Western Australia state election 2017

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Politics and Public Administration Section

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Introduction

Western Australia has a bicameral parliament consisting of the Legislative Assembly (lower house) and the Legislative Council (upper house). On 11 November 2011 the Western Australian Parliament passed the *Electoral and Constitution Amendment Act 2011 (WA)* which established a fixed election date: elections are held on the second Saturday in March every four years. The previous election was held on 9 March 2013.¹ The Legislative Assembly is comprised of representatives from 59 single member districts. The Legislative Council is comprised of 36 representatives: six elected from each of six regions on a proportional representation basis. Parliament was prorogued, and the Legislative Assembly dissolved, by the Governor on 30 January 2017. The writs were issued on 1 February for an election on Saturday 11 March.² Sixteen parties contested the election compared to the seven which ran in 2013.

**Note:** All hyperlinks in this paper accessed at the time of publication.

Background

**Electoral changes**

According to the *Electoral Act 1907 (WA)*, an electoral redistribution is required during each term.³ The 2015 redistribution was significantly affected by a rapid population increase on the outskirts of Perth. The boundaries of 50 out of 59 lower house districts were altered, many substantially. There were three new seats — Baldivis (notionally Labor), Bicton (notionally Liberal) and Roe (notionally National) — while the regional Liberal seat of Eyre was abolished and some districts were given new names. Furthermore, redrawn boundaries in other seats resulted in two Labor seats becoming notionally Liberal.⁴ Overall, while ‘Liberal’ seats increased from 31 to 32 and ‘Labor’ seats reduced from 21 to 20, the 10 per cent swing needed for a change in government was little affected.⁵

For the first time in Western Australia, people with disabilities could register to vote electronically, via the internet or a touchtone phone.⁶

Pre-polling was opened up to all voters, not just those who were unable to cast their vote on polling day.⁷ Early voting polling was opened on Monday 20 February.

In a first for the seat of Kimberley, Labor and Liberal both fielded indigenous candidates: Warren Greatorex (Liberal) and sitting MLA Josie Farrer (Labor).⁸

**2013 election**

At the 2013 WA election the Liberals under Premier Colin Barnett retained Government with a two-party preferred swing of 6.6 per cent. Although the Liberal Party won enough seats to govern in its own right, the Liberal-National alliance was maintained. Labor under Mark McGowan lost seven seats; the Greens for the second successive election failed to win a seat; and Independents lost the three Legislative Assembly seats they had won at the 2008 election.⁹

The Government also maintained control of the Legislative Council with the Liberal-Nationals alliance winning 22 of the 36 seats. Labor retained its 11 seats, the Greens lost two of four seats (despite receiving many more votes than the Nationals), and the Shooters and Fishers Party picked up one seat.¹⁰

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² Western Australian Electoral Commission, *Election Timeline*.

³ Western Australian Electoral Commission, *Review of electoral boundaries*.

⁴ A Green, *Western Australian Election Preview*, ABC News.

⁵ A Green, *Western Australian Election Preview*, ABC News.


Table 1: Legislative Assembly seats won by each party at the 2013 election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats (change from 2008 election)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
<td>31 (+7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationals</td>
<td>7 (+3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>21 (-7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>0 (-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: B Holmes Western Australian State Election 2013. Background Note, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2 May 2013, p.25.

Table 2: Legislative Council seats won by each party at the 2013 election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats (change from 2008 election)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
<td>17 (+1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationals</td>
<td>5 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>11 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>2 (-2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooters and Fishers</td>
<td>1 (+1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: B Holmes Western Australian State Election 2013. Background Note, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2 May 2013, p.25.

Following the 2013 election there was only one by-election—in October 2014—following the resignation of former Liberal Party leader and Treasurer, Troy Buswell. The Government was able to retain the seat. The only other change came when MLA Rob Johnson left the Liberal Party in April 2016 to sit as an Independent.  

**Party leaders**

Each of the major parties was led by the same leader that had been in place for the 2013 election. Liberal Premier Colin Barnett was seeking a third term, having been in office since 2008. He had won the 2013 election in the context of a performing state economy and an unpopular federal Labor Government facing an election later in the year. Barnett had survived a leadership challenge from Dean Nalder in September 2016, but entered the campaign for the 2017 election with a ‘better premier’ approval rating of just 32 per cent.  

National Party leader Brendon Grylls had resigned the leadership in November 2013, but returned to the leadership position in August 2016.  

Labor’s Mark McGowan continued as Labor leader to fight the 2017 election, having survived rumours of a challenge to his leadership and a serious challenge in 2016 from former federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith.  

**Results**

Turnout was 86.9 per cent which was down from 89.2 per cent at the 2013 election. The proportion of informal votes improved from 6 per cent in 2013 to 4.5 per cent this election following a concerted effort by the WA Electoral Commission. Four hundred and fifteen candidates contested 59 seats in the Legislative Assembly. Three hundred and two candidates stood for 36 seats in the six regions of the Legislative Council. There was a marked increase in the number of postal votes cast from 74,493 at the 2013 election to 111,761 at this

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11. A Green, Western Australian Election Preview, ABC News.  
12. A Green, Western Australian Election Preview, ABC News.  
Twenty-four out of 89 members seeking re-election lost their seats, including seven Cabinet ministers.

The estimated two-party preferred vote was ALP 55.5 per cent to Liberal/Nationals 44.5 per cent, (compared to ALP 43.8 per cent, Liberal/Nationals 57.2 per cent in 2013). This was a swing of 12.8 per cent to Labor. Commentator William Bowe noted that this was the fifth time since 2011 that a swing exceeded 10 per cent in Australian mainland state elections. Such volatility means that there are many fewer safe seats than there used to be. In fact, a 12.8 per cent swing would put Labor in government at the next state election.

