

## WA shock gives Barnett a chance

In the past month he has been transformed from imminent retiree and grumpy backbencher to Liberal hero. writes **Andrew Burrell**.

**J**ohn Howard famously described his chances of returning to the federal Liberal leadership as akin to "Lazarus with a triple bypass".

On that score, it's difficult to know how Colin Barnett could ever find an appropriate metaphor to describe his own astonishing resurrection from the political graveyard.

In little more than 30 days, Barnett has been transformed from imminent retiree and grumpy backbencher in a weak, divided opposition to an all-conquering Liberal hero and the likely next premier of Western Australia.

Barnett, 58, has pulled off one of the most stunning political triumphs in West Australian political history.

The trained economist had been counting down the days until his 18-year parliamentary career ended, even putting the final touches to a lucrative new contract for an academic position that involved the resources sector. His replacement for the blue-ribbon seat of Cottesloe had been preselected by the party.

But that all changed in early August when internal Liberal polling showed the party was headed for a disastrous defeat if it stuck with leader Troy Buswell, whose chair-sniffing antics had made him a national laughing stock.

In desperation, the Liberals turned to Barnett, the man who had led them to defeat at the 2005 election. He was regarded all along by most party insiders as their best performer, if not always their strongest electoral asset.

For the past few years, Barnett had spent most of his time writing a book on his career and entering public debate only on issues that concerned him most, including the destruction of rock art on the Burrup Peninsula in the Pilbara and the Labor government's problematic break-up of the Western Power energy utility.

In effect, Barnett was drafted back to the leadership to lose gracefully, stick around for a while after the election and later hand over to another leader who would contest the next poll.

But something suddenly stirred in the electorate when Barnett returned as Opposition Leader after Premier Alan Carpenter called a snap election on August 7 — one day after Barnett's return to the leadership.

An experienced campaigner, Barnett presented himself as a safe pair of hands and was able to deliver a strong message that capitalised on voter dissatisfaction with the Labor government, mainly in the areas of health, education and law and order. And despite criticism that Barnett did not have the talent in his parliamentary team to

form a competent government, the recycled Opposition Leader made a point of appearing at daily campaign events with his several well-performing frontbenchers — unlike Carpenter who ran more of a presidential-style campaign.

Still, Barnett should never have been in the hunt.

Western Australia's economy is growing at more than 6 per cent annually, unemployment is at historic lows and the resources boom has made the state the envy of the nation.

Until the past few weeks, WA's Liberal Party was the most divided and worst performing in the country.

Moreover, last year's one-vote, one-value redistribution of WA's electoral boundaries appeared to have made the job even tougher for the Liberals because it created a swag of new metropolitan seats where Labor is strongest.

Until the final days of the four-week campaign, Labor appeared likely to be returned for a third term, albeit with a reduced majority.

But voters were looking for an excuse to severely punish Labor, which has been beset by scandal over its links to lobbyists Brian Burke and Julian Grill and was widely perceived as failing to deliver the benefits of the boom to ordinary people.

Carpenter's decision to call WA's earliest election in more than a century and then to run a largely negative advertising campaign also benefited the Liberals.

If, as seems likely, Barnett becomes WA's 29th premier in coming days, he may come to be seen as the state's most pro-development

leader since Charles Court. Barnett describes himself as an economic dry and he has the curriculum vitae to prove it.

Indeed, the primary focus of much of his career has been Western Australia's economic development.

Barnett was educated at Nedlands Primary School in Perth's exclusive western suburbs and Hollywood Senior High School, both among WA's top state schools. (Kim Beazley also attended Hollywood.)

After graduating from the University of Western Australia with a masters degree in economics, he took a job as an economist at the Australian Bureau of Statistics in Canberra before returning to Perth, where he became an economics lecturer at Curtin University.

Barnett then lobbied for business when he worked for WA's Chamber of Commerce and Industry as both chief economist and executive director, before winning the seat of Cottesloe in a byelection and entering state parliament in 1990.

The times suited Barnett. Three years later, Richard Court won the 1993 state election and appointed Barnett as his minister for

resources development and energy.

Barnett is widely seen as being a competent minister during that period, guiding through major projects including the Goldfield gas pipeline, the expansion of the North-West Shelf project, the hydroelectric project on the Ord River, the Collie power station and the Onslow salt project.

When Court lost the 2001 election to Geoff Gallop's Labor, Barnett was installed as leader.

Four years later, despite opinion polls showing him well in the race, Barnett lost the 2005 election to Gallop after a campaign that is best remembered for his disastrous plan to pipe water from the Kimberley to Perth and his embarrassing failure to explain his costings — a rare slip for a man who normally

demonstrates a solid understanding of policy.

Barnett told *The Australian Financial Review* last week he would be an honest leader for WA — a reference to Labor's sleaze and corruption of the past few years.

But he also stressed his experience: 18 years in parliament, 13 of which were either as leader or deputy leader of the Liberal Party and eight years as a cabinet minister.

And despite his strong credentials as an economic, Barnett insists he has a softer side, citing his five years as education minister when he introduced universal kindergarten program for all four-year-olds and pre-primary for all five-year-olds.

"We now have the strongest early childhood program in the country," he said.

**Voters were looking for an excuse to punish Labor, which was widely perceived as failing to deliver the benefits of the boom to ordinary people.**



Lyn and Colin Barnett on Saturday night, after it became clear the Opposition Leader might have to put his post-politics career on hold.

Photo: ROSS SWANBOROUGH