flawlessly, and by his stylish laughing off of the Liberal attacks on him as a union captive, maintained a media ascendancy over the flailing Prime Minister.

In Britain it is accepted that Prime Ministers have an unfettered right to dissolve at any moment; there have never been serious complaints over election timing. But Australia, accustomed to three-year parliaments (20 of her 32 parliaments have lasted virtually the full term), seems more ready to question the propriety of calling an election. In 1983 Malcolm Fraser was not only asking for the fifth double dissolution in Australian history on grounds that he subsequently abandoned (by admitting that he would not press on with the sales tax legislation that the Senate had rejected). He also gave less notice for the campaign than ever before: the thirty days between the request and the poll meant that laggards had only 24 hours to get their names

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on the electoral roll. This hasty action, based wholly on political expediency, came oddly from a professedly principled conservative; it may have contributed to his diminished stature during the campaign.

Democratic elections the world over do occasionally turn on foreign affairs or defence or on issues of personal scandal. But normally they are most influenced by the public's judgement of the broad economic competence of the rivals. In Australia, since 1972 at least, foreign affairs and defence have played no significant part in electioneering — and the same can almost be said of scandals. In so far as the 1983 election had major issues they concerned economic competence.

In 1980-83, Mr Fraser had presided over the first major halt in Australian growth since the war. Inflation and unemployment had soared. The Government could blame trading conditions abroad and union demands (and the drought) at home — and these excuses were to some extent accepted. But there was no doubt that the country's economic performance left a wide target for Labor to attack. However the Government could still present itself as a prudent steward in difficult times and argue that the spendthrift, union-dominated Labor Party would do as badly as it had done in 1972-1975.

Both sides suffered from a certain credibility gap. No one, remembering the promises of 1977 and 1980, could believe that Mr Fraser had

much to boast about. But no one, looking at Labor's record under Whitlam or at the current inexperience of its leaders, could feel great confidence that the alternative government possessed all the answers to the nation's problems.

Mr Fraser probably had no alternative to waging an aggressive, negative campaign, focussing on the weaknesses of the opposition rather than on Liberal achievements or Liberal

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promises. But his attacks were clumsy and sometimes counter-productive; Mr Hawke, in one neat riposte, pointed out that there was no room under the bed to hide one's savings — it was already full of Commies. The opposition wisely chose a more constructive approach, offering a pact with the unions and a prices and incomes policy which, although unconvincing to anyone who had watched twenty years of unsuccessful prices and incomes policies in Britain, looked fresh and plausible enough in Australia. And Mr Hawke joined to it a theme of moderation, of togetherness, of mateship.

Labor offered change. But it was a very unthreatening, moderate change. The reasonable men on the Labor Front Bench could not be turned into ogres to frighten the conservative Australian electorate. The economy was crook; it was safe enough to give the other bloke a go.

Australian elections traditionally combine negative slanging matches with auctions of promises, local or nationwide bribes to selected groups of voters. In contrast to other countries there has been notably little exploitation of glittering generalities, evocations of patriotism and the glorious future. Mr Hawke's presentation of the Labor slogan, 'Bringing Australia Together' came nearer to an uplifting appeal than anything in the last twenty years.

He may have been helped by the disaster that interrupted the election. The terrible bushfires that broke out in the second week of the campaign obscured the Liberal counter-attack on Labor's Policy Speech; they took up three days which the Liberal Party needed badly if it was to come from behind; they may also have led voters to put a higher value on the national heritage — and therefore on the Franklin dam issue. And they did stir up a vast wave of public sympathy, a camaraderie that matched the Hawke theme of togetherness.

At first Labor feared that the bushfires would distract people from the election and enable Mr Fraser to stand out as a national leader in time of trouble. But in practice Mr Fraser had to share the limelight with two popular Labor Premiers as he went with Mr Cain to the holocaust in Victoria and with Mr Bannon to the stricken areas of South Australia.