At the March 2017 election the WA Labor Party achieved its best primary vote either federally or at the state level since 1987. Furthermore, its seat total and two-party-preferred vote was unprecedented. A swing against Labor of 5.8 per cent would be needed for it to lose Government at the next election.

The Liberal Party with 31.2 per cent of the primary vote won just 13 seats in the Legislative Assembly, down 18 from the previous election. In the Legislative Council, the party polled 26.7 per cent of the primary vote and won just nine seats, a reduction of eight. One election analyst has pointed out that, when the electoral redistribution is taken into account, the Liberal Party lost 19 seats and the Labor Party gained 21 seats in the Legislative Assembly.

The Nationals dropped two seats in the Legislative Assembly and one in the Legislative Council. A strong campaign by the Chamber of Minerals and Energy against the Nationals’ mining tax policy probably played a significant role in the two mining and pastoral seats of Kalgoorlie and Pilbara where Nationals Leader Grylls was defeated.

### Table 3: Seats and first preference votes by successful parties in the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party (Candidates)</th>
<th>Legislative Assembly</th>
<th>Legislative Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seats won</td>
<td>Change from last election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP (59)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>+20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party (59)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationals (16)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens (59)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (35)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooters, Fishers and Farmers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


One Nation contested 35 of the 59 seats in the lower house, but in four of those seats the listed One Nation candidate on the ballot paper had resigned or been disendorsed by the party before polling day. One Nation

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17. A Green, Final 2017 WA Election Results plus a New Electoral Pendulum, Antony Green’s Election Blog, 30 March 2017. Green notes that final figures will be available at a later date.
polled 4.9 per cent across the state for the Legislative Assembly but 8.5 per cent in the seats it contested. This was not far behind the Greens, who contested all Assembly seats and polled at 8.9 per cent. Neither party won a seat in the Legislative Assembly.

In the Legislative Council, One Nation won three seats with 8.2 per cent of the vote. The Greens won four seats with 8.6 per cent of the vote. Both parties contested all six regions.

According to election analyst Antony Green, the preference deal between One Nation and the Liberals provided no benefit for One Nation in its wins in either the South West or Agricultural Regions and only a small benefit in getting their candidate over the quota in the Mining and Pastoral Region.

Green also suggests that the Liberal Democrats benefited from voters’ name confusion with the Liberal Party and the fact that, in the region where they won a seat (South Metropolitan), the Liberal Democrats were placed to the left of the Liberals on the ballot paper. In the other five regions they were placed to the right of the Liberals. The Liberal Democrats were the only party to win a seat from a brokered preference-swapping arrangement, which they had with four other micro-parties.

Aftermath for the WA Liberal Party

In the aftermath of the election, the WA Liberal Party appeared to be in shock at the magnitude of the defeat (seven ministers had lost their seats). No one seemed prepared to put themselves forward as leader, and there were recriminations as to how the campaign had been run, how the party had been performing, and how the Government had handled some of the big issues. Former Corrective Services Minister Joe Francis fronted the media three days after the election, saying: ‘...there’s a void right now from the Liberal Party where people are either [in] denial about the magnitude of the victory of the Labor Party or in denial about what went wrong, or in denial about what the future may hold,’ and that:

Look obviously there was dysfunction between the Premier’s office and the ministry and the back bench. [Premier] Colin [Barnett] was wrapped in cotton wool by people who just said yes to him. I’m not going to point fingers. I would say that the Premier seemed to be cocooned somewhat by people in his office from the reality of what was happening in the electorate.

Francis and others slammed the party’s preference deal with One Nation for depriving the party of oxygen as it pushed its campaign messages. There was also criticism the party had breached trust with the public on a range of issues, including its broken promise from the 2013 election to build the Max light rail and an inadequate response to the impact of Uber on the taxi industry.

Federal Justice Minister Michael Keenan admitted the result was a ‘savage message’ for the Liberal Party but denied it was any reflection on the Turnbull Government.

The campaign

The formal election campaign began with the issue of the writs on Wednesday 1 February. The Barnett Government was well behind in the polls, and, unlike at the 2013 WA election, a federal Coalition Government was in place rather than Labor (and also behind Labor in the polls).

Economic issues

The economy was in decline compared to 2013. The investment boom was over; the state had lost its triple-A credit rating in September 2013; budget deficits were forecast until the end of the decade; public sector debt...
was forecast to rise to $41 billion by 2020; and unemployment was the highest of any state in Australia at 6.5 per cent. 35 Furthermore, the state’s share of GST revenue was predicted to be cut by $1.2 billion by 2019–20. 36

The Government pointed out that its borrowings had produced new infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, the Perth Stadium and Elizabeth Quay. 37 It also blamed the budget deficit on WA’s low proportion of GST revenue. Although encouraged by the Prime Minister’s reference to 70 cents in the dollar as a potential GST floor level, this hope was tempered by the Prime Minister saying that a set floor level would only be introduced when all states agreed and no state was disadvantaged as a result. 38

The Government’s policy for bringing the state budget back to balance was through privatisation, in particular the selling of 51 per cent of Western Power, which would reduce the state’s debt by $8 billion. However, this was opposed by Labor and One Nation. 39 Labor argued the partial sale of Western Power would lead to higher consumer electricity prices and leave the state worse off, but the Government denied these assertions and maintained the sale was necessary to reduce debt and fund new infrastructure. 40 Labor further claimed that the Water Corporation would be next in line to be privatised after Western Power, something the Government denied. In turn, the Government claimed taxes and charges would increase under Labor, something denied by the Opposition.

