

MOVING BEYOND 100 YEARS: THE 'WA APPROACH' TO NATIONAL PARTY SURVIVAL

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Abstract

Since its formation in 1913, the Western Australian branch of the National Party has faced many challenges to its survival. Electoral reform removing rural malapportionment in 2005 prompted changes in strategic direction, including abandoning coalition with the Liberal Party and creating a discrete image, branding and policy approach. Holding the balance of power after the 2008 election, the Party adopted a post-election bargaining strategy to secure Ministries and funding for its 'Royalties for Regions' policy. This 'WA approach' is distinctive from amalgamation and coalition arrangements embraced elsewhere in Australia. This article updates progress of the strategy following State and Federal elections in 2013 and finds that it has been a success measured by increased votes, seats and policy influence and expansion into regional WA to displace Labor. However, its applicability to other branches of the National Party is likely to be limited.

Introduction

The National Party has been called the ‘great survivors’ of Australian politics¹, despite having the “dubious distinction of being the Australian political party whose immediate future has been doubted most often by so many.”² With demographic, electoral and economic trends all seemingly against them, there has been regular discussion both within the Party and outside about the challenges facing the Nationals if they are to continue as Australia’s second longest surviving political party.

This ever-present existential threat has perhaps been even more evident in Western Australia (WA). After an acrimonious internal split in the 1970s, the WA Nationals had just two members of the State Legislative Assembly and one member of the Legislative Council by 1985. Federally the situation was even worse, with the Party having lost its last House of Representatives seat in 1974 and failing to win a Senate seat after 1975. Despite governing in coalition with the Liberal Party under Premier Richard Court from 1993 to 2001, by 2005 the WA Nationals looked to be in mortal peril again when the State Labor government finally passed electoral reform legislation. This removed the rural malapportionment that had been an article of faith and primary source of electoral strength for the WA Nationals since their formation.³

Yet the WA Nationals have since thrived through strong leadership, image rebranding, policy innovation, high profile electoral risk-taking and political opportunism. Holding the balance of power with just four seats after the State election in 2008, the WA Nationals joined in government with the Liberal Party and leveraged major policy success in the form of the multi-billion dollar ‘Royalties for Regions’ (RfR) program. At the 2013 State election, the WA Nationals moved out of their agricultural heartland to win seven seats, withstanding challenges from both major parties and pushing Labor to the margins in its traditional mining electorates. In achieving these successes, the WA Nationals attracted wider interest, with Cockfield and Botterill⁴ considering the ‘WA approach’ as a distinctive strategic option for the Party more generally. Van Onselen has argued that “the National Party around Australia can learn an awful lot from the way that [WA Nationals’ Leader] Brendon Grylls ran his campaign.”⁵

In this article, we examine the recent performance of the WA Nationals, up to and including the State and Federal elections held in 2013. This analysis is conducted in the context of discussions about the place of the National Party within the Australian party system. A weakness of the party systems literature is its failure to adequately take account of the federal nature of political parties in

¹ Linda C. Botterill and Geoff Cockfield, eds, *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors* (Crowns Nest, 2009).

² Brian Costar, “The future of the National Party of Australia” in Marian Simms, ed, *The Paradox of Parties: Australian Political Parties in the 1990s* (St Leonards, 1996) p. 17.

³ Norm Kelly, “Western Australian electoral reforms: Labor finally succeeds”, *Australian Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 41, 3 (2006), pp. 419-426.

⁴ Geoff Cockfield and Linda C. Botterill, “From Country to National to Regional?” in Botterill and Cockfield, eds, *The National Party*, and Geoff Cockfield and Linda C. Botterill, “Back from the Brink? The National Party after the 2010 Federal Election”, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46, 2 (2011), pp. 341-351.

⁵ Peter Van Onselen quoted in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Lucky Grylls”, *Landline* 31 May, 2009. <http://www.abc.net.au/landline/content/2008/s2584238.htm> Accessed 17 August, 2013.

countries like Australia. This is particularly important for a small party such as the Nationals, which (at least in principle) has several options open to it in terms of electoral strategy, policy priorities and partner selection in forming government. As we shall see, the different State branches and the Federal branch of the Party have adopted distinct strategies. We argue that while the recent successful approach of the WA Nationals fits squarely within the traditions of the Party in WA, it may not be readily applicable elsewhere and that maintaining its relatively independent stance is not assured.

The Nationals in the Australian Party System

The long-term existence of the National Party has complicated attempts by international observers to categorise the Australian party system and the Nationals' place within it. Some observers have regarded the Nationals as essentially part of the larger Liberal coalition partner, the "half" in a "two-and-a-half-party system"⁶, existing in a "symbiotic relationship"⁷ or even being viewed essentially as a small division within the one major party⁸.

These observations have been based on the long-standing and stable coalition arrangement that has existed at the national level between the National Party and the Liberal Party (and their various predecessors). However, as Botterill points out, this stability has disguised the fact that "the theoretical possibility [exists] that the party could trade its vote in order to achieve particular policy outcomes in coalition with either of the two main parties."⁹ While this possibility has not eventuated nationally, on occasions the Party has supported Labor governments at State level (in Victoria in the 1940s and, as discussed below, in South Australia in the past decade) while in WA this possibility was a key element of the WA Nationals' strategy at the 2008 State election. In addition, international observers have generally failed to take note of the "blackmail" potential residing in the Nationals, "even though it has evidently been used"¹⁰, most notably in vetoing the Federal Liberal Party's choice of leader in 1967, but also in a range of policy disputes.

