

From 'Journal for Students of HSC Politics', April 1984

The Federal Elections of March 1983

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Four major factors contributed to Labor's landslide victory in the elections of March 5, 1983. Firstly, the Liberal-National Country Party Government, despite its seven-and-a-half years in office, had demonstrated its incapacity to resolve Australia's deepening economic crisis: inflation remained high, and unemployment had climbed steadily. Secondly, the Labor Party's cruel but realistic decision to replace Bill Hayden by Bob Hawke as leader, just before the start of the campaign, provided Malcolm Fraser with an opponent popular throughout the country. Thirdly — a point often overlooked — Bill Hayden's willingness to step down rather than fight in the party room for the Labor leadership gave Bob Hawke a 'clean' image upon which to base his claims: the Labor Party therefore owes a great deal to Hayden for his graceful surrender of power.

The fourth factor is more complex: repeatedly, over the last twenty years, Labor has made a promising campaign start only to be defeated by the greater dexterity of its coalition opponents during the campaign. This was notably the case in 1980, when a last-days swing to the Fraser coalition snatched what seemed a clear prospective win from Labor. On this occasion, how-

ever, there was a role-reversal: from the very beginning of the campaign, Hawke spoke — and acted — like a Prime Minister placing a well defined policy package to the electorate which looked both credible and effective. By contrast, Fraser and his team looked lame from the outset and desperate towards the close of play.

How big was Labor's victory? Table 1 shows the House of Representatives seats and vote in 1980 and 1983: Table 2 the same for the Senate.

Inspection of Table 1 shows that the growth in the Labor vote, although considerable, did not approach the forecasts of up to ten per cent which polls during the campaign had predicted. But Hawke's across-the-board popularity, which won middle-class seats to Labor across the country, resulted in a massacre of Coalition seats and a Labor majority of 25 — the highest ever.

Table 2 fills out the story: the Australian Democrat vote was substantially higher for the Senate. It has clearly been established as an Upper House party where it can win a balance of power through the allocation of seats in propor-

Table 1
The House of Representatives:
Seats Before and After the 5 March 1983
Election and Votes Obtained in 1980 and 1983

	Pre-Election 1983 Seats	% Vote (1980)		Post-Election 1983 Seats	% Vote (1983)
ALP:	52	45.1	ALP:	75	49.5
LNCP:	73	46.2	LNCP:	50	43.6
Other:	-	8.7	Other:	-	6.9
Totals:	125	100.0%	Totals:	125	100.0%

Table 2
The Senate:
Seats Before and After the 5 March 1983
Election and Votes Obtained in 1980 and 1983

	Pre-Election 1983 Seats	% Vote (1980)		Post-Election 1983 Seats	% Vote (1983)
ALP:	27	42.3	ALP:	30	45.4
LNCP:	31	43.4	LNCP:	28	39.9
Dem.:	5	9.3	Dem.:	5	9.6
Ind. & Other:	1	5.0	Ind. & Other:	1	5.1
Totals:	64	100.0%	Totals:	64	100.0%

tion to votes within each State, the standard Senate electoral process.

Like Fraser before him, Hawke has no control of the Senate. But it cannot be denied that the election was a stunning victory for Labor which stripped the conservative coalition of seats — and morale — with a deafening crash.

The campaign itself was very brief — less than five weeks — and was precipitated by Fraser's determination to try to obtain control of the Senate. The Upper House had rejected bills for increases in sales taxes, attempts to impose University fees for students seeking second degrees and the withdrawal of some welfare benefits for families whose breadwinner was on strike. These were relatively trivial issues; if the Prime Minister had avoided calling a double-dissolution election, and let the Parliament run its full three-year term, the Senate voting system would have made it much more difficult for the Democrats to retain their seats. (This is because the 'quotas' for Senate seats would have been higher in the normal half-Senate election.) It is hard to escape the conclusion that the Senate position was not the real reason for the calling of a premature election: the real reason was Fraser's gamble that the Labor Party would fight under Hayden if he called a snap poll. He had outmanoeuvred Hayden before and believed he could do so again: Hawke was clearly waiting in the wings for the leadership role and

he was a much more formidable opponent. The gamble misfired: Labor strategists had estimated that, under Hayden, they would start with a five per cent lead which was likely to be halved during the campaign: not a big enough swing to win. The ruthless dumping of Hayden and his replacement by Hawke on February 3 (less than a fortnight before both parties' policy speeches) totally transformed the situation. A survey taken shortly after the ALP leadership change suggested that 52 per cent of the electorate wanted Hawke as Prime Minister compared with 31 per cent for Fraser.

The Coalition Government decided to run on its record and make few promises. This was a calamitous miscalculation. What was its record? Unemployment had climbed from 484,000 to 746,000 in the past twelve months. The inflation rate stood at about eleven per cent per year: since Fraser had come to power, the value of the dollar, in real purchasing power, had been reduced by about half. What claims to 'natural leadership' and economic expertise could be made on this basis? Unemployment had spread from the less-skilled to white-collar and professional jobs. High interest rates were hitting home buyers hard. Fraser's personal style, seemingly aloof and tough-minded, did little to reassure middle-class voters whose economic and social position was now being eroded. They were looking

for a viable alternative. Hawke, with his record of ending industrial disputes rapidly when a union leader, with experience on the Board of the Reserve Bank, and more appealing personal style, looked exactly that.