Labor’s policy for winding back the debt was essentially to pay it back over time. 41 It also proposed public service cuts and the establishment of a debt reduction account into which would go windfall amounts. 42 Labor would use 50 per cent of mining royalties to pay down the debt but only when the GST share returned to 65 cents or above, and the iron price was $85 a tonne or more. An analysis by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce showed those conditions had been met only twice since the turn of the century, and would not be met at all by the end of the decade. Treasurer Dr Mike Nahan criticised Labor’s strategy as ‘hollow’. 43

**Liberal/Nationals differences**

Some differences on key policy areas emerged during the campaign between the Liberals and their alliance partner the Nationals. National Leader Brendon Grylls criticised both Liberal and Labor for not having viable plans to reduce debt. He said the Liberal plan to sell off Western Power would be blocked by One Nation, and Labor’s gradual approach would be frustrated by shortfalls in revenue. 44 He also noted that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s promise of a floor under the GST had come to nothing. 45 The Nationals proposed an increase in mining royalties, charging BHP and Rio Tinto $5 a tonne for their mined iron ore; but this was opposed by the Liberals who preferred a one-off payment. 46 The mining industry ran an estimated $2 million advertising campaign against the royalties proposal. 47 Later in the campaign, the Liberals announced a plan to move money from the Royalties for Regions program to meet the recurrent costs of regional programs which would save $800 million over two years. 48 This funding had previously come from consolidated revenue, and Brendon Grylls

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36. A O’Connor and J Kagi, **WA election: Debt woes, Metronet and One Nation candidate mark campaign trail**, ABC News, 9 February 2017. Other indicators of a weaker economy were: wages were the slowest-growing in Australia, commercial rents predicted to fall across Perth CBD, engineering works the lowest since June 2008, and new car sales lowest since June 2004. S Wright, **WA Budget a bucket of woe**, West Australian, 27 February 2017, p.6.
37. J Kagi, **WA debt explained: How bad is it and what are the major parties promising to do about it?** ABC News, 9 February 2017.
40. A O’Connor, **Labor claims Water Corp will be sold off if Liberals are re-elected on Saturday**, ABC News, 7 March 2017.
41. J Kagi, **WA debt explained: How bad is it and what are the major parties promising to do about it?** ABC News, 9 February 2017.
42. S Wright, **WA Budget a bucket of woe**, West Australian, 27 February 2017, p.6.
44. A O’Connor, **WA election: Brendon Grylls says major parties’ budget strategies are flawed**, ABC News, 28 February 2017.
46. A O’Connor, **WA election: Mike Nahan, Ben Wyatt offer to resign if their parties break promises**, ABC News, 8 February 2017.
47. P Taylor, **BHP, Rio go on mine tax attack**, Australian, 3 February 2017, p.5. W Bowe, **Crikey Poll Bludger: the party with the cojones to take on the mining fat cats is ... the Nationals?** Crikey, 3 March 2017.
vowed to fight this plan.49 Adding to the tension between the parties, Nationals Deputy Leader Mia Davies criticised WA’s representatives in the federal Cabinet for neglecting the state.50

**Transport**

Transport was a major campaign issue, in particular the Government’s $1.6 billion Perth Freight Link project and its first stage, a $450 million extension of the Roe Highway known as Roe 8. Announced in May 2014, the whole project was designed as a heavy haulage freight route to Fremantle Port which would also ease traffic congestion in the area.51 Documents obtained under freedom of information indicating that the Perth Freight Link tunnel could cost up to $8.5 billion were dismissed by Treasurer Mike Nahan as being out of date. Federal Minister for Social Services and WA Liberal member Christian Porter stated that this was a 2014 estimate not based on an engineering or private sector assessment.52

Labor vowed to stop work on the project and divert the money to other projects such as an outer harbour at Kwinana.53 However, the federal Government said it may not permit such a reallocation of its $1.2 billion contribution to the project.54

The Greens, environmentalists and indigenous groups were also opposed to the project, with the Conservation Council of WA calling for a royal commission. One claim that the road would run through the Beeliar Wetlands, home to three species of black cockatoo, was countered by the Government pointing out that Lake Clifton had been identified as a potential offset site.55 Premier Colin Barnett went further, saying that if the project was not completed ‘lives will be lost in traffic accidents’.56

**Federal issues**

Just over two weeks from polling day the federal Fair Work Commission brought down its decision that the Sunday penalty rate be cut from double the typical wage to 150 per cent, and that this be applied to employees of hospitality, fast food and retail companies.57 Colin Barnett said he would like to see a reduction in ‘those excessive Sunday penalties [to] bring them in line with Saturday and increase the base rate.’58 Mark McGowan criticised Barnett’s stance, and Nationals leader Brendon Grylls expressed concern about ‘attacks’ on penalty rates.59

**Party campaign launches**

Both Labor and the Liberals formally launched their campaigns on Sunday 19 February. Neither Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull nor Opposition Leader Bill Shorten attended their party’s launch.

