

Cut Through, Feb 27, 2026: **South Australia election primer**

All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host, Crystal Andrews. And today I'm joined by Joe Dyer, who is co-host of The Sunday Shot, another wonderful independent media are going to be going through a little primer on the upcoming state election for South Australia. Joe, welcome to Cut Through. It's so nice to have you on here after having been on your show a couple of times.

Jo Dyer (00:25)

Thank you so much for having me. Great pleasure.

Crystal Andrews (00:28)

How's

it feel to be in the hot seat?

Jo Dyer (00:31)

it feels a lot easier actually, the pressure's off.

You don't have to be trying to think like two minutes ahead as well as stay in the moment.

Crystal Andrews (00:39)

Well, I'm glad to hear it. Joe is going to be our local on the ground South Australian guide through this episode, which will be a bit of a primer on what to expect once we do hit that polling date on the 21st of March.

the campaigning in South Australia officially launched this week. So I think first, because most people who subscribe to Crikey, most people who will be listening to this are not in South Australia. I myself am not in South Australia, so I'm going to be learning just as much as everybody else today. I think I'll just run through some numbers first to make sure that everybody is on the same page, just what the picture looks like as we head into this campaign period. So in the House of Assembly, South Australia's lower house, which of course determines who governs,

Labour holds 29 out of 47 seats. The Libs hold 13. There are four independents and one vacancy left by former Liberal MP Troy Bell, who's in prison for stealing \$430,000 from non-profit educational organizations, which is a wild separate story to all of this. ~ As you can imagine with that sort of layout, the Labour

Jo Dyer (01:33)

Mm.

It sure is.

Crystal Andrews (01:52)

Premier Peter Malinuskas is riding very, very high. I checked some news poll numbers just before we went to recording. They have him at about a 67 % satisfaction rating for his job as premier and about the same 67 % as preferred premier. About 44 % of news poll respondents intend to give Labour their primary vote. So this is a very, very strong start for Labour.

Jo Dyer (02:18)

Yeah, something

Albo could only dream of.

Crystal Andrews (02:21)

Yes. And then on the other side of the coin, Kevin Bonham's analysis has Labour sitting at around the 60 % on the two party preferred to the Liberal Party. However, we will get to this. That is assuming that the Liberals in South Australia remain in opposition or indeed whether they remain in the House of Assembly full stop.

as with the national trend, one nation in South Australia has risen to now be polling above the liberal party in every poll that I checked this morning. That might change by the time this episode comes out, but it's certainly a strong showing. So that is a very, very quick snapshot of, of what we're looking at. So Joe, maybe we should start talking about labor because that is probably the part of this that is least likely to change between now and the, and the 21st of March.

how have they approached this early phase of the campaigning? Because if we're being realistic, this is not an election that they are going to lose.

Jo Dyer (03:14)

No, and I think Malinuskas is being very careful to frame things as you can take nothing for granted in politics. We've got a campaign to get through, who knows who'll be sitting in or on the government benches after the election, but everybody knows that Labor is going to win in a smashing landslide. And so it really is, the only question really is, is by how much will they win? And as you highlight, who will be?

the formal opposition after the election, if there even will be one. I mean, if it's just going to be this sort of rabble of a crossbench and some One Nation and can the Liberals hold on to any seats at all? I mean, these are the questions. look, it's interesting ~ the role of One Nation just to, you know, bell that cat early, because One Nation really had never had much of an impact.

Crystal Andrews (04:06)

Yeah, of course.

Jo Dyer (04:12)

in South Australia. And it was a real surprise actually in the 22 election when they managed to snag what was their first seat in the Legislative Council at the 22 election. ~ And as is the case with One Nation within a relatively short period of time, the representative, ~ Sarah Game, she ~

Crystal Andrews (04:36)

Sarah game.

Jo Dyer (04:37)

Sarah Game. So she was the leader of One Nation in the state and she basically left the party. So she sits as an independent. In fact, the Green, Tammy Franks also, unusually for the Greens, left the party and sits an independent as well. So One Nation's rise is not really much to do with who One Nation is and what it represents, I think, but more that everybody is so frustrated with the Liberals.

since the 22 election where it was a very strong result for Labour, they actually have picked up in by-elections two seats previously held by leaders of the Liberal Party. That's what's taken them up to the 29. They picked up Dunstan with Stephen, when Stephen Marshall, the former Premier, who was actually, you know, very affable.