The existence of four Labor premiers (for the first time since 1957) cannot have hurt the party's chances. Indeed it was the Labor landslide in Western Australia on February 19 that really switched expectations about the national outcome on March 5 and turned the last fortnight of the campaign into something of a triumphal march for Mr Hawke.

However, the existence of Labor premiers will not guarantee a Labor Prime Minister a smooth ride on federal questions; one of the conspicuous weaknesses in the Labor program was the lack of a thought-out position on the Federal-State relationship.

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That indeed lay at the heart of the Franklin dam issue. Neither Mr Fraser nor Mr Hawke wanted the dam to be built. Both were prepared to pay the Tasmanians not to build it. But Mr Fraser, in deference to state's rights, was not prepared to use coercion and Mr Hawke was. Although plenty of opposition to the dam existed within Tasmania, the majority of Tasmanians showed by their votes what they thought of mainland interference.

The Tasmanian results differed spectacularly from the national pattern. The explanation seemed fairly obvious. The island Labor Party, which in 1981 had thrown out its premier over the dam issue, was in a shambles. The state had moved from being in 1968 the only one with a Labor premier to being in 1983 the only one with a Liberal premier. The dam offered the one clear-cut issue of the campaign — and not only in Tasmania. Conservationist voters all over Australia knew the score; vote Liberal and there will be a dam; vote Labor and there won't. The four per cent swing away from

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Labor, in contrast to the four per cent swing to Labor on the mainland, represented the greatest deviation from the national pattern recorded by any state since the war.

Western Australia deviated from the national pattern too, swinging almost five per cent more to Labor than the rest of the country. From being the least Labor state in 1980, it moved to the other extreme. Perhaps it was because as the most growth-minded state it had been more shocked by the check to growth than any other state. Perhaps the Western Australian Liberals had been particularly tainted by the Costigan report. Perhaps the departure of Sir Charles Court from the Liberal premiership, together with Labor's well-judged switch of leaders, gave an extra shove to the swing.

In the election results nationally the Mackerras pendulum worked well. Apart from the five Tasmanian Liberal seats which went so sharply against the tide, all but two of the Government seats that were at risk to a swing of up to four per cent changed hands — and none that was above the six per cent line. The two exceptions Riverina and Dawson came very near to switching. Moreover the handful of Labor seats that had been widely tipped to go against the tide — Ballarat, McMillan, Grey, Kalgoorlie and Capricornia — all moved more or less in harmony with their neighbours. It was, apart from the outlying areas, Tasmania and West Australia, as homogeneous an election as Australia has known. There was an even movement of two to five per cent over the bulk of the nation, affecting in a remarkably

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even fashion, North and South, town and country, marginal seats and blue ribbon ones. Voters were responding similarly to the events of the previous three years and to the campaign of the previous three weeks. Although the media that carried the political story to voters had their local variations, they seem to have offered a nationwide stimulus that was responded to nationwide.

Yet Labor did well to gain 23 seats on only a four per cent swing. The election underlined an anomaly in the system. Since 1949 majorities have been scattered fairly evenly around the pendulum with between three and four seats subject to every one per cent of swing. Therefore on past form a four per cent swing should have meant that 15 not 23 seats should have changed hands. It is difficult to argue that the system was being hard on Labor when 53 and a half per cent of the preferred vote won 75 of the 125 seats (60 per cent).

In 1977 and still more in 1980 an odd and unexplained bunching had developed in the pendulum:

	Lib/NP seats at risk to a five per cent swing	Lab seats at risk to a five per cent swing
1977	18	10
1980	31	12

As these figures show the Government entered the election in a peculiarly vulnerable position and as the results show they suffered for it.

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The election changed the geographic balance of the parliamentary parties. The Labor caucus used to be overwhelmingly urban with only two or three predominantly rural seats. But half a dozen of its 1983 gains were in country areas. The voice of the bush will be more heard in the party room. The National Party sank to 17 seats, its lowest level yet, and the Liberals, driven out of 15 seats in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Brisbane, will have a less urban emphasis in the new Parliament.