At the Liberals’ launch, Colin Barnett highlighted the revitalisation of Perth and pledged: a live export facility at Kwinana costing $110m and funded by the part privatisation of Western Power; $15,000 stamp duty concessions for over-65s wanting to downsize or change homes (capped at $750,000 house value); and a $5,000 bonus to employers taking on apprentices with the aim of boosting apprenticeships by 15,000.60 The launch was addressed by federal Minister Christian Porter.61

Labor launched its campaign under the banner ‘WA Jobs First’ with Mark McGowan pledging: to freeze TAFE fees at a cost of $15.55 million over four years; to divert federal funds meant for Roe 8 to Labor’s Metronet rail plan and road funding; and to impose a new four per cent tax on foreign residential property buyers (expected to

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53.  A O’Connor, WA election: Mike Nahan, Ben Wyatt offer to resign if their parties break promises, ABC News, 8 February 2017.
raise $21 million in its first year). In response to suggestions that the federal Government would not permit its contribution to the Perth Freight Link to be diverted to Labor’s Metronet, McGowan said, in an echo of John Howard, that: ‘It will be Western Australians who will decide where our funding is directed to and the circumstances with which it is spent.’

The Nationals had their launch the day before (18 February), during which Brendon Grylls announced a policy aimed at encouraging companies to employ people who lived in the town or area rather than hiring fly-in fly-out workers. The ‘Live Where You Work’ policy would exempt companies employing residents from paying payroll tax, the threshold of which would be raised to $5 million.

The Greens had launched their campaign on 11 February, emphasising sustainability, limiting the powers of lobbyists, and reforming the political donations system by ‘banning … donations particularly from for-profit corporations, mining companies and polluters.

**Leaders’ debate**

The only televised leaders’ debate was held on 22 February before a panel of political journalists. Premier Colin Barnett noted that the economy had been ‘difficult’ but that it was ‘basically strong’ and ‘turning for the better’. He promised ‘to lead Western Australia … through a transition into another period of growing prosperity’. Labor leader Mark McGowan noted the poor state of the economy and offered ‘stable, competent, secure leadership for the long haul’. Barnett criticised McGowan’s lack of experience, the costings of his program and his debt reduction plan. McGowan criticised the Liberals’ plan to sell off Western Power and its preference deal with One Nation. Political analyst Peter Kennedy judged that the debate was most likely to have reinforced people’s voting intentions rather than changing them.

A few days later Barnett and McGowan appeared at a question and answer event organised by the Australian Christian Lobby where the focus was on social issues. Barnett opposed voluntary euthanasia; McGowan supported it. McGowan was in favour of the Safe Schools program, Barnett was not. Barnett criticised the format as not being interactive enough and insisted there would be only one debate.

**Federal visits and interventions**

A range of federal MPs, former prime ministers and state premiers made appearances or comments at various stages throughout the campaign. These included former Liberal PM John Howard and former WA Labor Premier Geoff Gallop.

Prime Minister Turnbull’s one and only visit—for less than 24 hours—was described variously as a ‘disaster’ and a ‘damp squib’. This was because, having promised in August 2016 to put a floor under GST distribution so that states such as WA did not miss out, Turnbull subsequently stated that any such reform was ‘a few years away’. Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten visited three times. Neither leader attended their party’s campaign launch as both were in Darwin commemorating the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin. Federal MPs who campaigned for Colin Barnett at one stage or another included Deputy Liberal Leader Julie Bishop.

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One media report suggested that two federal Nationals MPs, including federal leader Barnaby Joyce, were not welcome to visit WA during the campaign due to differences over the proposal to increase mining royalties.  

Federal Australian Greens Leader Senator Richard Di Natale visited the state on 21 February and proposed the decriminalisation of illicit drug possession and a royal commission into drug-related crime.

Federal Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese warned on his visit that both Liberal and One Nation supporters were unhappy about the preference deal between the WA Liberal Party and the One Nation party (covered below): ‘The One Nation people said they were outsiders and now they’re in bed with the Barnett government and Liberals who have a small ‘l’ liberal view of the world are frustrated as well about this deal that has put One Nation before the National Party.’

Former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke suggested that Opposition Leader Mark McGowan address WA’s budget and economic situation by holding a summit with business, union and community leaders. Mcgowan was also supported by former federal Labor leader Kim Beazley who said McGowan had ‘safe hands’ which, Beazley said, was more important than vision.

Federal One Nation leader Pauline Hanson campaigned during the week leading up to polling day and attracted much media attention in relation to statements supporting the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin and criticising the compulsory vaccination of children. The media attention was intensified when Hanson later admitted that she was wrong to claim that parents could have their children tested for allergies to vaccines.

Premier Barnett expressed frustration over the level of media focus on One Nation and the Liberal-One Nation preference arrangement.
• One Nation candidate for Fremantle, Warren Duffy, said he and other candidates supported Roe 8 in contradiction of Pauline Hanson, who had said in January that she opposed it and the privatisation of the Fremantle Port.94

Polling
Throughout the campaign polling consistently had Labor ahead of the Barnett Government on a two-party preferred vote, and Mark McGowan clearly ahead of Colin Barnett as preferred Premier. Newspoll had Labor ahead on the two-party preferred vote from the end of March 2015 onwards and leading the primary vote from May 2016 onwards. Mark McGowan had consistently outpolled Colin Barnett as preferred Premier since the end of 2013.95 In the last week of the campaign bookmakers gave Labor a 76 per cent chance of winning the election.96

The Liberal-One Nation preference deal
One Nation’s media domination of the campaign began early-on. Having done very well at the Federal election (2 July 2016) less than a year before, and polling well in WA, One Nation was the subject of much discussion within the major parties as to where to place the party on how-to-vote cards. The Liberal Party decided to come to an arrangement with One Nation whereby the Liberals would preference One Nation above the Nationals in the Legislative Council in exchange for One Nation preferencing the Liberals ahead of Labor in the Legislative Assembly.97 The Liberals would preference the Nationals in lower house seats and put the Greens above Labor in all Legislative Council Metropolitan seats, as they did in the 2013 election.98 Labor refused to do any preference deals with One Nation.99