Crystal Andrews (05:23)

29.

Jo Dyer (05:31)

man, people really liked him, but he was a moderate in a party which is increasingly being dominated, not just by the conservatives. ~ And there's always been a really quite kind of heartfelt conflict between the moderates in South Australia, moderates and the conservatives in South Australia, because they were so strong, the moderates were so strong in South Australia and Christopher Pine, Simon Birmingham, real leaders within the moderates.

at a federal level, we're still involved directly in politics. the split within the Liberals sort of has played out in really visceral ways ~ in South Australia. But now, post-Pine, post-Birmingham, the Conservatives really have the numbers and they are moving increasingly to the right, dominated by recruits from the Pentecostal.

movement. So it's quite extreme positions that the Liberals adopt, including some anti-abortion shenanigans going on that have been beaten back. So for those people who are of the centre-right, they felt orphaned and weirdly and ironically, and this does seem to be playing out a bit on a national level too, instead of going, all right, well, where do we, where can we go, which is centrist, they seem to be

gravitating, at least in polling terms, towards One Nation. So it is a protest against the disarray of the Liberals, I think, which has seen this surge, which is kind of oddly nothing to do with what

One Nation represents. They've recruited Corey Bernardi, which I find kind of hilarious in terms of Relevance Deprivation Syndrome.

when he was recruited, I assumed he would be, you know, heading up the Senate ticket and this was him trying to make his way back into federal parliament. But the idea that he's aspiring to the dizzying heights of the ledge co in South Australia is kind of extraordinary. ~ He has been photographed quite deliberately, I think, having a beer ~ with ~ Alex Antic because you don't have a beer.

on the pavement outside the Exeter Hotel on Rundle Street if you're not hoping to be seen. ~ This of course has meant that people have been saying, well, is Antic really going to defect? ~ I'm not sure about that because staying with the Liberals is probably his safest bet of staying in federal parliament. I think it's much more likely to be them trying to work out preference deals. ~ So I think Malinuskas and Labor can just sit back

Crystal Andrews (07:57)

you

Jo Dyer (08:22)

and watch all this happen really. I mean, they are in such a dominant position. There's quite a few senior Labor members retiring from politics, former Deputy Premier and Susan Close, former Treasurer and Stephen Mulligan, ~ former Speaker who's been sort of a long time veteran of South Australian politics, Leon Bignell, ~ who left the party to be an independent Speaker, but was obviously still very much aligned.

with Labor outside of his official duties. But none of this is making an impact on the support for Malinuskas. He's very popular, he's very charming, he's very handsome, ~ all of those things. He is at heart of Shopee though, he was recruited and mentored by the godfather, Don Farrell. He's led a relatively low key

government ~ with the exception, when I say it's low key, with the exception of these high profile events that he's continuously ~ recruited into South Australia, culminating in just last week, the revenge on the Victorians of nabbing the motor GP. So it's this sort of steady as she goes government, ~ which then gets prominence and cut through these events. Live golf.

the gather round. It is look at us, this will generate economic activity and over here we've investing in health, we're investing in housing, we're doing the things that you would hope a Labor government would do, albeit in a very centrist business friendly kind of way.

Crystal Andrews (10:05)

you mentioned in the piece that you wrote for Crikey that there is some polling that indicates that the liberals will lose all 13 seats that they have. And certainly it seems like some liberal strategists at least are treating that as a serious possibility, something that could happen. And I just think it's worth noting, you know, all of those seats are not a

necessarily a windfall to one nation or perhaps other ~ right wing, you know, minority parties or independent candidates. That also is labor very likely picking up, you know, picking up even more seats. You mentioned too that they had already picked up through, through by-elections. So this is really going to be an even more robust labor government on the other side. think, I mean, is it, is it, would it be unusual if they didn't take any seats off the liberals at this election? Is that, should we expect that? Yeah.

