

By Tony Walker of the Australian Financial Review, in Melbourne

As an intriguing 2010 election campaign enters its final stretch with Labor's Brisbane campaign launch this evening and the result of the election itself in the balance, the State of Victoria may end up holding the key to the result.

Most of the focus has been on marginal seats in Queensland and New South Wales, and to a lesser extent, Western Australia where Labor is in difficulties. This is putting a premium on Labor doing well in Prime Minister Julia Gillard's home State to cancel out possible losses elsewhere.

Labor is targeting the Liberal marginals of McEwen and Latrobe, both held with a margin of less than one percent on the 2007 figures, and possibly Dunkley with a cushion of four percent. Polling indicates that McEwen and Latrobe are highly problematical for the Coalition.

Dunkley would go with a pronounced home-State swing to Gillard.

Less attention has focused on the southern States, including Victoria, South Australia or Tasmania such has been the preoccupation with Queensland, NSW and WA, but shifts in these States one way or the other will have an impact on the eventual outcome.

Just as one vote, whether it is in the Northern Territory or in Tasmania, has the same weighting notionally as another, so a seat won or lost in the north or the south contributes to the final result.

Labor is fairly confident it will retain its Victorian marginals – Corangamite and Deakin – and pick up McEwen, but the addition of La Trobe would be a bonus, and Dunkley would amount to a windfall.

Labor will also be a bit anxious about Tasmania where it is defending all five lower house seats. Braddon on a margin of 2.5 percent and Bass on 1.1 percent are potentially vulnerable, especially if anti-Labor sentiment apparent at the recent State poll transforms itself to the national sphere.

South Australia, where Gillard spent her childhood, is also regarded as being a bit prospective for Labor with the seat of Sturt held by Christopher Pyne, the Coalition's education spokesman vulnerable.

Conventional wisdom has it that Pyne will hang on, but this seat is far from being in the bag for the Coalition.

In summary, Labor stands to pick up between 2-5 seats in the southern States based on State-by-State polling in various opinion polls that show a swing to Gillard in Victoria and South Australia, but these apparent incremental shifts can easily cancel themselves out.

Labor does not have any of these southern marginals in the bank, and it could easily lose a seat or two unexpectedly, such as one or two in Tasmania, including the seats of Bass and, possibly, Franklin.

Bass on a margin of 1.1 percent is potentially vulnerable.

On the last weekend of campaigning before the August 21 poll, most national polls were relatively close to each other, suggesting things might be becoming more settled after the extreme volatility of the campaign's early stages.

A Morgan telephone poll has Labor leading 51-49 and the margin for Labor in Newspoll is 52-48, unchanged from its previous poll. But – this is a substantial ‘but’ – Newspoll’s ‘internals’ still show a relatively high level of uncertainty in voters’ minds.

While 57 percent of those polled said they had made up their minds, a combined 40 percent said they might change before polling day. This corresponds with pollsters’ assessments that up to 22 percent of people leave a decision to the last moment.

Labor will be concerned about its primary vote at 38 percent remaining below 40 percent in Newspoll. A primary vote tally without a ‘4’ in front of it spells trouble. The Coalition primary stands at 41 percent, but balancing all this is strong Greens polling.

According to Newspoll the Greens lifted their share of the primary vote to 13 percent from 12 percent in the latest poll. Some of this can be expected to drift back to Labor on voting day.

Marginal seats polling published over the weekend in News Limited newspapers contained nothing particularly surprising. Labor is in big trouble in Queensland, in jeopardy in Sydney’s western suburbs and on the NSW central coast, and possibly in one or two seats in WA.

Tony Abbott needs to win 17 seats to secure government in his own right (this factors in redistributed seats that have notionally changed hands since 2007), and lose none. This is a big ask by any stretch of the imagination. But conversely Gillard needs to at least hold her position in the southern States and, preferably, from her standpoint, gain a few.

In all federal elections, there are surprises either way. This election is unlikely to be any different. A hung parliament result cannot be excluded.

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Ends Walker, Melbourne, August 16, 2010