Predictably, the Liberal policy speech on 15 February did little to impress voters: couched in general terms and with few specific undertakings, it merely confirmed the views of those who now felt the LNCP Coalition could do nothing for them and was indifferent to their plight. Labor's policy speech (on the following day) contained, by contrast, a body of coherent economic policies which pre-figured a prices and incomes accord based on its special relation with the union movement. However, it adroitly avoided a self-presentation as a working-class party by calling for a national, cross-class effort to halt the economic decline. No general capital gains tax was mentioned. A range of programs, from a national soil and water conservation scheme to expansion of funds to the arts through the Australia Council, was spelt out, obviously reflecting careful pre-planning. The business community, at first disturbed by the prospect of a Labor Government, was somewhat reassured.

The further course of the campaign reflected the increasing alarm of the Government. Initially, both major party blocs had allocated about \$2.5 million to advertising: now, the Liberals mustered another half million dollars. Fraser directed attention to the brevity of Hawke's leadership of the ALP and declared he would wilt under stress, but the reverse seemed more true: it was Fraser who seemed to be losing his grip. When he suggested that even bank savings would be safer if transferred under the bed under Labor, the response by the media was derisive.

By this time, another factor was emerging which may have fortified

the Labor case: if the Government was defeated, it seemed highly likely that Fraser would be replaced as Liberal leader by Andrew Peacock — a development which many Coalition voters, watching Fraser's performance with increasing dismay, found attractive.

The issue of the dam under construction in the Gordon River in Tasmania which threatened a wilderness area of world interest was the one issue which seemed to favour Fraser. He had attempted to stop its construction but had bowed to the wishes of the Tasmanian Premier, Mr Gray, and allowed it to go ahead. Tasmanians were clearly in favour of the dam, and this was the one state in which the ALP lost votes. But in another way, it was to Hawke's advantage: opinion on the mainland was much more against the dam, and both Labor and the Democrats were in long-standing opposition to its construction. In the upshot, the issue not only assisted the Labor campaign at the national level: it also provided the Democrats with valuable support. Many members of the Wilderness Society assisted the Democrats by handing out their how-to-vote cards at polling booths, and this not only assisted their own vote but also that of the Labor Party. Democrat preferences tended to go to Labor more heavily in this election than in previous ones.

The desperation in the Coalition camp was also reflected in a decision to recruit the Queensland Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, to an active part in the campaign. This was of dubious value outside Queensland, since many voters regard him as an archetypal reactionary. As the campaign neared its close, the confidence and panache of Hawke increased as the Labor vote gathered momentum and Malcolm Fraser looked increasingly lacking in confidence and at his wits' end for a bold stroke which might turn the tide in his favour. To no avail. After the polling made it clear that Labor

had won Government by a wide margin, he conceded defeat at 1 a.m. on March 6 in a short, emotional speech which presaged his withdrawal from federal politics.

How should we interpret the campaign as a whole — and its outcome? There are five points to be made. Firstly, it now seems clear that Hawke's popularity was not ephemeral and his rapport with the electorate has continued to grow. He was established by the campaign as Labor's major asset and is likely to remain so. His relations with the union movement have remained good, although not uniformly so: he remains in conflict with the Labor Left, especially in Victoria. Nevertheless, his position as Labor leader seems certain for years ahead.

Secondly, the economy and its management have both remained intractable problems. There has been no massive recovery and it seems certain that structural unemployment of a sweeping kind will persist. Nevertheless, the rate of industrial disputes has fallen and the end of the drought, together with signs of an upswing in the American economy, have assisted our situation. However, there has been little forthcoming in the way of striking government initiatives in the area of high technology to help its growth. This remains an area largely unexplored, in which the Opposition, now led by Peacock, may find it possible to recover ground. The overall economic policies which the Fraser Government pursued — wage and budgetary restraint — have followed the same course and are likely to continue to do so with little major change.

Thirdly, the proportion of the vote obtained by the LNCP Coalition was not catastrophically low, and allows for a re-equilibration once some credible policies have been developed by the Liberals. However, their support is unlikely to

grow sufficiently for a win to be in prospect at the next election.

Fourthly, whilst at this election the Democrats appeared to consolidate their role as a central party, seemingly capable of maintaining their balance of power within the Senate for an indefinite period, there is greater uncertainty surrounding their future than might have first appeared. Their victory — the retention of the five-seat power base in the Senate — was based on Fraser's folly in calling a double dissolution election which, as we have noted above, made it easier for their candidates to 'scrape home' because of the smaller quota of votes required. In future elections they may be unequal to the task of meeting the stipulation of normal vote quotas (which are as high as 16.7 per cent). Their national membership is much depleted and they cannot count in the future on the support of such special concern groups as the Wilderness Society. They have yet to develop a fully coherent policy profile — a point reflected in their somewhat vacuous campaign slogans: for example 'The Minders'. This self-characterization stops a long way short of being electorally magnetic: the last thing which the electoral public seems to require is a body to 'look after' Bob Hawke.

Lastly, the wisdom of concentrating upon domestic issues and giving the appearance or promise of sound economic management remains clear. It is the way to win elections in this country, a lesson taught us by a minor paradox: Bob Hawke has been in the eighties what Bob Menzies, the Liberal leader, was in the fifties and sixties, that is, a popular leader whose most important electoral asset is a reputation for good economic management. As the Romans said in the classical period: 'Times change and men change with them.' In contemporary Australia, the mantle of 'natural' leadership has passed to Labor shoulders. The posture and style are not altogether different.