Australian commentators have been more prepared to consider the Nationals as a party in their own right. As Cockfield argues:

The Nationals ... are a distinct political party, not just an extension of the Liberals. There is much more to their history in Australian politics than the federal Coalition. They have some independent policy positions and, though they have tried on occasions to broaden their electoral appeal, they are still tied to their distinctive origins.¹¹

The Nationals remain strongly connected to their origins as a farmers' party, with a particular ideology and identity built around the special role of rural industries and rural people in national life,

⁶ Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems* (Oxford, 1996).

⁷ Giovanni Sartori, "A Typology of Party Systems" in Peter Mair, ed, *The West European Party System* (Oxford, 1990), p. 342.

⁸ Robert A. Dahl, "Party Systems and Patterns of Opposition" in Mair, ed, *The West European Party System*, p.297.

⁹ Linda C. Botterill, "An Agrarian Party in a Developed Democracy" in Botterill and Cockfield, eds, *The National Party*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Linda C. Botterill, "An Agrarian Party in a Developed Democracy", p.13.

¹¹ Geoff Cockfield, "The National Party" in Alan Fenna, Jane Robbins and John Summers, eds, *Government and Politics in Australia* 10th edn (Frenchs Forest, 2013), p. 196.

and the need to protect and support farmers and rural communities¹². The policy shift in Australia towards market liberalism in the past twenty years has placed this ideology under some pressure, however, and their “apparent inability to defend the interests of their core constituents, combined with decreasing numbers of those constituents, leaves the Nationals in a precarious electoral position”.¹³ One manifestation of this has been the electoral success of rural independents and party defectors, as well as the rise of new parties (such as One Nation, Katter’s Australia Party and the Palmer United Party) claiming to represent the real interests of the National Party’s traditional support base.¹⁴

Another weakness in the party systems literature, at least as it relates to Australia, is its tendency to ignore the realities of federalism, which provide the opportunities for different strategies among the various branches of the same party.

The federal dimensions to party organisation and strategy are explored more extensively in other nations. In Germany, for example, there has been long standing discussion of prospects for ‘Jamaica coalition’¹⁵ formations, where the Greens eschew the more common ‘Red-Green’ coalition arrangements with the leftist Social Democratic Party (SPD) for one with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and/or Free Democratic Party (FDP)¹⁶. Recently, two such coalition arrangements came into being at *Länder* (State) level; a CDU-Greens coalition formed in 2008 in Hamburg and a CDU-FDP-Greens coalition in Saarland in 2009¹⁷. As Decker and Best¹⁸ note, these State level experiments deliver useful lessons; “the *Länder* serve as test labs for new coalition designs. These become legitimate on the federal level once they have been tried and tested in the *Länder*.”¹⁹

In Australia, tests of such new coalition designs at State level, running against the grain of the usual coalition arrangements, have been rare. One example (discussed below) was the Labor-National arrangement in South Australia from 2004 to 2010 where the Nationals accepted a Ministerial position in return for support for the minority Labor government. The situation in Tasmania from 1996 to 1998 of the Liberal-Greens agreement was not a form of coalition, as the Greens did not hold Ministries, but they did support the minority Liberal government in return for additional resources. As we shall see, the WA Nationals’ approach leading up to and in the aftermath of the

¹² Rae Wear, “Countrymindedness and the Nationals” in Botterill and Cockfield, eds, *The National Party*.

¹³ Cockfield, “The National Party”, p. 197.

¹⁴ John Warhurst, “The Nationals and the Democrats: Cracks and chips in the cartel?” in Ian Marsh, ed. *Political Parties in Transition?* (Sydney, 2006). p. 152 and also Dennis Woodward and Jennifer Curtin, “Beyond Country to National”, in Linda C. Botterill and Geoff Cockfield, eds. *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*. (Crows Nest, 2009). pp. 34-37.

¹⁵ So-called as the three Party colours are black, yellow and green, the colours of the Jamaican Flag.

¹⁶ For example, as summarised in Sven-Oliver Proksch and Jonathon B. Slapin, “Institutions in Coalition Formation: The German Election of 2005.” *West European Politics*, Vol. 29, 3 (2006), pp. 540-559.

¹⁷ Both coalitions were relatively short-lived, the Hamburg coalition collapsed in 2010 and the Saarland coalition in 2012.

¹⁸ Frank Decker and Volker Best, “Lost in the New Five-Party System?” *International Policy Analysis*. International Monitoring of Social Democracy paper series, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2011.

¹⁹ Decker and Best, “Lost in the New Five-Party System?” p.8.

2008 State election provided the possibility that they might switch from their usual position as a 'wing' party to a 'hinge' party, open to forming government with either major party.

Like most Australian political parties the Nationals are federal in nature, consisting of Federal, State and Territory branches, each of which "is an independent and autonomous Party organisation with its own Constitution and Rules ... [that] join together in an affiliation to form The Nationals."²⁰ As a result, electoral, policy and office-holding strategies are determined by each State Party and these strategies affect and are in turn influenced by the party and electoral systems prevailing at State level. Strategies vary according to historical circumstance, demographic and electoral factors, electoral systems, leadership ambitions, policy priorities, and the competitive strengths and strategies of other parties. The success (or otherwise) of strategies adopted by each State branch may also affect the policies adopted by the Party at the national level, and hence assume a relevance which may not be immediately apparent to an international observer focused only on the seemingly unchangeable coalition at the national level.

Cockfield and Botterill²¹ identified four possible strategies for the Nationals generally, based on existing practice and the broader theory on political parties. One is to return to the Country Party's origins as an independent party, and to deal with the two major parties on an issue-by-issue basis. This option has generally not been followed as it is associated with the cross benches and forgoing the potential to be in government.

