

A Labor government will 'civilise the place', says leader Michael Daley

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Michael Daley is a self-declared "fish man". Two of the shimmering creatures swim languidly in a small tank in his Parliament House office – the corner suite he took over from Luke Foley when his predecessor [flamed out](#) last year.

Inside his Maroubra electorate office, his personal study strains to accommodate a five-foot tank, where several venerable specimens are now 20 years old. At home there are more fish (in his young daughter's bedroom – they're "forbidden" in the lounge-room), as well as two dogs and a mini rainforest in the backyard populated with frogs, skinks and the odd blue-tongue lizard.



Self-confessed "fish man" NSW Opposition Leader Michael Daley in his office at Parliament House. CREDIT: DOMINIC LORRIMER

Daley's father John came from dairy farming stock and he was taught from childhood to "treat animals as individuals," he says. "It's a respect for life - I think that's where the fish come from. I like living things, I like creatures, I like the environment."

One suspects it takes a particular kind of patience to keep fish alive for two decades – the same patience, perhaps, that allows you to bide your time to become party leader, having played bridesmaid or runner-up for close to eight years.

Daley, now 53, was first talked of as possible successor to the state's last Labor premier, Kristina Keneally, when she led the party to a crushing defeat in 2011. But former union boss John Robertson won the crown instead. When Robertson was forced to resign in late 2014, Daley put his hand up more forcefully.

He pulled out of the contest when it became clear Foley had the nod from the party's powerful head office. The catastrophic end to Foley's career made [Daley the natural successor](#) as then-deputy in November. Yet the new Opposition Leader insists he hasn't been walking around for years with a baton in his knapsack.

"I'm not the sort of person who got in to public life to be leader," he told the Herald this week. "I [didn't] wake up every day yearning to be the leader of the party, never have. I've always thought that if I was good enough, and the colleagues wanted me, I'd put my hand up. I've had reasonable success in life just being me, and I'm going to continue to be me."

He cites Paul Keating's philosophy that "when you get into public life, you jump on your bike and you pedal like buggery. I've always had that view - work as hard as you can and merit should take you as far as you can go."

Daley is seen as less cerebral than Foley, and some insiders – particularly those who were close to the former leader – query his policy heft. But a Labor elder counters, "I'd be grateful for small mercies. There have been plenty of people with big policy brains in government who drove significant change and caused a hell of a lot of trouble." He describes Daley as an "old-fashioned Labor leader, straightforward and reliable, more McKell than Whitlam. He's less interested in the corporate boardroom and much more interested in Mr and Mrs Average, because he knows them and understands them."

Daley, too, was well ahead of the pack in nominating climate change as a major challenge in his first speech to Parliament in 2005, long before most politicians had registered it as a blip on the horizon.

Labor's hopes of toppling Gladys Berejiklian, or at least tipping her into minority government, were bolstered when the first public poll after Daley became leader had the ALP leading the Coalition 51-49. With the state election just 70 days away, he's feeling a "heavy responsibility" to the party and his colleagues to stay competitive. A Labor government, he argues, would "civilise the place".

Sydney is a "beautiful city, a jewel in the crown of our country ... But I think at the moment we've got a government that's not really a government, it's a corporation ... masquerading as a government. They have taken power away from ordinary citizens and put it in the hands of corporate interests, and the people are feeling the pressure. They feel like they are not in control of their own communities, let alone their own city or their own lives, and they are crying out

now for someone to come in and stop the madness and calm the place down, and govern carefully and sensibly and with respect."

It's a potentially potent line of attack after eight years of breakneck urban development under the O'Farrell, Baird and Berejiklian governments.



Then deputy leader Michael Daley with then Labor leader Luke Foley, in November 2018. CREDIT: AAP

The Coalition's much-vaunted infrastructure drive has delivered economic growth and jobs, but at the cost of mounting controversies over the giant WestConnex project; the troubled eastern suburbs light rail; the Opal Tower scandal highlighting questionable regulation of the building industry; the unswerving determination to knock down and rebuild the Allianz Stadium; and the string of resignations and complaints that accompanied the opening of the much vaunted Northern Beaches Hospital, supposedly a model of public-private enterprise.

Against this, the Liberals continue to disparage Labor as the party that built little or nothing during their long years in office. (Daley's office issued a "fact check" this week insisting the previous ALP government had delivered more than 15 infrastructure projects.)

Another vulnerability is the inexperience of his front bench. Apart from the leader himself, only Jodi McKay and Paul Lynch have held ministerial office. But Daley says this overlooks the depth of other expertise on his team, citing, for instance, shadow treasurer Ryan Park's stint as a former deputy director of the Transport Department.

The government has also homed-in on the fact that Daley (fleetingly) thanked jailed former faction boss Eddie Obeid in his maiden speech in 2005. "They have returned to the swamp with Michael Daley," chortled state Treasurer Dominic

Perrottet, on the floor of Parliament in the days after Daley's ascent. The new leader, he claimed, had been "thick as thieves" with Obeid.

Daley flatly denies this. "I never met Obeid until I walked into this place," he says.

So why give him a shout-out in his speech? "Because I was given a list of MPs who claimed that they were handing out how-to-votes for me, and I was told as a matter of protocol that you should thank all your colleagues who worked for you on election day. As it turned out, he didn't, anyway – which was par for the course."

Former Labor premier Morris Iemma has told others he never saw any evidence Daley was part of the Obeid clique. "Morris knew very well who was close to Obeid and [crony] Joe Tripodi, who was lounging in their offices late at night, drinking and eating the nuts and the snacks. And it certainly wasn't Michael Daley," a senior Labor source says.

