

# THE AGE



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## Baillieu bounds into contention

■ Coalition gains 5 points on last poll ■ Caning over myki, over-crowding ■ Massive approval of bushfire response

By DAVID ROOD  
STATE POLITICAL REPORTER

OPPOSITION Leader Ted Baillieu has surged into contention for November's state election, with a new poll showing the Coalition gaining dramatically on John Brumby's government.

The turnaround in the Coalition's election chances comes as voters lashed out at the government over the botched introduction of the myki ticket system.

They also criticised the government's efforts to combat alcohol-related violence, with the poll showing that law and order had emerged as a key election issue.

The Age/Nielsen poll shows Labor with 53 per cent of the vote after preferences, down 5 percentage points from polling last November. The Liberal-National vote improved to 47, up 5 points.

Should the vote be repeated at this year's poll, Labor would still comfortably win power, but would suffer a 1.5 per cent swing against it and could lose up to three seats.

The new poll is a shot in the arm for Mr Baillieu after years of poor results, although he still trails Mr Brumby as preferred premier, 54 to 34 per cent.

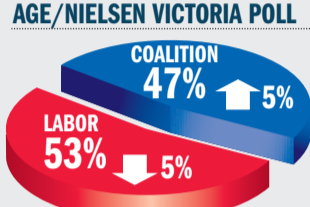
The November Age poll, taken by a different company, showed the Government with a commanding 58-42 lead in the two-party preferred vote. News-poll, also conducted last November, gave Labor a 57-43 lead.

The Age/Nielsen poll found: ■ Two-thirds of voters are dissatisfied with the state government's performance on public transport. Twenty-nine per cent were very dissatisfied.

■ Sixty per cent of those polled were dissatisfied with its performance on reducing "alcohol-fuelled violence". Law and order has also risen in prominence as an issue since the 2006 election, now ranking third behind health and education.

■ Almost three-quarters of voters polled were satisfied or very satisfied with the government's performance in improving bushfire safety since Black Saturday.

### STATE OF THE PARTIES AGE/NIELSEN VICTORIA POLL



### TWO-PARTY VOTE

\*COMPARISON WITH NOVEMBER 2009 SAULNIKK POLL

### HOW YOU RATED THE GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE ON ...

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT** 66% dissatisfied  
**IMPROVING BUSHFIRE SAFETY** 24% dissatisfied  
**REDUCING ALCOHOL-FUELLED VIOLENCE** 60% dissatisfied



**POLL QUESTION**  
Do you think the Liberals can win the state election?  
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The telephone poll of 1000 voters, taken from last Friday to Sunday, showed Labor's primary vote down 3 percentage points to 40 per cent, while the Coalition had slipped 1 point to 39 per cent, compared with the 2006 election.

The Greens have benefited from the drop in Labor's primary vote, with 14 per cent saying they will give their first vote to the Greens, up from 10 at the 2006 election.

Labor is battling to fend off the Greens in at least three marginal inner-city seats including Education Minister Bronwyn Pike's electorate of Melbourne, held by 2 per cent, Housing Minister Richard Wynne's seat of Richmond held by 3.7 per cent

and Brunswick, held by the same margin.

The Premier's personal approval rose 7 points to 52 per cent, from the last Age/Nielsen poll in November 2008. His disapproval edged up 1 to 37 per cent. Mr Brumby's approval rating is just 4 points below that of former premier Steve Bracks on the eve of the 2006 election.

More of the voters polled disapproved of Mr Baillieu than approved. His disapproval jumped 10 percentage points to 45 per cent, while his approval increased 3 to 40 per cent, when compared with the 2008 poll.

Support for the Coalition was significantly higher in the bush with the Liberal-Nationals attracting 55 per cent of the two-party preferred vote outside Melbourne, compared with Labor's 45 per cent.

The Coalition would need to pick up 13 seats to win the November 27 election, equivalent to a uniform statewide swing of about 6.5 per cent.

Mr Brumby, meanwhile, will today tell Parliament that water security, child protection, bushfire reconstruction and housing initiatives are among the priorities for his government in 2010.

In his third statement of government intentions, the Premier is expected to outline an election year plan that focuses on delivering infrastructure projects, a climate change strategy and recruiting more child protection staff.

■ The federal opposition has moved ahead of the Rudd government on primary votes for the first time since the 2007 election, according to the latest News-poll. The Coalition has gained three points to 41 per cent of the primary vote, with Labor steady on 40 per cent.

While Labor leads 52-48 in two-party terms, the result is a fillip for Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, who will this morning release his climate change policy before the resumption of Federal Parliament.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd yesterday warned his team it could lose this year's election.

▶ Editorial PAGE 8



Premier John Brumby and Altona ALP candidate Jill Hennessy take a water break on the first day of school at Point Cook P-9 College.

PICTURE: ANGELA WYLIE

## It's Labor's election to lose — and they could do it

IT'S time — time for Victorians to take notice of state politics again.

The message from this poll is clear: after a decade of Labor dominance, this year's state election is shaping as a contest.

