



27 FEB, 2021

Is Mr Popularity really just a one-trick pony?

The West Australian (Saturday edition), Perth



PAUL MURRAY



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McGowan's riding high on the pandemic but his track record doesn't bode well for when life goes back to normal



West Australians lived through three years of a pre-COVID era McGowan Labor Government which was nothing out of the box. That was followed by 12 months when everything was overshadowed by the international battle against the pandemic — a time unlike

anything people from the post-war generations had ever experienced.

As pre-poll voting kicks off for the March 13 election, it appears Mark McGowan will be rewarded handsomely for that last bit of his four-year term.

But the worst of the pandemic might be over by the end of this year. And that would leave more than three years of a Labor government

free to get on with the same sort of things it did in the first three years.

So let's go back to 2019 and see what the McGowan Government looked like after two years in power. It seems many have forgotten.

Back to the time of crayfish socialism when Labor tried to take over the WA rock lobster industry and the pertinent question in many business



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sectors was this: who's next?

What sort of political hubris caused that brain fade? Or was it a sign of true ideological intentions that got derailed just in time?

Labor went into the 2017 election with a core promise to "create" 50,000 jobs in its first term. But in February 2019 McGowan walked away from that number, replacing it with a grandiloquent plan for 150,000 jobs over the ensuing five years to 2023-24. Why?

By October, as the Government inched towards its third anniversary, a Media Reach opinion poll was published which revealed that promise was struggling as unemployment grew.

The poll showed the Liberals marginally ahead and that Labor had a problem with women voters, sparking then Opposition leader Liza Harvey to go on the offensive about WA's sluggish economy.

Seems weird now, hey?

"Only 20 per cent of women believed the State Government had created more jobs, as opposed to 30 per cent of men," it was reported.

"Mrs Harvey (said) . . . women were worried about job security, mortgage stress, and the state of the economy and Labor had failed on its promise to create more jobs."

Blind Freddie could see why

McGowan had extended the 150,000 jobs timeframe out beyond his first term: Labor was worried it would become a 2021 election millstone on his results up to that stage.

Unemployment was growing faster than he could say he was creating jobs. But when the pandemic struck, all bets were off and McGowan axed that promise anyway.

Now he wants to do it all over again, setting another new target of 125,000 jobs by 2025-26

as the centrepiece to last weekend's Labor campaign launch. How long will that promise last?

Skip back a bit further to the Darling Range by-election of June, 2018 at which Labor suffered a massive 9.5 per cent

swing, losing the seat to the Liberals after the Barry Urban, pictured below, scandal.

Things looked even more weird at that stage, with then-Liberal leader Mike Nahan claiming that poll was a referendum on McGowan's leadership.

"Labor's poor performance will be cause to think about some of Mark McGowan's policies and how they are affecting people in areas such as Darling Range," The West Australian's

political reporter Dylan Caporn — who now works for Labor — wrote after the loss. "While there were extraordinary circumstances in this campaign . . . there was also an Opposition talking about the Government's \$700 increases to fees and charges over the past year, and cuts to services."

Those early broken promises are another thing that most people seem to have forgotten. It's amazing what a \$600 power bill bribe can do. So the early years

in government lacked the

current "rock star" buzz and the pandemic clearly came as a godsend to the McGowan Government — which is not to say it hasn't handled it well. It has. But should voters see McGowan as more than a one-trick pony?

And what's up for grabs in the next four years of Labor?

That answer is a lot if they get control of both Houses of Parliament. Cockburn Sound, for example.

Labor has wilfully blocked any future possibility of a better freight route to Fremantle — which would also decongest traffic in the southern suburbs — and four years will be long enough to enshrine its alternative of a

Kwinana outer harbour and the destruction of Cockburn Sound.

While the Opposition might not be laying too many hits on the Government, some unions are having a crack in this campaign.

Right from the start, the maritime union saw the government's Westport process for what it was — getting to a pre-ordained result of replacing a perfectly adequate port at Fremantle capable of another 20 years' capacity with an expensive and unnecessary one at Kwinana.

The outer harbour will have to jump enormous environmental hurdles to get approved, but Labor will be helped by the acquiescence of

the WA green movement. It has preferred to trade off some degraded bush in Coolbellup and a tiny corner of Bibra Lake wetlands for a sensitive coastal ecology and the passive recreation playground that generations of West Australians have enjoyed.

The only stranger labour



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movement campaign is the Australian Services Union's attempt to frighten voters that the Liberals — who no one expects to win — will privatise government-owned energy assets like Western Power.

That claim ignores the fact that the only State Government to privatise power assets in recent memory is the current one. Late in 2017, Labor quietly sold Synergy's Albany and

Grasmere wind farms, the Greenough River solar project and its Warradarge renewables project at Eneabba to a foreign-dominated consortium.

One of the reasons for that privatisation was Ben Wyatt. He's not your standard Labor ideologue, which is why he's going to a plum job in the private sector after the election.

But record iron ore prices and the subsequent royalties flood make Wyatt's books look better than he deserves. He got an operating surplus, but debt blew out by \$8.3 billion in the last Budget.

That Budget shows net debt as a share of gross State product steadily growing from 11.9 per cent this year to 14.1 per cent in 2023-24.

Despite that, Wyatt's loss will be a blow to the McGowan Government's economic credentials. He was its financial backbone and internal skirmishing continues over who can adequately handle WA's recovery as treasurer.

Health Minister Roger Cook has been mentioned in dispatches, but he should not be in line for a promotion until he fixes the mess in his own portfolio.

In Opposition, Cook established ambulance ramping as the metric by which to measure the hospital system.

"If that's not a crisis, I don't

know what is," Cook said in October 2014, when Barnett government ramping hit 1500 hours in a month. Two months

ago, it registered 4111 hours and McGowan blamed COVID-19, even though there were no affected patients in hospital or the community.

But in February, 2018, pre-COVID, ambulance ramping was already 2221 hours. And it got steadily worse through 2019. Crisis anyone?

"Mark McGowan and Roger Cook were both incensed in 2013 and 2015 when there was much less ramping going on . . . and yet under their watch it has increased dramatically," Australian Medical Association (WA) emergency medicine representative David Mountain said in March 2019.

"They have done nothing to change that. They don't seem to take it seriously."

It is a supreme irony that McGowan is getting massive support over one health issue that might be fixed by year's end, but in four years the State's hospital system went backwards, attracting no penalty. Maybe that's because you can't fix hospitals by opinion polling. But you can close borders.

It was revealed earlier this month that McGowan's Department of Premier and Cabinet spent at least \$100,000 during the height of the pandemic polling the public's response to new government restrictions.

The extent to which the community sentiment polling determined the government's COVID strategies and messaging is unclear. But why do it? The logical conclusion is that such research was done to gauge what the public would tolerate and what messages were working.

So were you manipulated at a time of high anxiety? Almost certainly.

It's hardly surprising that people are reacting like Pavlov's dog to McGowan's pandemic rhetoric. That psychology has been known for more than 100 years and fear is a very motivating emotion.

The messages that voters have been fed are the ones the Government knows they want to hear and have been conditioned to accept.

Labor is so poll-driven that it is even testing whether its attack ads on Liberal leader Zak Kirkup are creating any sympathy for him. They're not.

In a social era when emotions and feelings override logic, rewarding McGowan has become central to the election.

But what happens when the pandemic passes and governing returns to normal?



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