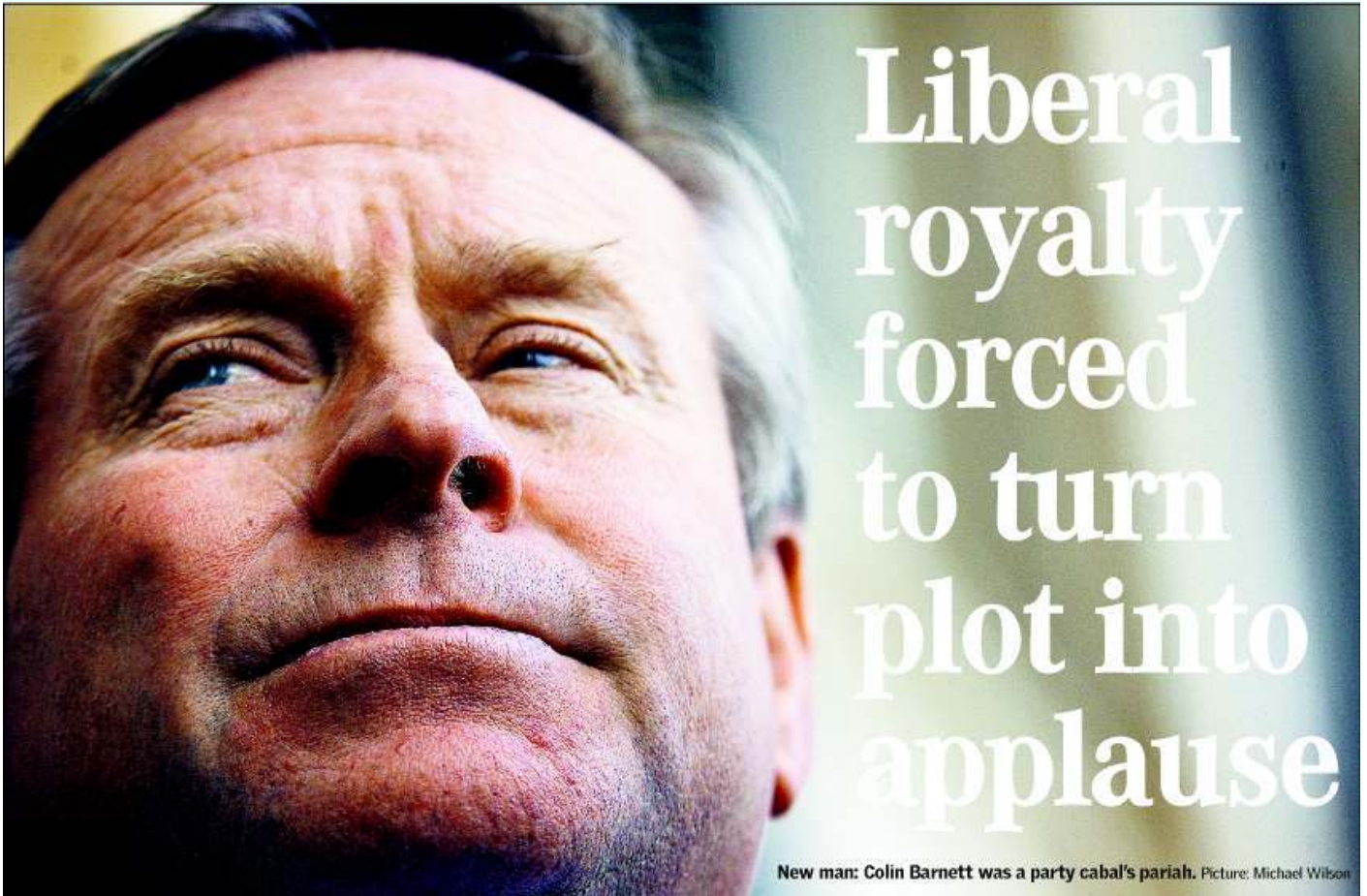


Election08



Liberal royalty forced to turn plot into applause

New man: Colin Barnett was a party cabal's pariah. Picture: Michael Wilson

The sharp Liberal knives once aimed at Colin Barnett's back are now history. **Gary Adshead** reports

There is a single sentence which captures the enormity of Colin Barnett's comeback: Never underestimate the power of forgiveness. Seven years ago, when Geoff Gallop ended Richard Court's reign as premier, a Liberal Party cabal quickly set about destroying Mr Barnett's leadership hopes.