Premier Barnett defended the decision on purely pragmatic grounds. He was at pains to emphasise that the deal should in no way be viewed as endorsement of One Nation candidates or policies, saying:

Can I make it absolutely clear the Liberal Party has made an agreement on preferences in this election in the Upper House - in the Lower House where government is determined, Liberal preferences go to the National Party. There is no endorsement of One Nation candidates by myself or anyone else, there is no endorsement of One Nation policies and there is no agreement or understanding that we will reach policy agreements on legislation or any other matter.100

Nevertheless, Barnett also commented that One Nation’s policies were not as extreme as they were 20 years ago.101

Pauline Hanson also saw the arrangement in practical electoral terms: ‘It’s shoring up that we can win seats in the Upper House, otherwise it’s going to be extremely hard for us.’102

The deal was not accepted by all WA Liberals. Liberal MLA for the seat of Perth Eleni Evangel said: ‘... just because this preference deal has been negotiated, it’s not a reflection of my values and what I stand for because I certainly don’t have anything in common with the values and policies of One Nation.’103

Federally, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull supported the Liberals’ decision on the basis that it was all about maximising the chances of the Liberals retaining government.104 However, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott decried the deal, saying that the Nationals should always be put above other parties.105 Federal Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce was also against the deal.106

95.  WA two-party preferred, WA primary vote, WA better premier, Newspoll website.
The WA Nationals expressed their displeasure with the deal by deciding to preference Greens candidates ahead of the second- and third-placed Liberal candidates in two Upper House regions: Mining and Pastoral, and South West. This meant that sitting Greens MP Robin Chaple received National Party preferences ahead of Liberal Minister for Agriculture Mark Lewis. 107

More widely, the preference deal was criticised by the Islamic Council of Perth, which urged Muslims not to vote Liberal because it is ‘appearing to endorse the politics of racism, division and fear’. The Council advocated voting Green. 108

According to a ReachTEL poll conducted on 15 February (a little over three weeks before the election) the wider electorate also had a negative view of the preference deal. It found that 54.2 per cent disagreed with the deal, with 30.8 per cent agreeing and 15 per cent undecided. Furthermore, 43.2 per cent said they were less likely to vote Liberal as a result of the deal, 22.5 per cent were more likely to vote Liberal and 34.3 per cent said their vote would not change. 109

Meanwhile, ‘Preference Whisperer’ Glenn Druery brokered a deal whereby five micro-parties seeking seats in the Upper House would preference each other. The parties were: Family First, Liberal Democrats, Flux the System, Fluoride Free and Daylight Saving Party. 110

One Nation internal issues

The Liberal-One Nation preference arrangement was not accepted by all One Nation candidates, many of whom had not been consulted or informed about it beforehand. Margaret Dodd, One Nation candidate for Scarborough, said she had not been informed of the deal and would not be preferencing the Liberals. 111 In the last week of the campaign she said she had paid for posters containing a ‘Put the Liberals last’ message next to a picture of her and Pauline Hanson. 112 She planned to put them in polling booths—to the displeasure of Senator Hanson, who said she was not a team player and that if she had a problem with preferencing the Liberals she should have stood as an independent. 113 Weeks before, Hanson had said that the deal was in the best interests of One Nation and that those candidates not happy with it should resign from the party and run as independents. 114

On the last day of the campaign One Nation candidate Margaret Dodd did precisely this, although her name on the ballot paper remained under One Nation. Dodd said in parting:

PHON [Pauline Hanson’s One Nation] in my eyes are not about the WA people and their future but for personal power for Senator Hanson who will do and say anything to achieve her goal at whatever cost. This sort of agenda is something I do not wish to be part of therefore I shall take Senator Hanson’s advice and leave the Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. 115

Another One Nation candidate, Ray Gould, had resigned just a week out from polling day saying ‘Nothing has been upfront, we haven’t been told the truth from day one’. 116 His name too remained on the ballot paper under One Nation.

One Nation disendorsed candidates for the rural Lower House seat of North West Central (Dane Sorensen) and the southern Perth seat of Thornlie (Sandy Baraiolo) for not meeting ‘standards’. 117 Although Sorensen had spoken out against the preference deal with the Liberals, One Nation WA state leader Colin Tincknell said the disendorsements were not related to that issue. 118 Because nominations had closed, however, the two

111. WA One Nation candidate Margaret Dodd refuses to preference Liberals, ABC News online, 13 February 2017.
114. A Probyn, Pauline Hanson responds to One Nation candidates’ criticism of WA Liberal preference deal, ABC News 15 February 2017.
candidates remained on the ballot paper as One Nation candidates. Sorensen expressed dissatisfaction with One Nation’s chief advisor, James Ashby, for not being prepared to discuss matters with candidates or leave room for negotiation. Baraiolo, who had indicated that she was not doing deals with anyone, said that the reason she was given for being disendorsed was that she ‘refused to follow direction and refused to work as a team’.

Even as One Nation was in the process of selecting its candidates, longstanding party stalwarts Ron McLean and Marye Louise Daniels accused Senator Hanson of sacking Mr McLean as a Legislative Council candidate because she felt he was ‘too old’ to run for parliament. Hanson denied this.

Five other One Nation candidates said voters should make up their own minds as to where they directed their preferences. Pauline Hanson agreed, and tried to calm matters by saying the deal was a recommendation only and that voters could choose to ignore it.

