

Tasmanian Election 2002

Background

Tasmanian voters went to the polls on 20 July 2002, well before the election was due—and despite an earlier promise by Premier Bacon not to go early.¹ Dubbed 'the cold snap election', it was only the fifth Tasmanian election held in the middle of winter. The 29-day campaign was longer than was usual. The Bacon Labor Government was protecting a three-seat majority gained in the first election following the reduction of the House of Assembly from 35 to 25 members.

Among the MHAs to retire at the election were Attorney-General Peter Patmore, former Liberal Premier Tony Rundle, and former ministers Bill Bonde (Liberal) and Gill James (ALP).

The State of the Parties

The Government had travelled quite comfortably since the 1998 election. It had presented a united face, its leadership had made no serious blunders, and some of its policies, such as those to do with the gas industry and the purchase of the Bass Strait 'twin' ferries, appeared popular. The Government had been criticised for its timber policies and for the secrecy over its dealings with the Abt railway developers, but the criticism seemed not to have weakened its chances of re-election.² It also seemed likely to survive its failure to meet its 1998 promise to bring the State's unemployment figure down to the national level. By April 2002 a newspaper was stating that it was just 'a matter of timing' for Bacon to win a landslide.³

The Government's strong position was partly due to its administrative competence, but it was also assisted by difficulties experienced by the Liberal Party. From his entry into the Assembly in 1996, Bob Cheek had made it clear that he was seeking the leadership. He did not challenge Tony Rundle, but Sue Napier's leadership had to withstand a sustained attack during 1999–2000, culminating in a formal challenge in November 2000. Despite his defeat, Cheek continued his efforts, challenging again and defeating Napier in October 2001. Cheek's activities were said to have left divisions within the parliamentary party, many of whom believed that they hurt the party's chances of victory.⁴ Cheek's elevation may have brought a slight increase in the party's opinion poll standing, though by May 2002 the party actually trailed the Government by 11 points.⁵ The Liberals also suffered the controversy brought about by the disendorsement of a Denison candidate, Australian Republican Movement chair, Greg Barns, for his criticism of the Howard Government's boat people policies. The Greens had been stripped of three Assembly seats in the 1998 election. Their solitary MHA, Peg Putt, set about increasing the Tasmanian Green constituency by widening its range of policies. By March–April 2002, opinion polls had the Greens at about 15 per cent, suggesting a possible increase in their Assembly numbers.

The Australian Democrats' slogan, 'Make a real choice', belied the fact that they ran candidates in only the

two electorates of Bass and Franklin. Tasmania First, a party sharing the views of One Nation, reportedly had trouble finding candidates. In 1998 it had attracted more interest, securing five per cent of the vote.

The Campaign

The 2002 campaign followed a typical State election path: Labor announced few new policies, while the challenging Liberals produced 23 in all—including the relocation of an AFL team to Tasmania. The *Mercury* calculated that Liberal promises tallied \$214 million, compared with the Government's mere \$24 million.

As well as unemployment, a major issue was the future of old growth forests. Here the Greens staked out a much stronger policy of opposition to clearfelling than did either of the two major parties, both of which supported the 1997 Regional Forests Agreement. With Tasmanian Green strength apparently on the increase, John Gay, chief executive of Gunns Ltd, the company which has the sole woodchipping license in Tasmania, launched an attack on this 'selfish minority', which pushed anti-logging views that were 'based on environmental falsehoods'.⁶

In the last days of the campaign, the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania ran advertisements reminding voters that the forest industry supported one in 20 Tasmanian jobs, while Gunns' advertisements called for voters to support 'Stable majority government'—in effect to vote for the Government, because the Liberals had specifically ruled out

any post-election arrangement with the Greens. This was endorsed by former Liberal Premier Robin Gray, himself a Gunns director.⁷

An issue that had caused much controversy in the lead-up to the campaign had been the deregulation of Sunday shopping hours. The Liberal Party promised to halt the deregulation, a stance that the Tasmanian Small Business Council lauded, though the poor crowds at various protest rallies suggested that this was unlikely to be an issue that would hurt the Government.

