

FACTIONS TOO MUCH FRICTION

Rita's uphill battle in Labor's leader tussles



The latest survey of how West Australians rate their political leaders makes for interesting reading (well, interesting's a stretch) but not for the reason a lot of people thought.

The poll of 969 voters by research firm DemosAU showed West Australians are increasingly inclined to vote for One Nation.

That revelation understandably commanded the lion's share of attention (if Pauline Hanson takes unusually long in the toilet it's news at the moment) but I was more intrigued by what the poll said about the regard, or lack thereof, voters have for Deputy Premier Rita Saffioti. The parliamentary bulldog has a net positive rating of -10 per cent, meaning her popularity hangs somewhere between a fart in an elevator and a turd in a swimming pool.

I don't quite understand why Rita's so on the nose. Sure, she's spending money like a drunken sailor, but at least she gets stuff done.

Her no-nonsense manner is reminiscent of Alannah MacTiernan.

Both have a crash-or-crash-through approach to public policy and eschew the weasel words to which many politicians default. Both staked their careers on building train lines.

Like Alannah, Rita is a fighter. She had to be, really. Between attending Kelmescott Senior High School and representing the battlers of West Swan, she's had the mouthguard in for most of her life.

But for some reason, Rita isn't attracting the broad approval enjoyed by the long-serving former member for Armadale.

A negative 10 per cent approval rating would be concerning for any aspiring premier, but especially so for Rita because without popularity, she's got no game.

As an unaligned member of the Labor Party, she has no factional support.

The only way Rita becomes premier when Roger Cook hangs up his boots is if the factional leaders believe she is so incredibly popular they are willing to bench their own candidates.

If you're a Labor MP who is both unaligned and unpopular, you are the political equivalent of the slowest

MEMBER	ELECTORATE	FACTION	UNION
Klara Andric	MLC	Left	UWU
Stuart Aubrey	MLA Scarborough	Left	AMWU
Geoff Baker	MLA South Perth	PL	SDA
Hannah Beazley	MLA Victoria Park	PL	SDA
Dan Bull	MLA Bayswater	Left	UWU
Tony Buti	MLA Armadale	PL	SDA
Dan Caddy	MLC	Left	UWU
John Carey	MLA Perth	Left	UWU
Sandra Carr	MLC	Left	UWU
Steve Catania	MLA Midland	PL	CFMEU
Lauren Cayoun	MLC	PL	AWU
Lorna Clarke	MLA Butler	PL	TWU
Alanna Clohesy	MLC	Left	AMWU
Caitlin Collins	MLA Hillarys	PL	SDA
Roger Cook	MLA Kwinana	Left	UWU
Divina D'Anna	Kimberley	Left	AMWU
Stephen Dawson	MLC	Left	AMWU
Kate Doust	MLC	PL	SDA
Colleen Egan	MLA Thornlie	Left	UWU
Mark Folkard	MLA Mindarie	Left	AMWU
Kim Giddens	MLA Bateman	PL	SDA
Emily Hamilton	MLA Joondalup	Left	UWU
Meredith Hammat	MLA Girrawheen	Left	UWU
Jodie Hanns	MLA Collier	Left	AMWU
Terry Healy	MLA Southern River	Left	UWU
Klasey Hirst	MLC	PL	CFMEU
Jackie Jarvis	MLC	Left	UWU
Hugh Jones	MLA Darling Range	PL	CFMEU
Parvinder Kaur	MLC	PL	SDA
Dave Kelly	MLA Bassendean	Left	UWU
Ali Kent	MLA Kalgoorlie	PL	AWU
Jags Krishnan	MLA Riverton	PL	SDA
Sook Yee Lai	MLA Bibra Lake	PL	SDA

gazelle on the Serengeti, such is the power of the factions.

For such an influential force, most people know little about the Labor factional system (see the panel).

Rivalry between trade unions and the philosophical, often religious, divisions within Labor used to mean Caucus House Of Cards and Game Of Thrones.

Membership of the Left or Right faction depended predominantly on how much capitalism you wanted with your socialism.

Nowadays, factional alignment is

more a flag of convenience; a transactional, friends-with-benefits arrangement.

In WA, it's not even Left and Right any more, it's the Left faction and the "Progressive" faction, which is a hodgepodge collection of centrists, Catholics and right-leaning thinkers.

