



The landslide revisited? The 2006 Victorian Election

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The Australian Labor Party (ALP) has been re-elected as the party of government in Victoria, with its leader, Steve Bracks, to return as premier with an only slightly diminished lower house majority of 22 seats. Arguably the most interesting aspect of the election was the use of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) proportional representation electoral system for the Legislative Council for the first time, following changes to Victoria's constitution and electoral laws in 2003. Victoria now joins the other States, except unicameral Queensland, in having one of its two houses of parliament elected by proportional representation.

After an initial indication that the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) had one two seats in the Council, a subsequent re-count found that it had won only one seat. But this did not diminish the historical fact that this was the first DLP electoral success in Victorian State elections since 1958. The DLP will join the National Party (two seats) and the Greens (three seats) as part of the constellation of minor parties with whom the Bracks government will have to negotiate if it is to see its legislative program pass the upper house. Labor has secured 19 upper house seats – two short of the absolute majority that early counting suggested it would achieve. The success of the DLP – a party that has spent most of its time since the 1970s convincing the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) that it still has the 500 requisite *bona fide* members to retain its official party status – has precipitated a debate about the success of Labor's upper house electoral reform. And it also highlights the iniquities of the practice of above-the-line voting, with the DLP's representation secured, not by popular vote, but through preference flows secured by backroom deals.¹ There are also increasing

¹ See Marian Sawer, 2004, 'Above-the-line voting—How democratic?' Democratic Audit of Australia, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/> and Peter Brent, 2004, 'Above the line Senate voting', Democratic Audit of Australia, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/>

rumblings of discontent over the way the VEC conducted this election including the almost farcical last days of the upper house count and re-count.

The controversy associated with the DLP success in the upper house notwithstanding, the ALP had a solid election. In the Legislative Assembly contest swings against the government occurred on primary vote (a swing of 4.9 per cent) and on two-party preferred vote (3 per cent) on the land-slide victory achieved in 2002. The two-party swing was predicted by newspaper opinion polls that had tracked a two-party vote for the government of between 53 and 55 per cent. As it turned out, Labor's two-party vote for the Assembly was 54.8 per cent – down on the 2002 land-slide but still amongst one of the highest two-party preferred votes in Victorian elections in the post-war period. The opposition parties obtained a rather small transfer of marginal government seats for this swing, although there are signs that the trend away from the government was much greater in strategically important parts of the electorate than the State-wide figures suggest – an outcome that might give some succour especially to the Liberal party.

Amidst the two-party preferred swings were some interesting results for the various minor parties. The swings on primary vote contained in the result for the Legislative Assembly (see table 1) show that the Liberal party obtained a paltry share of the vote (a swing of 0.5 percent) realigning from the ALP. What is more, is that the primary vote for the Greens, widely tipped especially by journalists as being the minor party most likely to benefit from a decline in voter support for the government, hardly moved from the high-point obtained in 2002 (a swing of 0.3 per cent), making the task of winning lower house districts in the inner city (Melbourne and Richmond in

particular) and maximising returns in the Legislative Council just that bit more difficult. Notwithstanding their failure to win Melbourne, by securing three upper house seats the Greens did create history by winning a Victorian parliamentary presence for the first time and being one of the minor parties with the potential to wield the ‘balance of power’ in the Council.

The National party also enjoyed some success in this election and, in so doing, defied commentator predictions of electoral extinction. The Nationals increased their vote by 0.8 per cent and their representation in the Assembly by two by winning the Labor-held La Trobe Valley-based seat of Morwell and the previously Independent-held district of Mildura (but failing to regain the previously National-held seat of East Gippsland from the other Independent MLA, Craig Ingram). In the Legislative Council the Nationals won two seats – one in Northern Region and one in Eastern Region. The gains in the lower house offset the net losses in the upper house as a result of the change in the electoral system (the Nationals usually held between four and six seats in the 44 member upper house under the previous system) and this, in turn, gave the party the 11 parliamentary seats required to retain its status as a parliamentary party. Nationals leader Peter Ryan was jubilant at the conclusion of the election, but both he and Liberal leader Ted Baillieu will need to reflect on the political wisdom of the two main non-Labor parties fighting each other in election campaigns over three cornered contests and the direction of preferences.