The Court clan and others disliked the MP for Cottesloe so intensely that a secret and audacious plan to drop Federal Liberal Julie Bishop straight into the party's leadership was being worked up. Without having Shakespeare to write the plot, the cabal failed miserably, Ms Bishop backed out and on February 26, 2001, Mr Barnett emerged victorious from the party room.

Fast forward to three weeks ago when the born-again Opposition Leader was welcomed to the Liberal campaign launch with evangelical-style rapture masterminded by Ms Bishop and a rousing introduction from Mr Court.

The once-infamous "Anyone But Colin" agitators had morphed into "No One But Colin" supporters. As the unified crowd applauded, the hit song Absolutely Everyone bellowed. The power of forgiveness had overcome poison of the past.

Colin James Barnett would understand the contradictions which helped shunt him from the brink of retirement to having one hand on the prize of premiership. Mr Barnett, 58, married with four sons to Lynette and a hobby farm in Toodyay, is in many ways a contradiction himself.

Since 1990, he has kept a tight grip on a blue-blood Liberal seat without ever being accepted as "one of them". He is a pro-mining, pro-development free-market champion who wants Aboriginal rock art put ahead of any industrial expansion on the Burrup Peninsula. He is an economic "dry" but a small "I" Liberal.

Party doyen Bill Hassell has never been close to the man who inherited his Cottesloe seat but says Mr Barnett has turned the opinions of many around in the past few weeks.

"Many have remarked that he's a changed man, more relaxed," Mr Hassell said. "People who were not fans of Colin are pretty impressed.

"He was very sensitive to the support of the Liberal Party and he made a great point at functions of thanking the party and you probably don't know what that means to some of us. Any leader who doesn't understand that everything depends on the party is never going to succeed." Another contradiction as the loner becomes a team player.

In the campaign, Mr Barnett did look more relaxed than his opponent and most observers put that down to having nothing to lose while Alan Carpenter could lose the lot.

It is also true that, unlike 2005, he did not unload any grand iconic plans. He never polarised the public with a Kimberley canal and did not patronise the press as he did three years ago when reporters pointed out his figures were \$200 million out.

Mr Barnett was Cautious Colin, always calm, confident and considerate. Quite an achievement

for a man branded arrogant, non-inclusive and aloof long before Happy Carps arrived on the scene.

His long-time friend and new-found political ally, Churchlands Independent Liz Constable, believes the public will see an intelligent, thoughtful and visionary leader should he become WA premier.

"Maybe some people like to have an entertaining and charismatic person as premier," she said. "I'd rather have someone who will get on with solving problems. Since being returned as the Liberal leader, he's had a real steadiness and sense of control about him."

Before believing Mr Barnett has found Buddhism, remember that in parliamentary debates, the former Claremont fourths football player has always enjoyed kicking heads.

"You're in more trouble than Ned Kelly and you know it," he hollered across at Labor MP John Quigley in



Richard Court and Colin Barnett

June. "You are a joke."

In the 1960s, Mr Barnett played under coach Sonny Maffina with greats including Brownlow medallist Graham Moss to win a premiership but only the giant ruckman and not the nuggety rover had the ability to carve out a sporting career. "He chose wisely," Moss said. "He tried hard but probably didn't have a lot of natural ability."

After leaving Hollywood High School, Mr Barnett chose geology. About a year later he switched to economics, the decision which forged his future, and from 1985 to 1990 he cemented his market economist credentials as head of WA's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a breeding ground for Liberal leaders.

If as predicted, Mr Barnett and Nationals' leader Brendon Grylls form government, there will be

Conductor: Julie Bishop was picked to oust Colin Barnett.

ghosts from the past to exorcise if his premiership is to succeed.

Before Troy Buswell agreed to stand aside, senior Liberals tore themselves apart over the Vasse MP's background. "In politics you can be friends one day, enemies the next and vice versa," said Liberal MP Rob Johnson, one of those who wanted Mr Buswell banished.

Next week both could be ministers and Mr Barnett will

hope forgiveness works its magic once again.