A second option is to continue on the path of loyal and unquestioning coalition with the Liberals, as currently followed in New South Wales and at the national level. A third option has been to extend the coalition arrangement into a formal amalgamation, as in Queensland (with the formation of the Liberal National Party in 2008) and the Northern Territory (with the Country Liberal Party).

The fourth option, which is of most relevance here, is "to engage in post-election bargaining similar to the WA approach."²² This involves acting independently in opposition in order to enable bargaining in the aftermath of the election to achieve policy goals and a place in government. Botterill suggests that this could see the Nationals becoming a genuine 'hinge' party whose support for either of the major parties is genuinely up for grabs – as distinct from its traditional role as a 'coalitional wing' party situated alongside and in support of the Liberal Party.²³ Alternatively, the bargaining could occur only with the Liberal Party, "with the real choices being between a post-election coalition and some form of agreement to ensure supply with independence on other policy matters".²⁴ As discussed further below, both elements have been evident in WA.

Historical and Local Context for the WA approach

²⁰ National Party of Australia
<http://www.nationals.org.au/AboutTheNationals/OurStructure/TheNationalsOrganisation.aspx> Accessed 15 October 2013.

²¹ Cockfield and Botterill, "Back from the Brink?", p. 348.

²² Cockfield and Botterill, "Back from the Brink?", p. 348.

²³ Botterill, "An Agrarian Party in a Developed Democracy", pp. 15-17.

²⁴ Cockfield and Botterill, "Back from the Brink?", p. 349.

The recent WA approach can be seen as part of a broader discussion about the political and policy strategies the Nationals might follow to survive. First, however, it is important to understand the historical context within which the WA Nationals have constructed their strategy.

Known as the Country Party until the 1970s, the National Party of Western Australia (abbreviated hereafter to WA Nationals) reached the centenary of its formation in 2013 and a centenary of parliamentary representation in both the WA Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council in 2014. The WA Nationals is the oldest branch of the Party in the nation and, after Labor, the second oldest continuously existing party in Australia.

The Party has faced considerable political challenges in WA going back at least forty years.²⁵ In response to a steady decline nationally, in 1974 the then Country Party formed a partnership with the Democratic Labor Party as the 'National Alliance'.²⁶ The Alliance was short lived and dissolved after the Federal election of that year. Further instability followed in WA. In 1975, the renamed National Country Party (NCP) left the coalition government led by Premier Sir Charles Court but following national pressure then re-joined.²⁷

The testy relationship with the Liberal Party remained a constant theme however and in 1978, largely due to internal disagreements over how to manage the coalition, a group split from the NCP and adopted the name National Party of Western Australia.²⁸ Following the 1980 State election, the NCP remained in coalition with the Liberals while the National Party did not and indicated that it would support Labor if the next election resulted in a balance of power situation.²⁹ Labor won a clear majority in the 1983 election and thus did not seek National Party support. Nevertheless, this publicly stated departure from the routine assumption of National Party support for the Liberal Party laid the foundation for the WA Nationals' position in the 2000s and the formulation of their distinctive WA approach.

Between 1983 and 1986, the fortunes of the National Party in WA reached their nadir. In 1983, severe indebtedness led the NCP to consider a dissolution motion³⁰ and following this crisis the NCP re-established the relationship with the splinter National Party in 1984.³¹ The NCP formally dissolved in 1985 but all three of its MPs defected to the Liberal Party rather than join the WA Nationals. As noted above, this left the Party with its lowest parliamentary representation in its 100-year history, with just three MPs.

²⁵ Geoff Gallop and Lenore Layman, "Western Australia" in Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward, eds, *Country to National: Australian Rural Politics and Beyond* (Sydney, 1985); Lenore Layman, "The Country Party: Rise and Decline" in Ralph Pervan and Campbell Sharman, eds, *Essays in Western Australian Politics* (Nedlands, 1979); Lenore Layman, "Decline and division in the WA country party", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 16, 1 (1981), pp. 72-80.

²⁶ Barbara Hamilton, "Western Australia: Australian Political Chronicle: January–April 1974", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 20, 2 (1974), pp. 256–259.

²⁷ Barbara Hamilton, "Western Australia: Australian Political Chronicle: January–June 1975", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 21, 3 (1975), pp. 122–123.

²⁸ Gallop and Layman, "Western Australia"; Layman, "Decline and division in the WA country party".

²⁹ Ron J. Elphick, *Coalition or Cross Bench: the Country Party dilemma* (West Perth, 1996), p 118.

³⁰ Elphick, *Coalition or Cross Bench*, pp. 121-123.

³¹ David Black, "Western Australia: Australian Political Chronicle", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 31, 3 (1985), p. 521

However, from this low point the Party steadily pulled itself back from the brink of extinction. In the 1986 State election the Parliamentary Party was complemented by a further five members (four in the Assembly and one in the Council) and in the period 1993 to 2005 worked in coalition with the Liberal Party both in government (1993-2001) and in opposition (2001-2005). However, it faced a grave new threat after the 2005 election in the shape of electoral reform.

Responding to Electoral Reform

The *Electoral Amendment and Repeal Act 2005* removed the last remaining lower house rural vote weighting system in Australia (with the exception of the Mining and Pastoral Region, discussed below), where non-metropolitan seats had approximately half the number of electors of the average metropolitan seat. This change clearly threatened the WA Nationals as it benefited from malapportionment and held five rural seats prior to this legislation.³² Under the ‘one vote one value’ principle underpinning the new legislation, each Assembly seat has an approximate equality of electors, with an allowable variance above or below this of 10 per cent. The number of metropolitan seats increased by eight to 42 while the number of non-metropolitan seats fell by six to 17, of which only four remained in the WA Nationals’ heartland of the Agricultural Region.