Jo Dyer (10:50)

Yeah.

I think they will take seats off.

mean, Labour, think definitely will take seats ~ off the Liberals. ~ And even Bragg, which is one of the safest seats ~ in South Australia for them, or certainly in the urban area, and had been Steel Hall's ~ seat when he was in ~ parliament in South Australia, ~ it's just...

It is incredible the number and the type of seats that the Liberals are having to defend. But if you look at what happened federally, mean, they have been, the Liberals have been entirely wiped out of Adelaide, losing Sturt, which of course had been Christopher Pine's seat. That was the last one that they were clinging onto after the loss of Boothby in 22. So it is completely conceivable that the Liberals will have no seats at all in Adelaide itself, which would, you know,

be extraordinary. ~ Look, Ashton Hurn may well hang on. She's, ~ you know, the new young, moderate, liberal leader that the Libs have sort of turned to in these times of crisis. ~ But the fact that she's even having to spend quite a bit of time out in her seat ~ as well, it just indicates the diastates that they are in. You know, I

It also is ensuring that, you know, Malanouskas is having a free pass on any issue that should be more controversial and more of an issue in the way that he's governing, but there's no one, there's no one there. They're fighting amongst themselves. ~ They're panicking and they're just letting things go through the keeper.

Crystal Andrews (12:43)

It's really striking how much of the state liberal story does seem to mirror the federal liberal story that's playing out. As you mentioned, Ashton Hearn being a moderate woman putting it put in a leadership position at a time when the party is in just a

critical, critical state. I mean, fighting for its life doesn't even seem to be a strong enough term. It really mirrors what we've seen just happen with Susan Lee. mean, whether people liked Susan Lee or not for, for liberal leader and leader of the coalition, it's a very similar position that they seem to have found themselves in.

But is there, are there any like key differences here that, you know, if we are watching on from other States and trying to make those comparisons to federal politics, like it can't all just be exactly the same playbook that they're playing out here, is it?

Jo Dyer (13:33)

No, look, don't,

actually don't think it is in some ways what's happening in South Australia, I think is probably more comparable to what happened in Western Australia, ~ where they just had a state leader in Mark McGowan, as he was then premier, who is just so popular ~ that the Liberals or the opposition just sort of don't really know what to do. And then they've had their own issues. So

And then these sorts of things reinforce each other. Failing to get traction means that the internal problems that they have become exacerbated because there is a sort of an existential panic going on. So after the election, ~ Stephen Marshall stood down as leader straight away and they had a leader in

David Spears, who was relatively young, Scottish born, had been Minister for the Environment and Water, had performed well, had got some cut through because water is a big issue in South Australia because obviously the Eastern States just steal all our water and leave us hanging out to dry quite literally. ~ So David Spears was elected and then wasn't getting cut through and

As I say, the politics is really nasty and really personal down there. But his downfall came about in quite an extraordinary way. ~ Now, who leaked these images is still very much a question being debated across dinner tables. But the advertiser got their hands on some footage from within his home of him taking cocaine.

So it was really extreme downfall that happened really quickly. Now he had stood down just before that saying he had a gut fall. This wasn't the way he wanted to spend his time being attacked by colleagues and so on, former friends. So, but it's clear that him standing down was related to this looming publicity that he was about to get. So.

They had to move quickly. They put Vincent Tarzir in. He just really didn't trouble the pollsters at all. He was there for about 16 months, I think, but they never got, the Libs never got back on a proper, you know, electoral political footing. It was all just soap opera and chaos. So they had to do something. I think at the end of last year, it was internal polling which showed that they were going to lose every seat in Adelaide. So they had to do something and they were panicking.

Ashton Hearn had been on maternity leave. She's a first-termer and she's been on maternity leave for a lot of this ~ Parliament. it is, in a way, it is incredible that they've gone to her and hopefully they're not sort of just setting her up to, well, they are setting her up to fail at this election, but that she can stay on ~ and have a proper go at, you know, trying to get traction.