In addition to the Greens and the DLP there were other minor parties formed to contest this poll including the Country Alliance (created to exploit rural dissatisfaction with aspects of the Bracks government’s policies and concentrating on the upper

house), People Power (a conglomeration of disability support people with anti-gaming machine activists also seeking to attack the Bracks government) and the evangelical church-aligned social conservative Family First. Admittedly Family First had been around before; in the 2004 federal election for the Victorian Senate the party secured a host of favourable preference deals and, through this, was able to get its candidate Steve Fielding elected. Family First had polled 1.9 per cent in the Senate contest, and most commentators forecast that the nascent right-of-centre party wouldn't do much better in the State contest. As it turned out, at 4.3 per cent Family First obtained the largest swing on primary vote of all the parties participating in the Legislative Assembly contest, although this did not translate into representational gains in the Legislative Council.

There were some interesting regional variations on the anti-government swing. Two-party swings to Labor occurred in seven districts, including Richmond, where the government was defending its seat from the Greens, in the western suburban seat of Keilor where sitting member George Seitz had been accused of corruption by *The Age* newspaper, and southern suburban Bentleigh where the press reported Liberal leader Ted Baillieu's mother-in-law, amongst others, intended to vote for sitting Labor MP Rob Hudson. While there were very big anti-government swings in seats already held by the Liberal and National parties, most swings in government-held seats, including marginals, were at or under the 3 per cent State-wide figure. In the ultra-marginal government seats of Evelyn (a swing to Liberal of 3.2 per cent), Hastings (a 2.4 per cent swing to Liberal), Kilsyth (2.4 per cent to Liberal) and Ferntree Gully (2.4 per cent to Liberal, which it won by 27 votes), this was enough to result in the defeat of sitting Labor MPs.

There were some big anti-government swings, however. At 10.3 per cent the biggest anti-government swing in a government-held seat was in the district of Narracan covering the west Gippsland region and parts of the La Trobe Valley. The adjacent seat of Morwell also registered an above-average average two-party swing of 7.8 per cent. The loss of these two seats qualifies the axiomatic claim that the Bracks government's electoral strength lies in the support it enjoys in the regional cities. In this case, the La Trobe Valley and West Gippsland indicated that it was far from happy with the government, especially following the announcement made in October that fresh water from the region would be diverted to metropolitan Melbourne in exchange for re-cycled water destined for the cooling towers of the La Trobe Valley's electricity stations.

Adverse voter reaction to government policy was also discernible in parts of the outer eastern and south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Here the government's decision to reverse a 2002 election promise to not levy tolls on new freeways had an impact on voters in traditionally marginal seats clustered around the controversial Frankston-to-Mitcham (nee Scoresby) Freeway. Labor's losses of Bayswater, Kilsyth, and Ferntree Gully were seats in close proximity to the controversial freeway, and Labor also nearly lost Mitcham (a 6 per cent swing to the Liberals) and Forest Hill (a 5.2 per cent swing). In the normally ultra-safe Labor seat of Carrum at the southern extremity of the freeway the two party swing against the government was also 5.5 per cent. In those eastern suburban seats away from the freeway such as Gembrook (1.2 per cent to the Liberals), and Mt Waverley (2.2 per cent to the Liberals), the anti-government swing was much lower and sitting Labor MPs were able to defend their seats. The

government clearly suffered an electoral cost in changing its mind about tolls, but strong flows of Greens preferences of between 72 to 75 per cent helped Labor to retain Forest Hill, Gembrook and Mt. Waverley despite trailing their Liberal opponents on primary vote.

For all of this, the electoral pendulum after the 2006 election has not changed too dramatically. The Liberals were able to win some traditionally volatile eastern suburban districts and the regional seat of Narracan, and previously held Liberal seats all became much safer as a result of some quite substantial anti-government swings. The Liberal party still faces a daunting task to defeat Labor in 2010, however. To force Labor into a minority situation at the next election the combined non-government side of the pendulum would need to achieve a two party swing of 4.4 per cent, while a uniform two party swing of 6.7 per cent would be required if the Liberals were to be able to govern in their own right. These considerations alone indicate how limited the Liberal advance was in the 2006 lower house election.

The Legislative Council

Under the new electoral arrangements for Victoria's upper house, five representatives are to be returned from eight districts (called 'Regions') using STV- proportional voting. The eight Regions conform roughly with Victoria's electoral geography: the three rural regions of Western, based on Geelong and Ballarat and beyond; Northern based on Bendigo; and Eastern within which falls the La Trobe Valley and Gippsland. The five metropolitan regions are Western Metropolitan with its clutch of ultra-safe Labor suburbs; Northern Metropolitan where, in 2002, the Greens polled well; Southern Metropolitan taking in affluent Liberal-voting suburbs; Eastern Metropolitan

covering the leafy but electorally volatile eastern suburbs; and South Eastern Metropolitan covering the Labor-voting industrial suburbs around Dandenong. These regions are large, both geographically and, with between 360,000 to 400,000 voters in them, in electoral terms. To get elected candidates need to win a quota of 16.7 percent – a figure that translates to an actual vote of some 76,000 votes.

