

Lazarus-like Barnett faces tougher task in governing



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It is good to see that, despite the cruel tensions which must have been felt by all concerned, both Alan Carpenter and Colin Barnett have managed to preserve equanimity, grace and good humour in public over the past week or so.

There is something about the changing of the political guard in Australian politics which almost always brings out the best in our politicians. The snaky variety of narcissism which characterised Peter Costello's performances this week is relatively and thankfully rare.

Mr Barnett's performance, stoic and good-natured, has been particularly admirable since he suddenly became Liberal leader — and it would be only fair to acknowledge that Troy Buswell managed pretty well on election night as well.

Mr Barnett now has the unenviable task of turning this Lazarus-like feat into a functioning government. That will almost certainly be even more difficult than his campaign performance.

Not only is the alliance (which we should not call a coalition) with the Nationals unstable — not least

because of the considerable instability in the Nationals' own ranks — but the price of the alliance is an agreement which, whatever the fine print eventually looks like, will put severe and probably undesirable constraints on Mr Barnett's ability to manage the State's finances and his ability to direct expenditure to where it is most needed.

It is true that hung parliaments can actually produce something like good government; but a hung parliament resolved by process of auction seems unlikely to do that.

Some obvious pledges excepted — such as the promise to retain and renew Royal Perth Hospital, and the extra funds for teachers — it is not clear where the discretionary focus of a Barnett government will lie.

It may be fortunate that the Liberals were still, by polling day, a bit short on policy detail. It will give them a certain freedom. What did not emerge during the campaign, however, was that sense of the overall policy temper of a Barnett government. There were predictable themes of making a clean break with the Labor style: less spin, more substance, more openness and accountability, and so on; themes which come at no or little cost.

The real problems come when the

backlog of much-needed expenditure is faced seriously for the first time. And while capital expenditures have become the focus, there are problems just as acute in managing the consequences of Labor's addition to ever-increasing recurrent expenditures.

Mr Carpenter was unpopular at a personal level, but his defeat owes as much to the widespread dissatisfaction with his failure to deliver on two elections' worth of Labor promises. The basic big, and big-ticket, issues remain, much as they were when Geoff Gallop won the 2005 election. The delay in making a real start, for instance, on the Fiona Stanley hospital, for instance, stands as merely the worst example of a wider failure to deliver on public health problems.

There is a similar but fiscally smaller problem with schools, not least in tackling the huge backlog of renovation and refurbishment of older schools, some of which have not been significantly upgraded for decades. Law and order issues, fortunately, require little by way of similar capital expenditures, unless a major new prison proves necessary.

Capital expenditures are not, of course, the only problem.

Even if every school in the State

were a marvel of shiny bright new building and technology, that would only address the real problems in education at the very margin. The crisis afflicting WA's public school system (recently underlined by the release of the national student testing results) is an administrative one. The bureaucracy is too big and controls too much.

On the other hand, there is virtually no autonomy at school level in any real sense. The pursuit of ultimately useless methodologies such as OBE has only reinforced the chasm between teachers and administrators.

This naturally raises the wider and now very pressing question as to whether centralised bureaucratic control is the appropriate way of running our schools. Research, observation and the example of the private sector — particularly the

low-cost end of that sector — suggest strongly that it is not.

Substantial devolution has the advantage of being a lot less expensive than the maintenance of an army of bureaucrats. The Liberals need only extend the thinking apparent in their published policies to get on top of this issue.

That kind of thinking goes further. The Gallop and Carpenter governments demonstrated fairly conclusively that the problems with our public hospitals did not respond to the appointment of more (and more highly paid) bureaucrats. At the very least, a more extreme version of managerial autonomy, managed by contract, seems more necessary now than a decade ago.

Government is not, of course, all about these perennial headaches. Mr Barnett has already given some clues as to where he might stand on other

issues. His reluctance to buy into Labor's "bread and circuses" act on the provision of the new football stadium is a welcome sign. If the private sector cannot find any real enthusiasm for the idea — if, in other words, it cannot be built and operated at a profit — then there is no case for extensive public subsidy.

One begins to think that taking on the role of premier after some years of contemplative life on the back bench is probably a very good idea. Experience and observation have made him a fiscal conservative, which is all to the good.

But his surprise stands in recent years — on the wilful destruction of the Burrup Peninsula's prehistory, for instance — show a strength of judgment which, if his Government lasts the distance, will make for interesting times.



Eager to begin: Premier-elect Colin Barnett's grin will be tested on expenditure.