There's something about just the chaos of the Liberals and the visceral hatred of the Liberals in South Australia, which has meant they haven't behaved in a professional way. And there does seem to be something about these hard right Liberals. And this is where I think there are comparisons to a federal level where they are absolutely determined to hang on, to seize the spoils of defeat rather than

give up some of their haloed cultural war positions in particular. And as I say, that's what we've seen play out with some really extreme anti-abortion stances, which then I think he was in the shadow ministry then ~ Ben Hood introduced through the legislative council where Labour don't have a majority. ~ Now Ben Hood is now the shadow treasurer. So, you know,

Crystal Andrews (17:29)

Mm.

Jo Dyer (17:31)

This is these sort of extreme positions which are adopted and then being sort of mainstreamed within the Liberal Party, but are just not in any way electorally palatable to the broader population.

Crystal Andrews (17:43)

Yeah, the comparison to the West Australian government is one that a lot of crikey commenters on your article mentioned as well. I'm from Western Australia, so that is a situation I know well. ~ But I do think what was interesting about that is, yes, WA has a very, very strong Labour government and the Liberals there are just yet in an absolute mayor. However, in the Legislative Council, the Labour Party

Jo Dyer (17:50)

Yeah.

Crystal Andrews (18:09)

doesn't have an outright majority where they still have to work with the opposition and the crossbench in the legislative council to get bills passed and to do the work of do the business of government. And that's not the situation in South Australia where, ~ mean, correct me if I'm wrong, I think the Labour Party also has an outright majority in the legislative council. Is that right? No, they don't.

Jo Dyer (18:31)

No, they don't, but there

are sort of sympathetic ~ legislative councillors in that, you know, SA Best, the remnants of ~ Nick Xenathon's tilt, which is, you know, sort of centrist. ~

Crystal Andrews (18:46)

It's

the affiliated, it's sort of the next adjacent affiliated ~ parties and independents. Okay, I see. Yes.

Jo Dyer (18:50)

Yeah, so they can marshal a majority in

a relatively straightforward way, even though there are kind of, you know, kooks and up in the the ledge co as well, and increasingly, you know, independence there as well. ~ But mostly from former party members who have abandoned their parties in One Nation and as I say, surprisingly, the Greens as well with Tammy Franks.

Crystal Andrews (19:18)

What was interesting about, about that dynamic to me is it almost seems like being in a position where the Liberal Party is not really any kind of functional opposition, because of their, numbers mean that there's just, you know, there's nothing that they, well, there is nothing that they are choosing to meaningfully do, ~ allows them to, pull these sort of like quite extreme stunts. I felt the...

the abortion legislation that was put through by Ben Hood, which had absolutely no, it was not going to pass. And I think in some ways that is almost the point and that is allowing the, conservative wing of the liberal party, lurch even more to the right and put up these sort of signals to a more extreme base.

use the parliament itself to sort of do that, do that signaling and say like, there's nothing really for us in a day to day, on a day to day basis to do here because the Labour government is so dominant, they're going to do whatever they're to do. So what could I, what could I do this week? What could I do? Like, is there an element of that? Again, I'm on the outside just looking in. So tell me if I'm way off base with this.

Jo Dyer (20:18)

Yeah, I don't think it's...

No, look, I think it is, I mean, it is extraordinary because, you know, there's been quite a bit of commentary in the last few weeks about, ~ you know, at a federal level, ~ the Liberal Party had lost far more votes from the centre through the Teals ~ and actually some voters just going straight to Labour than they have lost a One Nation to the right. But there was never this huge kind of out

cry from within the party that, my God, we've lost votes to the Teals, therefore we must move more centrist. It always seems to be, we have to move more to the right because we have to claim back the voters who are now going to One Nation. And that is the way to electoral oblivion. And it's playing out again and again. But they are refusing to learn those lessons again and again and again. Now, we shall see both in South Australia and in

the by-election of Farah when that comes, ~ how real this sort of so-called surge of support of One Nation actually is, whether or not there are any votes going from Labor to One Nation, or it is just an internal splintering of the right ~ that liberal members, I I was shocked that a friend of mine who is very much a liberal person said,

He loathes Pauline Hanson, but he is probably going to give his first preference to One Nation. And it is a protest against just the chaos of the Liberal Party. So look, I'm curious because I think the South Australian election and Farah, as I say, will be the big test. ~

Crystal Andrews (22:07)

Mm.