The legislation allowed for an exception to the ‘one vote one value’ principle in the remote Mining and Pastoral Region, where the geographically five large Assembly seats receive an ‘allowance’ using a calculation based on area in square kilometres. This enables significant vote weighting to continue, with enrolments in 2008 ranging from 11,500 to 17,800 electors compared to an average of 23,500 in metropolitan seats (Table 2 below shows the enrolments for each Electoral Region and number of Assembly seats for the 2013 election). Four of these Mining and Pastoral seats were at that time considered to be notionally Labor with the fifth notionally held by the Liberals. As a result, commentators at the time considered that “Labor is the clear political winner in these reforms. It has been able to protect its Assembly seats in the Mining and Pastoral region, while severely weakening the Nationals in their areas of support.”³³

The 2005 electoral reforms did not bring the principle of ‘one vote one value’ to the Legislative Council, where instead regional malapportionment actually increased.³⁴ The six Council Regions (half in the metropolitan area and half in the regions) each return six members, resulting in the three metropolitan Regions with 991,000 electors (in 2008) returning the same number of members as the three non-metropolitan Regions with just 339,000 electors. There is vote weighting even within the non-metropolitan region, with two regions (Agricultural, and Mining and Pastoral) combined having slightly fewer electors than the South West region but having twice the number of Legislative Council members (see Table 2 below).

The WA Nationals had fought against electoral reform for years, partly on principle but also because it was likely to threaten the Party’s parliamentary strength, if not survival. In response, under the newly elected 32-year-old leader Brendon Grylls, in 2006 the WA Nationals left the coalition with the Liberal Party in opposition and overhauled an independent strategy in preparation for the 2008 State election. In doing so, the WA Nationals broke from the traditional coalition position as

³² Kelly, “Western Australian electoral reforms”, p. 421.

³³ Kelly, “Western Australian electoral reforms”, pp. 425-426.

³⁴ Kelly, “Western Australian electoral reforms”, p. 425.

practiced at the national level and in New South Wales and Victoria. The Party also eschewed the idea of amalgamation as the best path for survival, as recommended to the Party's Federal Council by the Anderson Report in 2008³⁵ and as implemented in the merger and formation of the Liberal National Party of Queensland.

The WA Nationals' strategy can be seen as following prescriptions devised 20 years earlier. Writing not long after the re-formulation of the Party from 'Country to Nationals' in the 1980s, Costar and Woodward³⁶ proposed four prerequisites for the National Party's survival:

1. Capacity for policy development;
2. Electoral strategies "to confound its Liberal and Labor Party enemies";
3. Retention of its core support base; and
4. Appeal to a wider constituency.

The WA Nationals adopted all these strategies in the lead up to the 2008 State election and subsequently.

First, the WA Nationals established, promoted and presented its novel RfR program as its major policy platform in the 2008 election and as a unique initiative unmatched by the other parties. In summary RfR, as proposed and subsequently legislated, sets aside 25 per cent of State mining royalty payments for reinvestment into regional areas, with funds held in a special investment fund capped at \$1 billion each financial year. Disbursements from RfR are additional to 'normal' departmental funding. Infrastructure projects and increased funding for services and community facilities are included, with funds going to government departments, local and regional organisations and to support private investment.

In terms of the second prerequisite, the WA Nationals combined opportunist politics with a targeted electoral strategy. In 2008, the WA Nationals contested and campaigned strongly in non-rural seats in regional WA (in particular in the less populous Mining and Pastoral seats) that were almost all held by Labor and which the WA Nationals had traditionally ignored. Following the 2008 election, a former Labor Minister turned-Independent gave his backing to the WA Nationals in the immediate post-election bargaining phase, with the prospect of RfR funding being the key attraction. On retiring, he then supported the Nationals' (successful) candidate for his seat in 2013. In 2009, another regional MP defected from Labor and joined the WA Nationals in government. He easily won his seat as a National MP in 2013.

For the third prerequisite, the delivery of RfR provided significant extra investment to the WA Nationals' traditional Wheatbelt heartland in the Agricultural Region, despite those areas being distant from the mining regions where the royalties derive. Policies such as a fuel card for seniors in country areas, hundreds of millions of dollars in increased funding for rural health, major injections of funds for community facilities and services to all country local governments (the Wheatbelt alone has 43 local councils), assisted rural areas that are the original political base of the Party.

³⁵ Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (Sydney, 2010), p. 386.

³⁶ Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward, "Conclusion" in Costar and Woodward, eds, *Country to National*, p. 138.

On the fourth prerequisite, the WA Nationals made a much more concerted broader electoral appeal to geographically widespread regional constituencies after 2005. Details of the success of this strategy are discussed below. Once in government, RfR became a key element to this strategy. Major investments were made in the 'Pilbara Cities' program in the major mining towns of Karratha, Port Hedland and Newman, aimed at slowing or reversing the rise of fly-in fly-out work practices in these areas. In addition, there was a new program of support to regional 'supertowns' and infrastructure assistance for the Ord agricultural development in the North East Kimberley.