Media endorsements

The Sunday Times editor advocated a change for WA, saying: ‘It’s time for fresh ideas. And new leadership. The Sunday Times supports the election of Mark McGowan and his Labor team. We believe they should be given the opportunity to run our great State for the next four years.’

The West Australian also put its support behind Labor in its polling day eve editorial, but not without qualification. It pointed to the strained relationship between the Liberals and the Nationals, saying: ‘This unworkable relationship is a symptom of the decline of the Barnett-Grylls Government and one of the reasons why The West Australian is advocating for Labor to be given an opportunity for a fresh start.’ While giving credit to Barnett for his infrastructure legacy, the newspaper criticised the lack of transparency on many projects and questioned their affordability. The West Australian characterised Grylls’ tax plan as a ‘disaster’, presciently noting that it could even cost Grylls his seat in the Pilbara. It also noted that Barnett received no support from his federal colleagues as evidenced by the Prime Minister’s failure to provide any assurance over the GST. The newspaper lamented the loss of treasurer Christian Porter to the federal sphere and stated that a ‘tired’ Barnett had no ‘credible succession plan’.

By contrast, the West Australian characterised Mark McGowan as being youthful, but was also concerned that Labor did not have a robust debt management strategy. It urged McGowan to continue with the Perth Freight Link, and also warned against undue union influence and the risk to good government posed by One Nation and minor parties having the balance of power in the Legislative Council. The newspaper urged voters to ‘reject those who want to wreck the system, and stick with the major parties.’ The editorial concluded: ‘The West Australian believes voters are looking for new ideas and new leadership. Labor has a suite of positive policies … [Mr McGowan] deserves the opportunity to implement his plans and to not be hindered by a gaggle of small parties in the Upper House.’

The Australian, while conceding an ‘it’s time’ factor in its editorial, warned against giving One Nation the balance of power in the Legislative Council, stating that: ‘Entrusting the party with the balance of power in the upper house would be tantamount to stalling reform and progress.’ It concluded:

‘However aggrieved West Australians may be with Mr Barnett, who has failed to develop a succession plan, voters should be careful in what they wish for by turning to Labor or to One Nation. If anything, the campaign has refocused the Liberal Party’s thinking and its plan is sound. Voters would best serve their own interests by retaining the status quo.’

122. C Moodie, One Nation couple claim Ron McLean was dumped from WA election ticket because he was ‘too old’, ABC News 8 March 2017.
126. Editorial: WA deserves the chance for a fresh start, West Australian, 10 March 2017.
127. Editorial: WA deserves the chance for a fresh start, West Australian, 10 March 2017.
128. Editorial: WA deserves the chance for a fresh start, West Australian, 10 March 2017.
129. Editorial: WA deserves the chance for a fresh start, West Australian, 10 March 2017.
Premier Colin Barnett criticised the media’s coverage of the election as being ‘light on’, characterising the questioning of the One Nation deal as ‘trite’ and the scrutiny of Labor’s promises as not properly done.\textsuperscript{132} Pauline Hanson herself was critical of Labor’s attack on the One Nation preference deal with the Liberals, likening it to the Medicare campaign run by Labor at the 2016 federal election.\textsuperscript{133}

**Analysis**

The main topics to arise in discussions of the election result and its implications were the ‘it’s time’ factor; the WA economy; the Liberals-One Nation preference deal; the media focus on One Nation; state versus federal factors; and the implications for the parties at the federal and Queensland level.

**It’s time**

Going for a third election win was always going to be difficult for the Barnett Government, as it brought into play the ‘it’s time’ factor. Prime Minister Turnbull attributed the loss to state issues and the ‘it’s time’ factor.\textsuperscript{134} A ReachTEL poll conducted a couple of days before the election found that 43.5 per cent of voters who said they were voting Labor stated the reasons for doing so to be either ‘it’s time for a change in Government’ or ‘I don’t like Colin Barnett’.\textsuperscript{135}

Political analyst Michelle Grattan noted: ‘If he wins, Mr McGowan’s victory will be largely because people just want to see the end of Mr Barnett, who trails his opponent as preferred premier. It’s not that they hate him, but rather many voters simply think his time is over.’\textsuperscript{136}

However, not all commentators agreed with the ‘it’s time’ thesis. Queensland political scientist Paul Williams dismissed it and pointed to its failure as a factor against Menzies or Beattie in the 1963 and 2006 elections respectively.\textsuperscript{137}

A concomitant factor to ‘it’s time’ was that Premier Colin Barnett had made it clear that he did not intend to stay the full term if elected. As Michelle Grattan commented: ‘It might be commendable frankness but, for voters, it adds more uncertainty.’\textsuperscript{138} The *West Australian*’s analyst Gary Adshead attributed some of the loss to the lack of a succession plan after Colin Barnett.\textsuperscript{139} Three major candidates for the leadership had moved on—Troy Buswell left for personal reasons, Christian Porter moved to the federal sphere and Barnett’s deputy, Kim Hames, had retired.

Professor Peter van Onselen also highlighted the failed leadership challenge to Barnett by Dean Nalder in September 2016, because it undermined the momentum which had seen the Government draw within two percentage points of Labor in the opinion polls. The challenge exposed doubts within the party as to Barnett’s suitability for another term.\textsuperscript{140} After the election, Liberal former Deputy Premier Liza Harvey pointed to this, stating: ‘I expect when we do the analysis of when things started to go wrong it will point to that period of upheaval and turmoil. The one big turn-off for people in the community is when politicians, governments, parties, start talking about themselves.’\textsuperscript{141}

**State of the WA economy**

The state of the WA economy and people’s concerns with their own circumstances appeared to outweigh any benefits derived from the rejuvenation of Perth and the benefits of Barnett’s large infrastructure projects.\textsuperscript{142} The planned sell-off of Western Power was also a significant factor in voters’ minds. In the final poll of the campaign,
27 per cent of those who indicated they would vote Labor gave their opposition to its privatisation as their main reason. This was nearly as many who ranked ‘it’s time’ as their main reason (27.2 per cent).  