Jo Dyer (22:15)

of whether or not this is real in any way and whether or not One Nation can get a toehold in seats ~ and in jurisdictions more generally that they, you know, that they couldn't have dreamt of 10 or 15 years ago.

Crystal Andrews (22:31)

whether that polling intention actually translates to votes is another question and we will see. Look, it's still, like I said, three weeks to go, even though Labour's position is probably not going to change so much. There are some other things that might change. Jo, if I could ask you for any hot seats that people should keep an eye on, there maybe is a bit of an interesting challenge or a

Jo Dyer (22:33)

Mm-mm.

Crystal Andrews (22:56)

minor party and independent ~ contender, which we should be keeping an eye on. I'd love your tip.

Jo Dyer (23:02)

Yeah.

I mean, I think the thing about the independents in South Australia is that most of the independents, in fact, all of the independents, apart from those who've left their parties like, you know, in the leg go and so on, who are currently in parliament of ex liberals. And there was a whole sort of sway of liberals that had to leave the party in disgrace before the last election in 22. And a lot of it was to do with allegations of

fraud, whether on public money, like Troy Bell, who, as you say, is the seat of Mount Gamber is now vacant. So that's notionally liberals, at least, or can they claim that back? Or some of it was to do with travel entitlements. And one actually who was accused of having defrauded his

entitlements actually kind of got off and it was to do with his urban home versus his regional home and some confusion around that.

~ But they all, they actually all got reelected. ~ So one is now, the seat is vacant. Another one is actually having to campaign whilst under house, in house detention ~ because he was convicted. ~ His sentencing has been delayed while he appeals, but in the interim he has been charged with domestic violence offenses. ~ But...

Crystal Andrews (24:15)
Right.

Jo Dyer (24:28)
is still in fact running. ~ So you know, there's a lot of those sorts of very weird and very specific ~ issues around some of independents. ~ But there are some genuine independents, if you like, which are now challenging. ~ In a couple of seats, ~

Crystal Andrews (24:32)
Wow.

Jo Dyer (24:52)
particularly the seat of Finnis, ~ where Lou Nicholson is an independent who is much more, she's not a teal in that sense, but it is very much a sensible centre, community independent, ~ who is just saying we jack of this and no one's listening to our needs. She did very well at the last election and she's challenging again. So I think that is something that the independence movement generally has got their eye on. ~ Then there is the seat of Flinders, which is normally has been one of the

safer seats for the Liberal Party. But at the last election, an independent challenger, Liz Haberman, came very close and reduced that margin to about 3 % of the two candidate preferred. Now, she then went on to challenge for the seat of Gray at the federal election, ~ did quite well, was ultimately unsuccessful. So there she's not running again, but there is a local businesswoman ~ from Port Lincoln, which is big city. ~

in that seat, Megan Petherick, who is challenging. So I think they would be the two seats to kind of keep your eye on in relation that independence movement, which, you know, you'd think would play out in stronger ways than it has given that South Australia has always been sort of open to these third parties. know, Zyck Xenophon had a major impact on the state.

and its politics, even though when he kind of came back and sought to be an alternative premier, it was deemed a bit of a flop. ~ But they had done well previously and he had done very well ~ when he had been running for the Legislative Council, getting over 20 % of the vote for his party. ~ So, you know, I'll be keeping my eye on them ~ and it may be that actually independence, real independence as it were, ~ may be the ones taking the fight up to.

Labour after the election.

Crystal Andrews (26:48)

Yes, it's something that will be keeping an eye on as well. I believe we will be sending a reporter to South Australia to cover some of the election madness as it gets a little bit closer. hopefully Joe will have more of your insights to come as well. So thank you for walking me through the primer. There is a lot going on, but I really...

Jo Dyer (27:06)

There is a lot going on and I think keeping

our eye on the polls, particularly One Nation and independence in individual seats as we get closer to the election will be key.

Crystal Andrews (27:19)

I really appreciate it. Thank you.

Jo Dyer (27:21)

No worries. Thank you, Crystal.