Prior to the election there were expectations that the government would lose the upper house majority it had won in 2002, with the Greens most likely to win the balance of power. Table 2 outlines the result for each of the Regions. The success of minor party candidates in Eastern Region and Northern Region (returning a National MP each), Northern Metropolitan (one Green), Western Metropolitan (one Green), Western Region (one DLP) and Southern Metropolitan (one Green) were the key features of this result. The surprise success of the DLP with only 2.6 per cent of the primary vote in Western Region was the most spectacular of these outcomes, but the significance of the Green achievement in winning three seats (and, but for the ALP's decision to direct preferences in Western Region to the DLP, could easily have been four seats) should not be overlooked either. The Liberal party would have been pleased with winning three out of five seats in Eastern Metropolitan, and came within a few hundred votes of defeating Steve Bracks' hand-picked candidate Evan Thornley in Southern Metropolitan. Its performance in Northern Metropolitan and Western Metropolitan was very weak, however. Labor won three out of five in its electoral heartland in the western, northern and industrial south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, but the failure to win a fourth seat in Western Metropolitan following a recount and the DLP success in Western Region at the expense of third-placed Labor candidate Elaine Carbine denied the Bracks government an upper house majority.

The transition in Victoria's upper house electoral system from alternative vote to proportional representation has been far from seamless. The political commentary community, used to the swift resolution of outcomes under alternative voting, waited for nearly two weeks to find out the result in the Legislative Council, and then reeled with incredulity when informed that the DLP had provisionally secured two seats after being repeatedly told to expect Labor to win a majority with 21 seats. Labor wasn't happy either and demanded a re-count in Western Region and Northern Metropolitan. The Greens, too, seemed to think something was amiss in the Western Metropolitan count and asked for a recount there. Twenty four hours later the VEC announced that Labor, not the DLP, had won the fifth seat in Northern Metropolitan, and the Greens, not Labor, had won the fifth seat in Western Metropolitan. The VEC were thus put on the defensive over the conduct of the upper house count, and this added to concerns about other aspects of the conduct of the election including the long delays many voters experienced at polling stations on 25 November. The VEC's report to parliament on the conduct of this election will make for interesting reading, especially amongst the emerging army of VEC critics.

Conclusion

The drawn-out nature of the upper house count and the last-minute drama associated with the surprise election of the DLP to the Council has tended to overshadow the fact that the 2006 Victorian election has resulted in the comfortable return of the Bracks Labor government. The swings against the government were anticipated and partly reflected a rectification of the land-slide vote cast in 2002. The big swing against Labor in the regional seat of Narracan and the above-average swings against the

government in seats adjacent to the controversial Frankston-Mitcham Tollway also suggested a causal link between voting behaviour and difficult and/or unpopular policy decisions. In spite of these, the Bracks government has been returned with a comfortable majority in the lower house. To displace it in 2010, the Liberals will either have to patch up their relationship with the Nationals and secure a 5 per cent two party swing, or win a 6.7 per cent swing to govern alone – both formidable tasks. But government's dominance will be moderated by an upper house controlled by opposition parties, with at least the Greens being committed to a significant strengthening of accountability mechanisms.

**VICTORIAN ELECTION 2006
TABLES**

Table 1: 2006 Election result, Legislative Assembly

party	primary vote %	swing	seats (change)	tpv %	swing tpv %
ALP	43.0	- 4.9	56 (-7)	54.8	- 3.0
Liberal	34.4	+ 0.5	22 (+6)		
National	5.1	+ 0.8	9 (+2)		
Liberal and National				45.2	+3.0
Greens	10.0	+0.3	0		
Family First	4.3	+4.3	0		
People Power	0.5	+0.5	0		
others	2.4	- 1.8	1 (-1)		
informal vote	4.5				
participation:	92.7%				

source: <http://www.vec.vic.gov.au/> accessed 14/12/06

Table 2: The 2006 Victorian election: Legislative Council

Seats won

region	ALP	LIB	NAT	GRN	DLP	FF	OTHERS
Eastern Metro	2	3					
Eastern	2	2	1				
Northern Metro	3	1		1			
Northern	2	2	1				
South East Metro	3	2					
Southern Metro	2	2		1			
West Metro	3	1		1			
Western	2	2			1		
total:	19	15	2	3	1		