The Result

The Bacon Government was returned with a vote of 51.9 per cent, though it won no more seats. Labor's vote was its first tally over 50 per cent since 1979, when the party had secured 54.3 per cent of the vote. Since 1992 the party's vote has climbed by 23 percentage points. Labor has returned to its dominant position of

1934 to 1982. The successful ALP candidates in Bass include Kathryn Hay, the first indigenous MHA and a former Miss Australia.

The Liberals attracted a vote of only 27.4 per cent and consequently lost three seats, including those of leader Bob Cheek and deputy leader Denise Swan. It was the first defeat of a party leader since Premier Elliott Lewis' loss of Central Hobart in 1903 in pre-Hare-Clark days. Former Liberal MHR and Fraser Government minister Michael Hodgman won a seat in Denison at the expense of Cheek. Hodgman's son, Will, won the Liberal seat in Franklin, thereby continuing the representative history of a political dynasty that dates back to 1900. Brett Whiteley, winner of a Braddon seat, later pleaded guilty to breaching the *Electoral Act 1985*. He had distributed how to vote material containing Liberal candidates' names, without their

consent. After pleading guilty, he was put on a good behaviour bond by a Devonport magistrate.

The Liberal vote was the party's lowest since its creation in the mid-1940s, and the lowest vote by the major non-Labor party since the Nationalists' 29 per cent in 1925. Since 1992 the party's vote has fallen by 26.7 percentage points. The 1998 reduction in the size of the House of Assembly aimed to reduce the influence of the Greens,⁸ appeared to be successful at the time, with the Tasmanian Greens winning just one seat in 1998. On this occasion, however, the Greens won four seats and fell just short of a fifth. The Tasmanian Green vote of 18.1 per cent was one percentage point higher than the best Green performance in 1989. In Denison the Green vote was higher than that for the Liberals. Denison, Franklin and Lyons each have one Liberal and one Tasmanian Green MHA.

Tasmanian Election 2002—First Preference Votes (percentage) and seats

	Australian Labor Party	Liberal	Tasmanian Greens	Australian Democrats	Tasmanian First	Other
	51.9 (+7.1)	27.4 (-10.7)	18.1 (+7.9)	0.7 (-0.2)	0.2 (-4.9)	1.7 (+0.7)
Bass	2	2	1	—	—	—
Braddon	3	2	—	—	—	—
Denison	3	1	1	—	—	—
Franklin	3	1	1	—	—	—
Lyons	3	1	1	—	—	—
Total seats	14	7	4	—	—	—
Seats held 1998–2002	14	10	1	—	—	—

Endnotes

1. D. Blewett, 'Bacon: no poll before September', *Examiner*, 31 January 2002.
2. M. Paine, 'A case of rack and pinion', *Mercury*, 17 July 2002.
3. *Australian*, 5 April 2002.
4. See views of former Liberal MHA, Tony Benneworth, 'That warm and fuzzy feeling of Greensville', *Examiner*, 22 July 2002.
5. M. Haley, 'Bass joy for Liberals', *Mercury*, 21 May 2002.
6. Kane Young, 'Forest fire', *Mercury*, 13 July 2002.
7. See advertisements *Mercury*, 16 July 2002; W. Crawford, 'Libs' collapse sends danger signals', *Sunday Tasmanian*, 21 July 2002.
8. S. Bennett, 'The Reduction in the Size of the Tasmanian Parliament', *Research Note*, no. 2, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1998–99.

Scott Bennett Politics and Public Administration Group Information and Research Services

Views expressed in this Research Note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Information and Research Services and are not to be attributed to the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Research Notes provide concise analytical briefings on issues of interest to Senators and Members. As such they may not canvass all of the key issues. Advice on legislation or legal policy issues contained in this paper is provided for use in parliamentary debate and for related parliamentary purposes. This paper is not professional legal opinion.

© Commonwealth of Australia
ISSN 1328-8016