

PETER COSTELLO

blog dailytelegraph.com.au/blogs



Separating spin from fact

In politics there is fact and there is spin. On Saturday the government of Victoria changed hands. That's a fact. The reason it changed is a matter of opinion. That's where spin comes in.

According to Premier-Elect Daniel Andrews, people said "No" to negative politics.

According to federal Labor, people said "No" to Tony Abbott. According to the Greens, people want action on climate change. According to Liberal headquarters, it was the result of a well-orchestrated union campaign.

Spin is not about convincing people that black is white or night is day. Spin is about taking something that has a little bit of truth and making people think it represents the whole of the truth. A good spin can make you see something quite differently to the way it unfolded. It is the art of illusion. When the illusionist saws the pretty lady in half, it's because he has you looking in the wrong direction.

On Saturday night the first Labor leader to claim victory was not Daniel Andrews (who actually won) but Bill Shorten (who wasn't even running).

I have broadcast election night coverage for the last 25 years at state and federal level.

I have never seen anyone do that before. Usually it's the bloke who wins that makes the victory speech.

Bill claimed the election was all about federal issues.

That's spin.

For two years the Victorian Coalition was well behind Labor in the opinion polls.

They were further behind in 2012 when Julia Gillard was still the prime minister. The election of the Abbott government did not cause the collapse in their support.

That's fact.



Bill Shorten wants us to believe the Victorian election was a vote against the Abbott government. Picture: Gary Ramage

Former premier Jeff Kennett also laid blame at the feet of Tony Abbott. But Kennett himself had written a piece in the last week of the election scoring the Napthine government an eight out of 25.

Kennett scored Napthine's vision for the state as "zero". It was harsh and unfair. But if friends of the government were giving those kinds of assessments it is hard to blame somebody else for losing the election. At the start of the campaign I wrote that the Liberals wasted their first two years in office by doing nothing.

Things picked up when Napthine became leader. But they were chasing from behind. I said the public would decide whether they had done enough to catch up. They hadn't.

The Victorian government was not a bad government — it was not chaotic like the Rudd government or prone to the scandals of the Gillard government.

But Baillieu and Napthine did little to change things once elected. They left Labor's public service largely in place to run the state. They did little to enthrone their supporters. In the

end, support for their government just petered out.

Federal Liberals have claimed the Victorian result had nothing to do with federal issues. That's spin.

People say Abbott was not prominent in the Victorian election campaign. Well, let me tell you that Abbott was everywhere on election day.

His picture was on every polling booth I visited. It was the main thrust of Labor's advertising campaign.

The Liberal campaign was trying to focus the election solely on state issues. But some

bright spark thought up the idea that instead of having Abbott they would have John Howard join the campaign.

It didn't swing a vote.

Instead it invited everyone to wonder why they were trotting out past leaders — not current ones. When Julie Bishop appeared the day before the election it drew attention to the fact some federal leaders were more welcome in Victoria than others. She spent her time trying to explain why Abbott wasn't there.

The federal government is well behind in the polls. That's

fact. It's further behind than the state Liberals were.

The Victorian Liberals were always predicting their polls would turn around once people focused on the issues, or once the election got closer.

Many federal MPs are saying the same thing. The point is that nothing will change unless something changes.

The federal government announced last week it is getting rid of "barnacles".

That is welcome. It shows an understanding there is a problem. Barnacles interfere with a smooth passage.

But getting rid of them has been as choppy as the barnacles themselves. There was confusion about whether the Medicare co-payment was a barnacle or not.

What about the paid parental leave plan? A government is entitled to change its mind on measures, particularly when it is unable to implement them.

But if it changes its mind it has got to change it and then announce and explain it.

Here's another fact that comes out of Saturday night.

No government is guaranteed a second term. The throw-away society is happy to get rid of a first-term government — even one that is not that bad.

You can see why Shorten has a spring in his step. After a shock loss, Victorian Labor held itself together. It didn't take any new policy direction except for the very dangerous promise to rip up a major binding infrastructure contract.

It concentrated on exploiting niche pockets of discontent. It was lucky to come up against a government that failed to develop a coherent story.

It won.

The Abbott government did not cause the Victorian electoral defeat but it would be foolish to ignore the lessons.

Peter Costello is former federal treasurer