**Liberal-One Nation preference deal**

The preference deal between the Liberals and One Nation was a major issue throughout the campaign as the media’s focus on it and on One Nation made it difficult for Premier Barnett to gain the attention he needed for his own policies and his battle with Labor. Federal WA Liberal Senator Dean Smith commented that the deal ‘sucked the oxygen’ from the Liberal Party’s campaign. It was a distraction that clearly frustrated Barnett. Nevertheless, after analysing the results and preference flows, Antony Green concluded that the deal had had ‘minimal impact’ on the actual election results due to the significant changes in the primary vote:

In the end the election was not about preferences but rather the collapse of the Liberal Party’s primary vote. The Liberal Party recorded 31.2% in the lower house, its lowest ever vote at a state election where it contested every seat. Liberal support fell 15.9 percentage points, Labor’s vote up 9.1 percentage points and One Nation polling 4.9% from contests in 35 of the 59 seats. The election was decided by the change in primary vote, with results merely altered at the edges by minor party preferences.

It is not possible to know how many people who would have voted Liberal voted for another party because of the preference deal.

Political scientist William Bowe has noted that, despite Pauline Hanson’s attempts to let voters know that they should take control of their own preferences when voting, there was a perception that in doing the deal she had favoured one of the major parties:

Even people who are not exactly sure what a preference deal is, they’ve picked up loud and clear that One Nation has picked a side. And once they have done that, they lose that fabulous advantage of being the anti-politics party, of being removed from the whole establishment, of being the kind of Donald Trump-style option that is just going to go in there and tear everything apart. If they have a disappointing performance here, I think the important thing is that they are going to think twice about entering a preference deal with the Liberal-National Party in Queensland.

Antony Green also commented on the implications of the Liberal-One Nation preference deal for Queensland:

The question is whether the benefit gained from the extra preferences was outweighed by the bad publicity over the deal during the campaign. Assessing the pros and cons of a general preference deal is now a matter for the Queensland LNP to consider. Queensland has no upper house which removes one of One Nation’s reasons for engaging in a formal deal. The question is whether the LNP would want to have a general deal on preferences, or pick and choose seats. Avoiding a blanket deal may diminish controversy and allow the LNP to get around the variable quality of One Nation candidates.

The Liberals’ message was overshadowed by the media focus on One Nation and the preference deal, which added to the presence One Nation gained from its success at the 2016 federal election and from comments such as Senator Arthur Sinodinos’ February 2017 statement that One Nation was ‘a lot more sophisticated’ and that ‘our job is to treat them as any other party.’ When asked about the possibility of the WA Liberal-One Nation preference deal, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had simply said: ‘We respect every single member and senator.’

WA Liberal Senator Mathias Cormann, who reportedly helped arrange the preference deal, defended it in pragmatic terms: ‘If we wanted to minimise losses, maximise our chances of holding onto seats, we needed to be able to source preferences and clearly, these weren’t going to come from Labor and the Greens.’

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145. A Green, Detailed Preference Flow Data from the 2017 WA Election, 24 May 2017. This article provides a detailed analysis of preference flows.
150. M Grattan, One Nation has now been ‘normalised’ in the Liberals’ firmament of political players, The Conversation 12 February 2017.
151. M Grattan, One Nation has now been ‘normalised’ in the Liberals’ firmament of political players, The Conversation 12 February 2017.
Barnett also attempted to portray the deal in purely pragmatic terms, saying: ‘what we’re out to do is to retain government.’\(^{153}\) Barnett later said he was personally uncomfortable with the deal, but also adopted this stance: ‘It’s a mathematical exercise. It’s numbers to maximise the Liberal vote. We would be naive as a major party not to look after and protect our position.’\(^{154}\) WA federal Liberal minister Ken Wyatt indicated that voters had told him of their dislike of the preference deal with One Nation.\(^{155}\)

One journalist noted that ‘A preference deal, no matter how pragmatic, lends legitimacy to One Nation, and such views and will increase the likelihood they’ll drown out any other message — just like whatever chance the WA Liberals had of targeting weaknesses in Labor’s campaign was obliterated by the focus on One Nation.’\(^{156}\)

**Media focus on Pauline Hanson**

The focus on Pauline Hanson following the preference deal was exacerbated when she attracted much media focus on the eve of her visit to Western Australia at the beginning of the last week of the campaign. She praised the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin and criticised the federal Government’s policies on vaccination.\(^{157}\) Her admission four days later that she was wrong to claim parents could have their children tested for allergies to vaccinations increased the media attention One Nation received.\(^{158}\) In the final two weeks of the campaign, based on the number of press stories containing the name ‘Barnett’, ‘McGowan’ or ‘Hanson’ in the title, Senator Hanson was mentioned in almost two and two thirds as many articles (90) as Barnett and McGowan combined (34 in total and 23 and 11 respectively).