The idea that a double dissolution would

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obliterate the Democrats and produce a clear majority in the Senate for one side or the other was always far-fetched. In the outcome Labor ended three short of a clear majority and the Coalition five short. There is no serious possibility that the next half-Senate election will put either in charge; the Democrats have come back with their strength undiminished and Senator Chipp and Senator Haines have won high enough places to give them a full term (expiring June 30, 1988) and with it prolonged tenure of the balance of power position.

The 1983 election saw the further development of the new style of media-chasing electioneering. Great rallies were in decline and it was the first contest in recent years in which there were no stories of crowd violence. The whole operation on both sides was geared to the needs of television, radio and the press. The media always hunger for news that is new. And the parties try to give them what they want, to grab quick headlines with fresh allegations about their rivals' misdeeds. But often the morsels they offer are so trivial that they are chewed to pieces in an hour or so. Few of the stories that were blazoned during the 1983 campaign ran for more than a day.

Every telecast and phone-in was monitored

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by the party organisations and every slip produced an instant reaction. When Mr Keating told a caller in Melbourne that he was not absolutely certain whether Labor's prescriptions would work, within ten minutes Mr Fraser was mocking him in Perth. There was an instant reply from Mr Hawke in that episode when Mr Fraser spoke to a caller about money under Labor being safer under the bed. Mr Fraser

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then boasted that he had used exaggerated language simply to get media coverage. When the *Bulletin* suggested that OECD figures had been tampered with Mr Hawke called a midnight press conference. There was, in short, a frantic rush to cap every headline with a riposte. Since many of the stories were mere

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point-scoring, the raw material for a five minute barney during parliamentary question-time, the campaign looked more and more frenetic and trivial.

Indeed one of its singular characteristics was that the journalists who had teased the protagonists into these high-speed exchanges then knocked them down. There seemed to be a new level of detachment in the media (which in general offered very balanced coverage). An increasing number of editorial writers took on the role of caustic but professional theatre critics; they let their readers know that there wasn't much substance in the dramas they were being offered.

The Liberal campaign was based on the assumption that there would be a late swing-back to the Government as there had been in 1977 and 1980. A massive advertising blitz was one again launched and the opinion polls claimed to detect one per cent or two per cent slippage from Labor early in the final week. But it did not continue. Labor won by the sort of margin that the polls had been recording for a year and more.

So, did the campaign matter? Did the leaders make the vital difference? If Andrew Peacock had succeeded in spilling Malcolm Fraser in April 1982, or if Bill Hayden had continued to lead Labor, would there have been another outcome? All elections are in part about leaders. Television in particular, with its limited news bulletins and camera resources, tends to focus on the top two contenders and each party's theme is transmitted overwhelmingly

through them. But, in any case, in 1983 Mr Fraser inevitably towered above his fellow Liberals. (His deputy, Mr Anthony, was unmemorable among his key National Party marginals). On the Labor side the spotlight was naturally on the new leader — and Mr Hawke provided good television material. The triumvirate approach of 1980 — Hayden, Hawke and Wran — was nowhere in evidence. The narrow eyes of the humourless Fraser, the inebriate past of the larrikin Hawke, offered ample enough targets. The cartoonists enjoyed themselves in this most presidential of Australian campaigns. But were the leaders decisive?

Although Fraser and Hawke got the limelight, they were in large measure the carriers of their parties' styles and messages. Despite the salience of the top men, it may have been the styles and messages that mattered to the voters. If the broad explanations for Labor's victory are valid, it is unlikely that a different leader on either side would have made the two and a half per cent difference needed to alter the outcome.

This article started with a warning against over-explanation. But it may not have escaped its own trap. There were many reasons why Labor should have fared better electorally in 1983 than in 1980 — and very few why it should have fared worse. Bob Hawke's charisma may have added to the scale of Labor's victory. It is hard to believe that all the other factors would not have given it the one and a half per cent swing that it needed win.