The Balance of Power in 2008

At the 2008 State election, contesting 12 of the 59 Legislative Assembly seats, the WA Nationals won 4.87 per cent of the vote and secured four seats in total, three of the Agricultural Region's four seats and one of the South West Region's 14 seats. This represented a reduction of one seat compared to 2005, yet despite this loss, the Party secured the balance of power. The 2008 election also saw the commencement of the WA Nationals' strategy to break out of its rural stronghold. It ran candidates in all five Mining and Pastoral Region seats for the first time, and although it failed to win any, the Party won around 20 per cent of the primary vote and gained its first ever Legislative Councillor for this Region.

The inconclusive result of the 2008 election meant that neither Labor nor the Liberals could govern without support from either the WA Nationals or Independent Members. As none of the three Independents would support Labor, this placed the WA Nationals in the position of determining who would govern. The Party made support contingent on agreement to put in place the RfR program in a move reminiscent of minor party 'blackmail potential', as identified by Sartori.³⁷

As noted earlier, the groundwork for this strategy of not automatically assuming a coalition with the Liberals had been laid in the early 1980s, when the WA Nationals leader (and later coalition Deputy Premier) Hendy Cowan, made public his determination to support a minority Labor government if the situation arose. In addition, the WA Nationals had the more recent example of South Australia in mind, where the sole Nationals' Parliamentarian in that State between 1997 and 2010 became a Minister in the minority Labor government in 2004 and retained her position even after Labor won a clear majority in 2006.

Although fortuitous, the balance of power situation in which the WA Nationals found themselves in 2008 was not entirely unanticipated. Prior to the 2008 poll, the WA Nationals had campaigned explicitly with the aim of gaining the balance of power, a theme retained in the 2013 election campaign. An example of this was a regional television advertisement, which the Party ran from 2006, featuring three men in a car trying to decide where to go next. Two of the men are large, symbolising the Labor and Liberal parties, while one, 'Shorts', is much smaller and represents the WA Nationals. As the two large men cannot agree on their destination, it is up to Shorts to decide:

Front passenger [looking at Shorts]: "Have you got the balance of power again Shorts?"
Voice over: Give The Nationals the balance of power in State Parliament and get a 'fair go' for country people.
Front passenger: "It's your call Shorts."

³⁷ Sartori, "A Typology of Party Systems", p. 320.

Voice over: Support The Nationals. Your future is in the balance' (WA Nationals 2007, 9).³⁸

Columnist Peter Van Onselen was one of several commentators who found merit in the WA Nationals' independent strategy:

Brendon Grylls has done incredibly well for the National Party. People, including myself, were predicting their demise. It didn't happen ... I think the National Party around Australia can learn an awful lot from the way that Brendon Grylls ran his campaign. He was prepared to break from their traditional Coalition partner ... to have a risky large-scale policy, like Royalties for Regions, and he saved his party. He may not have permanently saved his party, but he certainly breathed life into what looked like the weakest division of the National Party anywhere in the country. It now looks like the strongest in my view.³⁹

Costar⁴⁰ observed that the WA Nationals' behaviour at this point was a "reminder of the political tactics of the very early days of the Australian Country Party." In taking this independent stance, the WA Nationals passed what Botterill⁴¹ pinpointed as Sartori's⁴² political party relevance test, as it effectively became the power broker in the immediate post-election period. The Party sought and secured a firm agreement from both the Liberal and Labor parties to support RfR and as Costar⁴³ noted, actually secured a better offer from Labor. However, probably mindful of not alienating its traditional Agricultural Region conservative base (consistent with Costar and Woodward's third prerequisite discussed above), the Party followed the well-worn path of supporting the Liberal Party to form government, albeit arguing that it was an 'alliance' rather than a formal coalition.

The WA Nationals negotiated with new Liberal Premier Colin Barnett to gain three Ministerial positions, including Regional Development and stewardship of the RfR program for Grylls, as well as the position of Speaker; in other words, a post for all four of its lower house MPs. However, as a further symbol of independence, Grylls did not seek the position of Deputy Premier, a position that, with only one exception in the 1970s, the WA Nationals had held in all previous coalitions. Over the next four and a half years, the Liberal and WA Nationals government appeared generally united. One issue where the Party did exercise independence was the government's attempt to introduce legislation to grant police powers to 'stop and search' people without suspecting an offence. The legislation halted once the WA Nationals' Legislative Council members made their opposition to the Bill public and sided with Labor and the Greens in committee, which led to the Bill's rejection.⁴⁴

State Election 2013: Loss of the Balance of Power

The situation that enabled the WA Nationals' to adopt its post-election bargaining approach in 2008 did not recur in 2013. Premier Barnett's Liberal Party secured a lower house majority, winning 31

³⁸ WA Nationals, *The Nationals Western Australia 2007 Annual Report* (West Perth, 2007), p. 9.

³⁹ Peter Van Onselen quoted in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "Lucky Grylls".

⁴⁰ Brian Costar, "Party Futures: Independence, Coalition or Amalgamation?" in Botterill and Cockfield, eds. *The National Party*, p. 161.

⁴¹ Botterill, "An Agrarian Party in a Developed Democracy", p.12.

⁴² Sartori, "A Typology of Party Systems", p. 321.

⁴³ Costar, "Party Futures: Independence, Coalition or Amalgamation?", p. 162.

⁴⁴ Martin Drum and Daniel Baldino, "Community-Based Policing as an Alternative to 'Stop and Search'", *Public Policy*, Vol. 7, 2 (2012), p. 184.

seats (out of 59) with 47.1 per cent of the primary vote. The WA Nationals won seven seats (6.05 per cent of the vote) and Labor 21 (with 33.1 per cent). The Liberal Party gained a swing of 8.7 per cent and seven additional seats, while the WA Nationals received a swing of 1.2 per cent and three additional seats (see Table 1). The final two-party preferred vote was 57 per cent to the Liberals and WA Nationals, representing a swing of 5.4 per cent, against Labor's 43 per cent.

