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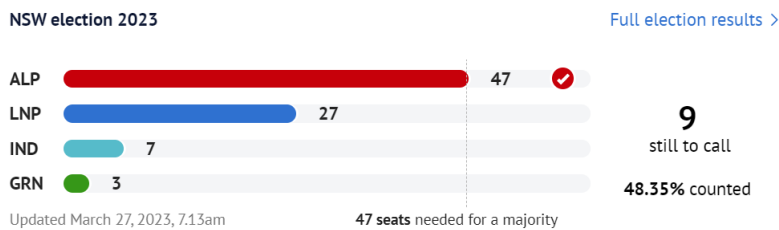
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From enigma to premier: How Chris Minns and Labor won the election



By [Alexandra Smith](#)

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As NSW was in its post-Christmas slump at the end of 2022, Labor strategists were worried. Voters simply did not know Chris Minns. Dominic Perrottet's profile was rapidly rising but the Labor leader's was not. Perrottet was gaining ground and Minns was an enigma.

One senior Labor insider who was closely involved in the campaign put it simply: "Perrottet went from being the most hated man in the state over his handling of Omicron to being able to reinvent himself and lose the rough edges."



Premier-elect Chris Minns with his wife, Anna, and son at a cafe in Kogarah.

CREDIT: JAMES BRICKWOOD

Another Labor source said: “The problem was Chris was unknown, but Dom had come out pretty hard on gambling – that helped him a lot.” Minns was actively avoiding being dragged into the debate around a mandatory cashless gaming card, allowing Perrottet to commandeer the airtime.

The party took the unorthodox step of launching a mass digital advertising campaign in the most sleepy time of the year. Splashing about \$100,000, the social media blitz was “hyper-targeted at families in target seats”, according to one of the key strategists. The goal was to help voters “get to know Chris”, and they introduced Minns and his wife, Anna, with a casual at-home recorded interview.

A month later, on February 2, again unusually early for a state election not set down until the end of March, Labor launched its television ad campaign, to coincide with its first rally in Penrith. Labor spent all its allowable advertising expenditure cap, outspending the Liberals on social media.

Minns was slowly lifting his profile but the Labor leader needed more than recognition.

For the best part of 2022, a consistent message was coming through in Labor’s focus groups and polling. The same theme was picked up in Unions NSW research. Voters disliked the idea of any further privatisation.

At first glance, it looked like the sale of public assets could give Labor a strong line of attack against the Coalition. After all, Perrottet, a former long-term treasurer, had described asset recycling as the “golden key” to unlock funds to build huge amounts of infrastructure for the state.

NSW Labor general secretary Bob Nanva, however, was nervous. He did not want to launch a Mediscare-style campaign without a “proof point”, according to several key campaign strategists. Labor needed to wait until it had something concrete to bolster its argument against the Coalition.

The first official leaders’ debate in early February between Perrottet and Minns on 2GB was the springboard. In that debate, Minns likened the Coalition’s method of privatising assets to pay for big road and rail projects as “flogging off the family jewels and home” to pay the credit card bill.



Chris Minns and Dominic Perrottet before their first leaders' debate on 2GB.*CREDIT:DOMINIC LORRIMER*

Unfazed, dismissive even, Perrottet would not rule out asset recycling. Pressed during the debate whether he would take it off the table, Perrottet would only say: “We have no plans for any further privatisation.” Matt Kean, who held the treasury portfolio, weighed in soon after and unequivocally ruled out selling Sydney Water, the most obvious next state-owned asset that could be offloaded.

Meanwhile, Perrottet said he had “no plans” to sell Sydney Water, but refused to rule it out. Eventually, he did but by then, the damage was done. The voters recruited to research focus groups run by both Labor and the union movement were highly cynical.

It also did not help that then local government minister Wendy Tuckerman and Liberal whip Nathaniel Smith turned up to a candidates' debate and held up “Yes” placards when asked if they supported “the privatisation of Sydney Water or other government assets”.

The Liberals appeared divided and Labor had the ammunition it needed. Sydney Water ultimately became Labor's most powerful weapon in the campaign. One senior campaign official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Perrottet's equivocation was exactly what Labor needed.



NSW Labor leader Chris Minns in front of Labor's billboard truck during the election campaign.*CREDIT:JAMES BRICKWOOD*

“Sydney Water became the emblematic proof point we needed, and we had the perfect environment. In all the focus groups, voters were very sensitive about water and people lost faith in Dom and didn’t think he could be trusted with public services,” the official said. Another said: “Sydney Water came to symbolise everything we wanted to say about the Coalition.”

Nanva finally felt comfortable about launching a full-scale assault on the Coalition, and party officials and Minns’ office agreed to release a tranche of Sydney Water documents it had been sitting on until the right moment presented itself.

Upper house MP Rose Jackson, who has the water portfolio, had managed to extract the documents using a parliamentary order, and while not a smoking gun on their own, they indicated that bureaucrats were, in the very least, canvassing ways to sell off the water asset. Labor’s head office hit “go” on a mass social media push and mail-out focusing simply on Sydney Water. It was a turning point in the campaign, several Labor sources said.

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A second pivotal moment in the campaign, according to another senior campaign insider, was when the Coalition launched an attack on Labor over its supposed “budget black hole”. Perrottet and Kean insisted that without a cap on public sector wages, which Labor will abolish, the budget would blow out under Labor. The campaign strategist said it turned out to be a “fatal attack, but on them, not us”. The Coalition underestimated how much voters valued essential workers, the official said.

“Late last year it was becoming clear that because of people’s high engagement with teachers and nurses during the pandemic, they were highly valued. And then when you throw in cost of living, people really cared about public services – they feel a strong sense of ownership over them because they wanted to know that they had a safety net,” the campaign official said.

Labor’s strategy paid off. The party stormed home and seized a host of seats in western Sydney, relegating the Coalition to at least four years in opposition. One of Minns’ first jobs as premier will be to future-proof Sydney Water. In a fitting move, the Labor

government will change the state's constitution to ensure it cannot be sold off at the whim of the government of the day.

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