Ted Baillieu's Liberal-Nationals Coalition is still behind, but has pushed to within striking distance of John Brumby and Labor.

This result points to the



PAUL AUSTIN  
ANALYSIS

possibility that 2010 could see the first change-of-government election in Victoria since Steve Bracks' shock defeat of Jeff Kennett in 1999.

Today's poll demands a

rethink of the conventional wisdom that Labor in Victoria has an unassailable lead and the Coalition is in a hopeless position.

That narrative has been buttressed by a bank of opinion polls consistently showing that the Coalition had gone backwards since Bracks defeated Baillieu in 2006.

The numbers tell the story. At the 2006 election, Labor had

a thumping win, recording 54.5 per cent of the vote after distribution of preferences, compared with the Liberals' 45.5 per cent. A mid-term Age poll two years ago, in February 2008, had Labor out at 59 per cent and the Liberals just 41 per cent. An Age poll published just three months ago, in November, still had Labor way ahead, at 58 to 42 per cent. A News-poll also published in

November, and also of about 1000 Victorians, showed Labor with 57 per cent and the Liberals languishing on 43 per cent.

But now, the first poll of the election year has Labor back to 53 per cent and the Liberals up to 47 per cent — a dramatic closing of the gap since last November's polls, from about 16 points to just six.

This will give heart to  
▶ Continued PAGE 2

## Fire chiefs 'unaware' as Black Saturday horror closed in

By DEWI COOKE

FAILURES in the Country Fire Authority's chain of command occurred on Black Saturday, with three of the state's top firefighters unaware the incident control centre responsible for managing the deadliest of the fires was totally unprepared and could not perform essential tasks, the Bushfires Royal Commission has been told.

Lawyers for the royal commission yesterday presented the damning assessment of the



management of the Kilmore East fire — which tore into communities including Kinglake, Strathewen and St Andrews, killing 119 people and razing more than 1200 homes — to the first commission hearing of 2010.

Senior counsel assisting the commission, Jack Rush, QC,

said the evidence found that the Kilmore incident control centre, which began operating that day, showed "no semblance of readiness", with no communication between the centre, firefighters on the ground or fire-spotting aircraft, no provision of fire prediction maps to the centre and confusion among firefighters over the centre's role.

Mr Rush urged the commissioners to accept the submissions, which implicate CFA chief officer Russell Rees, state co-ordinator Geoff Conway and

state duty officer Greg Patterson in the failure of the Kilmore control centre on February 7.

In written submissions counsel assisting said:

■ There was no management team in place at the Kilmore centre when the fire began.

■ The shortage of qualified personnel was known to senior CFA staff but no steps appeared to have been taken to redress it.

■ Mr Rees, Mr Patterson and Mr Conway should have known the Kilmore centre was not ready for a "hot start" on February 7 and

it seemed incredible that they did not.

Warnings to communities were inadequate, counsel said, and the failure to provide them was indicative of "a lack of planning, the lack of system and operational efficiency".

But Allan Myers, QC, for the state government, urged the commissioners to avoid making adverse findings against individuals or even naming them in a negative context. He rejected the suggestion that there had been a lack of preparation but

said any shortcomings "have to be understood in that context where the whole of Victoria was under threat".

Mr Rush said it was agreed by all parties that the Black Saturday fires were dreadful and that volunteer firefighters had done a "magnificent job". But it was the commission's role to examine good and bad, he said.

The commission was also told the Kinglake fire was caused by a faulty power line connection and that power line faults should be found as the

cause of four other fires at Coleraine, Horsham, Pomborneit and Beechworth.

Power companies SPAUSNet and Powercor disagreed with the findings in all but the Coleraine fire.

The commission will not hear from witnesses this week, commissioner Bernard Teague said, in acknowledgement of the anniversary of "that terrible day".

COMMENT & DEBATE  
▶ Remember other victims PAGE 9

## 185 picked up on asylum boat

A BOAT carrying 181 suspected asylum seekers has been intercepted off Christmas Island.

Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor said the crew members of patrol boat HMAS Larrakia boarded the vessel about 7.25pm yesterday.

It is the eighth asylum seeker boat to arrive this year.

Mr O'Connor said those on the boat would be taken to Christmas Island where they would have security, identity and health checks. Their reasons for travel would be established. There were four crew.

### WEATHER

MELBOURNE Generally cloudy morning with sunny breaks this afternoon. East to north-east winds averaging up to 25 km/h, tending east to south-easterly this evening.

Min 18 Max 32

TOMORROW Partly cloudy Min 23 Max 31  
THURSDAY A little rain Min 22 Max 31  
FRIDAY Rain easing Min 20 Max 23  
SATURDAY Sunny Min 16 Max 26  
▶ Details PAGE 15

### WATER

MELBOURNE DAMS: 36.1%  
THIS TIME LAST YEAR: 33.1%

### ODD SPOT

A Polish priest has installed an electronic reader in his church for children to leave their fingerprints so as to monitor their attendance at Mass. If they are monitored this way over three years and attend 200 Masses they will be freed from passing an exam prior to confirmation.

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