In the absence of a formal coalition arrangement as in NSW or a merger as in Queensland, the WA Liberal and National parties competed against each other in all 17 non-metropolitan seats and were in the final two-party preferred count against each other for eight, with the WA Nationals winning six of these seats (as well as another seat against the ALP).

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Despite winning seven seats in 2013 compared to four in 2008, the WA Nationals lost the balance of power gained at the 2008 election and the government-forming bargaining position it had employed so astutely. However, although the Liberal Party secured a majority sufficient to form government alone, Premier Barnett renewed the partnership with the WA Nationals, citing the success of the arrangement in the previous term. The fact that the WA Nationals hold the balance of power in the Legislative Council may also have played a part in the Premier's decision.

The WA Nationals' less effectual bargaining position was probably a factor in its minor demotion in the new Cabinet arrangements. As noted, after the 2008 election all four WA Nationals' Assembly members held positions, three as Ministers and one as Speaker. After the 2013 election, three of its seven lower house members remain as Ministers but the Liberals have taken the position of Speaker, with the WA Nationals taking Deputy Speaker. The WA Nationals also lost their traditional portfolio of Agriculture to the Liberals. However and crucially, Grylls retained the Regional Development portfolio and responsibility for the RfR program, although even this flagship policy has been subject to some re-prioritisation from its original design, on Liberal insistence.⁴⁵

From Rural to Regional

The 2013 WA State election bore witness to a further phase in the process of the WA Nationals' calculated repositioning to break out from its inland Agricultural Region stronghold to attempt to become a truly regional party. The two key components of this strategy were RfR combined with running and risking high profile candidates in mining-based electorates. The RfR policy was the key plank in the Party's campaign, as it had been at the 2008 election. Part leader Grylls, as Minister for Regional Development, was the public face of the program.

The key WA Nationals campaign slogan focused on the RfR program: '*A Billion Reasons to Support the Nationals*'. The following text from the Pilbara campaign is illustrative of the centrality of the program to the party's brand:

Royalties for Regions is transforming the Pilbara... but what would it mean if Royalties for Regions was scrapped by a new Government? The WA Nationals need to retain the balance

⁴⁵ Joe Spagnolo, "King of the bush Brendon Grylls loses Royalties", *The Sunday Times*, 16 June 2013. <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/opinion/king-of-the-bush-brendon-grylls-loses-royalties/story-fnhocuug-1226664575171> Accessed 5 September 2013.

of power on behalf of regional Western Australians to make sure Royalties for Regions can keep delivering (Nationals' Pilbara election material, 2013).

The WA Nationals' campaign highlighted its achievements under the RfR program and in doing so did not give credit to its partners in government, the Liberal Party. The campaign also promoted its 'big picture' items of 'Pilbara Cities' and regional 'supertowns.' The Party did appeal to its traditional base with the 'Vision for Agriculture' policy, but even this had a prominent 'Royalties for Regions' gold coin in the top right hand corner of every page.

By contrast, the Liberal and Labor campaigns were largely Perth-centric. Labor's main campaign centred on a proposed significant public transport investment in suburban rail, while the Liberal campaign was based on its record of largely competent and scandal-free government that had delivered stability in a hung Parliament. The Liberal Party gave specific attention to its own public transport plans for Perth as well as development and revitalisation of the metropolitan area and especially central Perth.

As noted, the WA Nationals contested all 17 non-metropolitan seats and won seven, the Liberals six and Labor four (see Table 2). The primary vote share won by the three parties in non-metropolitan WA was 39 per cent for the Liberal Party, 25 per cent for Labor and 24 per cent for the WA Nationals. The Party received the highest share of primary votes in the Agricultural Region (43 per cent), and the Mining and Pastoral Region (34 per cent), but was less competitive in the more populous South West Region where it won just 12 per cent of the primary vote and only one seat.

[INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE]

The Party took major political risks in the 2013 campaign. The most remarkable was the successful gamble by Grylls to move from his ultra-safe Agricultural Region seat of Central Wheatbelt to contest the seat of Pilbara, where the retiring Labor member had a 7.2 per cent margin in 2008. The seat includes the mining towns of Karratha, Port Hedland and Newman and is the source of the bulk of the royalties flowing into RfR. Grylls won easily with a two-party preferred vote over Labor of 61.5 per cent.

Grylls was not the only risk-taker in his party's line-up. His Parliamentary Secretary quit her safe place on the Legislative Council ticket to contest successfully the traditional mining electorate and former Labor stronghold of Kalgoorlie, while another Nationals' MP, successfully switched from a safe Legislative Council seat to Grylls' former Legislative Assembly seat, despite Labor preferencing the Liberal candidate there.

The WA Nationals held their three seats in the Agricultural Region and in the South West retained the seat of Warren-Blackwood in notable fashion. The most recent electoral redistribution added the tourist and wine centre of Margaret River to this seat, a change widely thought to favour the Liberal Party. In addition, both Labor and the Greens placed the Liberal candidate (who was also the local shire president) above the WA Nationals candidate on 'how to vote cards'. Despite this, the WA Nationals' Terry Redman, who had been Agriculture Minister since 2008, was able to win.

The Party's major breakthrough was its victory in three of the five seats in the Mining and Pastoral Region, all formerly Labor seats. The Liberal Party narrowly held onto one seat (Eyre) over the WA Nationals, while Labor retained Kimberley, a seat with a large indigenous population.