The names mean little. There are members of the Left who are free-market capitalists and members of the Right who would nationalise the banks in a heartbeat. Many of the Catholics are about as progressive as J.D. Vance.

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MEMBER	ELECTORATE	FACTION	UNION
Ayor Makur Chuot	MLC	Left	UWU
Magenta Marshall	MLA Rockingham	PL	TWU
Michelle Maynard	MLA Swan Hills	Independent	
Simone McGurk	MLA Fremantle	Left	UWU
David Michael	MLA Balclatta	PL	TWU
Kevin Michel	MLA Pilbara	Left	AMWU
Yaz Mubarakai	MLA Oakford	Left	AMWU
Lisa Munday	MLA Dawesville	Left	UWU
Andrew O'Donnell	MLC	PL	SDA
Lisa O'Malley	MLA Bicton	Left	UWU
Frank Paolino	MLA Mt Lawley	PL	CFMEU
Paul Papalia	MLA Secret Harbour	Independent	
Daniel Pastorelli	MLA Landsdale	PL	SDA
Stephen Pratt	MLA Jandakot	Left	UWU
Stephen Price	MLA Forrestfield	PL	AWU
Don Punch	MLA Bunbury	Left	AMWU
Cassie Rowe	MLA Belmont	PL	AWU
Samantha Rowe	MLA	PL	AWU
Rita Saffioti	MLA West Swan	Independent	
Amber-Jade Sanderson	MLA Morley	Left	UWU
Ron Sao	MLA Cannington	PL	SDA
David Scaife	MLA Cockburn	Left	AMWU
Jessica Stojkovski	MLA Kingsley	Left	AMWU
Katrina Stratton	MLC	Left	AMWU
Matthew Swinburn	MLC	PL	CFMEU
Reece Whitby	MLA Baldivis	Independent	
Rhys Williams	MLA Mandurah	Left	AMWU
Sabine Winton	MLA Wanneroo	Left	UWU
Pierre Yang	MLC	Left	UWU

Labor MPs don't like to publicly flaunt their allegiances, so it's difficult to understand who's who in the zoo.

Fortunately, I know a bloke.

Former WA premier Brian Burke may well be the Voldemort of Australian politics, but there's no doubting he knows his apples when it comes to which MP is beholden to which faction and which union.

He's calculated that of the 62 Labor MPs currently serving, 33 are aligned to the Left faction (which is bankrolled by the United Workers Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union), 25 are Progressives (which is

bankrolled by the Transport Workers Union; Australian Workers Union; Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association; and (until recently) the CFMEU.

That leaves four un-aligned MPs (who are bankrolled by Containers for Change).

Burke uses the aftermath of Mark McGowan's resignation to explain the power of the factions and the internal politics that governs their decisions.

"By a clear majority of seven, the Left rejected Cook in favour of Amber-Jade Sanderson, a protégé of the United Workers, which naturally thought Sanderson was a shoo-in because the Left, including Cook supporters, would loyally unite behind her," he said.

"Unfortunately for Sanderson, the Manufacturing Workers had other ideas. A minority in the Left, and always restless under the superior numbers of the United Workers, AMWU refused to be bound by the majority and persuaded Cook to stay in the race.

"The Left split between Cook and Sanderson and Progressive Labor fell in behind Cook.

"The small unaligned group decided to vote for Cook, too, and their most prominent member, Saffioti, was rewarded with the deputy premiership."

Rita may look at the career of McGowan as evidence you can defeat the tyranny of the factions.

She will note that Mark was unaligned but managed to become the most popular premier since Burke (younger readers will be surprised to learn Volodermort was once the most dominant politician in not just WA but the whole of Australia).

There's one important difference between Mark's career and hers — he only became premier because five years earlier he agreed to be Opposition leader at a time when nobody wanted the job, given Colin Barnett's Liberal government was poised to win the 2013 election in a landslide, which it did.

The bloody-minded predilection of factions to back their own is illustrated by the Right's last-minute move to replace McGowan with Stephen Smith as soon as the 2017 election appeared gettable.

A lot of stars are going to have to align for Rita to get the top job, but that won't stop her trying. She'll be biting down on the mouthguard to the end.