**Federal factors**

As is often the case, views regarding the influence of federal factors on the election differed. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stated that ‘there is no evidence of federal factors playing a role there’,\(^{159}\) and federal Treasurer Scott Morrison said ‘the issues in WA were the issues in WA.’\(^{160}\) Federal Justice Minister Michael Keenan stated that ‘penalty rates and federal issues have been no issue in this campaign.’\(^{161}\) However, federal Opposition Leader Bill Shorten had a different view, saying: ‘If Malcolm Turnbull listens to the people of Western Australia tonight, he will do two things on Sunday—drop his support for cuts to penalty rates, and rule out any more deals with One Nation.’\(^{162}\) In mid-March Shorten said:

> But I do note that Colin Barnett, along with Malcolm Turnbull, in the last two weeks of the West Australian election came out and supported the cut to penalty rates. I’m sure that did have some impact and it will keep having an impact on the fortunes of conservative politics when Pauline Hanson and Malcolm Turnbull keep supporting the cuts to penalty rates.\(^{163}\)

Shorten said there were a lot of state issues, but also lessons for the federal sphere: a vote for either the Liberals or One Nation was a vote for the other and ‘a vote to cut penalty rates’.\(^{164}\)

Commentators also expressed views on federal factors. Journalist Laura Tingle stated that ‘this was a campaign that never really jumped the Nullarbor’,\(^{165}\) and that WA voters’ dissatisfaction with the GST distribution for their state was more likely to have affected views of the federal government rather than of the state government.\(^{166}\) Western Australian-based Peter Van Onselen largely rejected federal factors as affecting the WA election outcome, opining instead that ‘Labor under Mark McGowan’s leadership presented as a credible alternative

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153. M Grattan, *One Nation has now been 'normalised' in the Liberals' firmament of political players*, The Conversation 12 February 2017.
when voters were looking for a change.'\textsuperscript{167} Paul Williams suggested that it was ‘implausible’ to think that federal issues did not have at least some influence on voters in marginal seats.\textsuperscript{168}

**Wider implications**

A few points emerge from the WA election that are worth noting in the broader context.

- The federal Government now faces Labor governments in every state and territory except NSW and Tasmania.

- Following the election Nationals leader Brendon Grylls, who lost his seat, was replaced by Mia Davies, who advocated that the party continue to maintain its separate identity from the Liberals: ‘I’m quite convinced that the reason we have as many members as we do and our ability to represent our constituency, is because we protect that independence.’\textsuperscript{169} Election analyst Antony Green noted that, despite the Nationals losing the mining seats of Pilbara and Kalgoorlie, their overall vote held up. Green suspected it was the Liberals, not the Nationals, who lost ground to One Nation.\textsuperscript{170}

- It has been suggested that if state results were repeated at a federal election, the federal Liberal-held seats of Hasluck (Ken Wyatt), Canning (Andrew Hastie) and Pearce (Christian Porter) could be under threat, given that the state seats encompassed by these divisions all fell heavily to Labor.\textsuperscript{171} It has also been suggested that the economic downturn and WA’s ‘ingrained hostility’ to Canberra could be of benefit to Labor federally.\textsuperscript{172}

- One Nation’s results of 8.5 per cent of the vote across contested Legislative Assembly seats and 8.2 per cent across contested Legislative Council seats could be considered quite an achievement, given that: three One Nation candidates were disendorsed; one candidate quit; two senior longstanding party stalwarts were ‘sacked’; and, towards the end of the campaign, Pauline Hanson made controversial statements in support of the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin and criticised the compulsory vaccination of children.\textsuperscript{173}

- One analysis from the Australia Institute suggests that One Nation’s result in WA could eventually lead to the party securing the balance of power in the Senate federally. One Nation’s 8.47 per cent of the vote in the seats it contested in the Legislative Assembly was just about double its result in the 2016 federal election; if this support is retained, the party could be in line to win a Senate seat in WA at the next federal election.\textsuperscript{174} In addition, One Nation WA is better off organisationally, able to claim nearly $320,000 in electoral expenditure reimbursement in WA as its candidates obtained over four per cent of the primary vote.\textsuperscript{175} This injection of funds and a stronger organisational base will put One Nation in a better campaigning position.\textsuperscript{176}

- The issue of possible preference deals with One Nation will reverberate federally and at the next state election in Queensland for political parties (including One Nation itself).\textsuperscript{177} In addition, the flow of One Nation preferences in WA is noteworthy:

> ... it was the first election under full preferential voting where One Nation directed preferences to the Coalition. It offers a guide to the next Queensland election, the state having recently returned to full preferential voting, and a potential guide to the next Federal election.\textsuperscript{178}

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\textsuperscript{167} P van Onselen, *The time was up for a tired Barnett*, The Australian, 13 March 2017, p.5.


\textsuperscript{169} E Borrello *Meet Mia Davies, Australia’s first female Nationals leader*, ABC News 5 April 2017.

\textsuperscript{170} E Borrello *Meet Mia Davies, Australia’s first female Nationals leader*, ABC News 5 April 2017.


\textsuperscript{172} W Bowe, *Poll Bludger: WA Libs’ downfall could eventually topple federal MPs*, Crikey, 13 April 2017.


\textsuperscript{175} N O’Malley, *Hanson vote underestimated*, Sydney Morning Herald, 24 April 2017.


### Appendix: seats won by each party for the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council

Table 4: Number of seats won by party in the Legislative Assembly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of Seats Won</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animal Justice Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Christians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daylight Saving Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family First</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluoride Free WA</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flux The System!</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julie Matheson for Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro Business Party</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline Hanson's One Nation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooters, Fishers and Farmers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socialist Alliance</td>
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<td>The Greens (WA)</td>
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Source: Western Australian Electoral Commission, [2017 State General Election: Legislative Assembly Elected Members](https://www.elections.wa.gov.au/)

Table 5: Number of seats won by party in the Legislative Council

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<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of Seats</th>
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