Following the 2013 election, the WA Nationals are no longer restricted to inland seats in the State, in contrast to what Cockfield⁴⁶ has noted is a trend elsewhere in Australia. Five of the Party's seven seats cover the greater majority of the State's 12,889km coastline, and include major ports, fishing and tourist-oriented holiday destinations as well as Australia's busiest port by tonnage, Port Hedland. Holding these seats ensures the Party has a constituency beyond its traditional Wheatbelt base. Although it failed to win seats based in the large coastal urban areas of Geraldton and Albany, the Party has begun to target these areas too, displacing Labor as the second party behind the Liberals in Geraldton and winning around 20 per cent of the primary vote in Albany.

Labor was the big regional loser, dropping to four non-metropolitan seats and is in danger of total marginalisation in regional areas. It narrowly retained two seats through long-term sitting MPs with strong personal followings. If and when they choose to retire from politics, these seats are very likely to go to the Liberals, leaving Labor with just two non-metropolitan seats – the remote seat of Kimberley, and Mandurah, which is at the southern end of the Perth conurbation and is effectively an outer suburban seat.

Labor anticipated the danger posed by the WA Nationals at the 2013 election and chose to preference the Liberal Party in several seats. However, the tactic proved unsuccessful in at least two seats, and the limited extent to which Labor is now able to staff polling booths in regional electorates in order to distribute 'how to vote cards' casts doubt on how influential its preference recommendations actually are. Labor's strategy is effectively an admission of defeat, as it assumes that it will finish third behind the two conservative parties and have its preferences distributed. This indeed occurred in two former Labor seats in the Mining and Pastoral Region that the WA Nationals gained comfortably.

Federal Politics in WA: 'Robust Competition'

In WA, the Nationals and Liberal Party remain fierce electoral competitors at Federal as well as State level. In the 2010 Federal election the Nationals' candidate Tony Crook, assisted by Labor preferences, defeated long-serving Liberal MP, Wilson Tuckey, in the seat of O'Connor. Crook initially chose not to join the Nationals' Party Room, a position he had made clear during the campaign. Crook was the WA Party's first Federal MP since 1977.

The distinctively independent approach of the WA Nationals was again evident in the 2013 Federal election. Across Australia, the Party contested ten seats against Liberal candidates of which half were in WA. The other five were seats held by Labor or where the sitting coalition member had retired and the seat was therefore legitimately open to intra-coalition competition.

In WA, by contrast, there was open competition between the Liberal and National parties, including against sitting members of both sides. The WA Nationals' strategy led to open acrimony with the Liberal Party, most notably when shadow treasurer Joe Hockey campaigned in O'Connor and publicly derided the Nationals as a "protest movement" that "would not have a strong voice in a coalition

⁴⁶ Geoff Cockfield, "A Rural Party in an Urban Nation".

government”.⁴⁷ Hockey’s comments were seized upon by Labor as an example of “open warfare in the coalition”⁴⁸ and were serious enough to warrant intervention by both Tony Abbott and Federal Nationals’ leader Warren Truss.⁴⁹ Abbott acknowledged the situation in his observation that “there has been a long tradition of very robust competition between the Liberal Party and the National Party in the West.”⁵⁰

The WA approach did not deliver success to the Party at the Federal election in 2013. The Liberal Party won two key seats, O’Connor (where the first-time National MP had retired) and Durack, which between them cover the State electorates where the WA Nationals had met with such success in the State poll earlier in 2013. In addition, their Senate bid failed with the Party getting just over 5 per cent of the vote. A key problem for the Party in O’Connor and Durack was Labor’s decision to preference the Liberals ahead of the Nationals, a reversal of the situation in 2010.

Aftermath: The future and wider applicability of the ‘WA approach’

The WA Nationals provide an interesting model when considering strategic options for the Party in its Federal and other State and Territory branches, and a useful reminder that observers of Australian political parties need to keep the federal nature of parties in mind in their analysis. There is no doubt that the WA approach has proved highly successful in terms of increased votes, seats and policy influence. Reduced to just four lower house seats at the first ‘one vote one value’ State election in 2008, the WA Nationals found themselves in the position of holding the balance of power, which they used skilfully to secure key ministerial roles in their arrangement with the Liberals as well as initiating the RfR policy. The Party then used the successful implementation of RfR as a springboard for extending its appeal as a truly regional party, a process it had already begun in 2008. By 2013, it had displaced Labor in several WA’s mining electorates and was providing stiff competition to the Liberals across regional WA. In doing so, it has succeeded in making the shift “from Country to National to Regional” that has often been seen as the way forward for the Party across Australia, but which has proved elusive in practice.⁵¹ Despite Brendon Grylls – the architect of the 2008 election strategy and of the RfR policy – stepping down as leader of the parliamentary party in late 2013, the WA approach is set to continue under its new leader, Terry Redman.

Whether the WA approach is more generally applicable, however, is less certain, partly because of its unusual origins in the balance of power situation that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 State

⁴⁷ Gabrielle Chan, “Nationals turn on Joe Hockey as war breaks out within Coalition”, *The Guardian*, 1 September, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/01/Nationals-joe-hockey-war-coalition> Accessed 2 September 2013.

⁴⁸ Australian Labor Party, “Open Warfare in Coalition as Hockey Dismisses Nationals as a Protest Movement”, (Media Release), 2 September, 2013. http://www.alp.org.au/cm3_020913 Accessed 2 September, 2013.

⁴⁹ Bigpondnews, “Truss, Hockey discuss ‘team’ comment”, 1 September, 2013. http://bigpondnews.com/articles/Election2013/2013/09/01/Truss_Hockey_discuss_team_comment_902079.html Accessed 2 September, 2013.

⁵⁰ Jonathon Swan, “Liberals and Nationals feud won’t hamper Coalition, says Abbott”, *WA Today* 2 September, 2013. <http://www.watoday.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2013/liberals-and-Nationals-feud-wont-hamper-coalition-says-abbott-20130902-2t0ld.html> Accessed 2 September, 2013; Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Hockey denigrates WA Nationals a week out from the election”, *ABC News* 2 September, 2013. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-09-02/hockey-disses-wa-nats/4928326> Accessed 2 September, 2013.

⁵¹ Cockfield and Botterill, “From Country to National to Regional?”

election. The WA Nationals' more independent stance also followed a history of tensions between it and the Liberal Party in Western Australia that go back to at least the 1970s. This is likely to have made the independent stance more acceptable to both parties than might be the case at the national level or in New South Wales, where such independence would be a break from a past record of stable and friendly coalition relationships. If the 'WA approach' were to be adopted in other States and Territories, it would be most likely to originate from opposition. The failure of WA's Nationals and Liberals to accommodate an electoral truce in government and to continue to oppose each other in all non-metropolitan seats is an unlikely model for adoption in situations where mergers or agreements to respect sitting members are working successfully in government.

There is also the question of how often the Party may deploy a post-election bargaining strategy. This relates closely to a key issue in the party systems literature: do the WA Nationals have genuine potential as a 'hinge' party, or are they more accurately seen as a 'wing' party on the Liberal side of politics, albeit a more independent one? The evidence suggests that their 'hinge' potential was short-lived, and restricted to the period surrounding the 2008 election. Once they decided then to support the Liberal Party to form a government, subsequent claims to independence as a 'hinge' rather than a 'wing' party became less credible, and indeed Labor rejected the idea of working with the WA Nationals well before the 2013 election. In such circumstances, it becomes problematic to identify a meaningful differentiation between an 'alliance' and a 'coalition' in considering the Nationals' relationship with the Liberals, although former leader Grylls has continued to argue that "the Nationals were prepared to go to the next election as independents to defend Royalties for Regions".⁵²

The situation in 2013 also shows the Party's potential vulnerability to preference deals. While on the one hand demonstrating the Party's success in displacing Labor as the second major party in regional WA, the Nationals still rely on Labor for preferences to defeat the Liberal Party in some seats.

The challenge for the WA Nationals is now once again to demonstrate its independence, identity and distinctiveness from the Liberals, a perennial problem that has confronted the Party throughout Australia. However, it is conceivable that the Party could maintain an independent strategy while remaining in government through at least three avenues.

First, the Party in WA is likely to continue to compete vigorously with the Liberal Party in both State and Federal elections, despite being partners in government. Following the creation of the LNP in Queensland, this strategy is unique in Australia, where such competition between the two parties is generally only permitted when there is no sitting member. In WA, the competition between the Liberal and National parties has, if anything, been electorally beneficial in that it has almost completely displaced Labor as an electoral force in regional WA.

Second, the WA Nationals may need to either defend its own policy positions or find some relatively 'safe' disagreements to have with its Liberal partners in government in order to demonstrate independence. The signature RfR policy is closely identified with the Party and has been crucial to redefining it as a regional rather than a rural party, and it will be important to demonstrate its continuing worth.

⁵² Rueben Hale, "Grylls defends Royalties record", *The West Australian*, 23 May, 2014.

Third, the WA Nationals have shown that they are prepared to take electoral risks. If the Liberal-led government in Western Australia becomes particularly unpopular or if clashes between the two parties become untenable, it is not inconceivable that the WA Nationals could leave government and enter the next election from opposition, or at least the cross benches. This would again raise the possibility of the Party engaging in post-election bargaining as they seek to retain their relevance and influence into the future.

Table 1: Western Australian General Election 2013 Legislative Assembly Summary of Results

Party	Vote (%)	Swing (%) (+/-)	Seats (Total 59)	Seats (+/-) 2008 Election
Liberal	47.1	+8.7	31	+7
Labor	33.1	-2.7	21	-7
WA Nationals	6.1	+1.2	7	+3
Greens	8.4	-3.5	0	0
Independent	2.8	-1.6	0	-3
Australian Christians	1.8	-0.8	0	0
Family First	0.6	-1.4	0	0
Other	0.1	+0.0	0	0

Data Source: Western Australian Electoral Commission⁵³

⁵³ Table derived from Western Australian Electoral Commission, '2013 State General Election Results', <http://www.elections.wa.gov.au/elections/state/sg2013> Accessed 28 October 2013.

Table 2: Legislative Assembly and Council Seats Won by Region and by Party 2013

Region Party	North Metropolitan Region 354,077*	South Metropolitan Region 351,927*	East Metropolitan Region 350,350*	South West Region 191,591*	Agricultural Region 90,675*	Mining & Pastoral Region 73,913*	TOTAL
Legislative Assembly							
Liberal	12	6	7	4	1	1	31
Labor	2	8	7	3	0	1	21
WA Nationals	0	0	0	1	3	3	7
TOTAL	14	14	14	8	4	5	59
Legislative Council							
Liberal	4	3	3	3	2	2	17
Labor	2	2	3	2	1	1	11
WA Nationals	0	0	0	1	2	2	5
Greens	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Shooters & Fishers	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	6	6	6	6	6	6	36

*Enrolment at election

Data Source: Western Australian Electoral Commission ⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Western Australian Electoral Commission, '2013 State General Election Results', Accessed 28 October 2013.