While the Coalition highlights the demons lurking in Labor's past, Daley has been busy harnessing some of the best talent from former premier Bob Carr's years: two of Carr's A-team, Bruce Hawker and Kris Neill, have come back to occupy key roles in his office, stepping out of their lucrative private careers. "I was pleasantly surprised when Kaila Murnain [Labor's party secretary] rang me up and said Kris [now Daley's chief of staff] wanted to come and join the team," Daley says. "I'm blessed ... In *Blues Brothers* parlance, we've got the band back together."

The new team in Macquarie Street has meant less friction with the party's Sussex Street headquarters as the election approaches. That tensions existed between Murnain and Foley was an open secret inside Labor.

By contrast, Daley and Murnain go back to 2005, when Daley first put his hand up to replace Carr in the seat of Maroubra. Daley was not head office's preferred candidate but prevailed in a nail-biter of a preselection context. Murnain joined his campaign as a volunteer and so impressed him that he gave her her first job in politics, as his electorate officer.

"When Luke left as leader, we had as close to a seamless transition as you could have," Daley maintains. "The difference [with the Turnbull-Morrison transition federally] could not have been more stark ... The Labor Party and the Labor movement in NSW at the moment is absolutely rock solid and that's a great platform for the election."

Daley's relations with Foley are something he seems less keen to discuss. In 2016, Foley dumped Daley as shadow Treasurer, making him shadow minister for planning instead. Daley was bitterly disappointed. Did he take it on the chin? "Politics is a hard game," he replies. Why was he demoted? "You should ask Luke Foley that question."

But he bristles at suggestions his work ethic at the time was under question. "As you can see from my record, I did not go slow at all. Look at the number of speeches I have given in the Parliament, the fact that I've been leading the charge

on the floor of the Parliament as the manager of opposition business, a position I held for seven-and-a-half years before I became leader ... Look at the amount of travel I have done into the regions. The portfolios I have held. My work ethic is as good as anyone's."

As an aside, he adds, "there is a political mantra that insecure leaders from time to time like to try and nobble their rivals. I don't subscribe to that." One senior Labor source says: "I wasn't a Daley supporter, but the turning point for me was the Wagga byelection. He drove down there several times, rolled up his sleeves, campaigned harder than anyone. That's when I thought 'this guy could be the leader'."



Michael Daley during Question Time. CREDIT: AAP

Daley came out with alacrity after ABC journalist Ashleigh Raper [accused Foley of groping her](#) at a drinks function, [saying he "believed Ashleigh"](#). That won him kudos with many women voters.

Asked if he had any concerns about Foley's personal welfare in the wake of the scandal, he replies: "My first concern for his wife and kids [and] of course I was concerned about Ashleigh."

Later he concedes, "Yes, that was a traumatic event [for Foley] and he's got plenty of friends watching out there."

Despite being close to Murnain, and their shared alignment with the party's dominant right faction, Daley likes to emphasise that he was not a product of the Labor "machine". "I did not come through [in 2005] as the head office choice, in fact I wasn't their choice," he says. "I've not been a staffer to a politician, I did not come through the union movement, I came from the grassroots, the ordinary

branch members and community members of Maroubra put me there." He was 27 before he joined the party.

He describes Kempsey in the state's mid-north as the family's "spiritual home" - a factor which may help his campaigning in the regions.

Grandfather Ray was head of the north coast Dairy Farmers Association, and his father, John, kept close ties with the area after moving to Sydney as a young man. John was a draughtsman in the Lands Department, and later in the Department of Main Roads. It was a source of particular pride to Daley when he became Roads Minister in 2008. Many of his father's mates were still working there. (Daley also moved on to the Police, and Finance portfolios.)

Daley's mother Mary is descended from the Carlons of Burraborang Valley, whose ancestors arrived from Ireland as convicts.

As a boy he attended Marcellin College in Randwick, and briefly went to university after school but found himself frustrated by the lackadaisical university timetable. "I just hated the waste of time, I hated having no money, I had a car and not enough money for petrol."

His father pointed him in the direction of a full-time job with the Customs office. He remained there for the next 13 years, crawling through ships' bellies looking for contraband, searching luggage at the airport, patrolling the tarmac, sometimes riding out to meet ships and their foreign crews coming through the heads, or doing desk and intelligence work.

At night he studied law, eventually joining a small firm where he met his future wife, legal secretary Christina, "over the photocopier" in 1997. She'd separated from her first husband, and had two young children, Jake and Alison, that Daley now counts his own.

Daley was smitten but Christina moved to Western Australia to be closer to extended family. He persisted, travelling to WA once a month and shelling out what was then a small fortune for air tickets: \$800 return. Eventually she moved back to Sydney and they married in 2005.

That, he says, was "a huge year. I got pre-selected in a blood-bath in July, elected to Parliament in September, turned 40 in November and married in December".

The couple have since added to their brood, with Olivia, now 12, and Austin, 8.

Daley's networks came in handy when he ran for preselection after years on the local council. A bunch of customs officers joined the local party branches. That support was bolstered by the votes of people he'd known since childhood, when he delivered Sunday papers through the housing estates of south Maroubra. It was a job he continued through to his final year of high school.

"I would have breakfast with all the old ladies, put the washing out and do the chores, and some of them are still there," he says. "That's when I got to see what I unashamedly say is the beauty of the working-class. Just ordinary families, who

don't want a handout, don't want anything special ... All they want from government is respect and order in the services that [their taxes] pay for."

Daley got the scare of his life when his comfortable 16.5 per cent margin shrank to 1.5 per cent in 2011. He has never forgotten it. "It makes you get into every nook and cranny of your electorate."

What does he stand for going into the election? "I want to be the Premier who sticks up for the ordinary person, who is the champion of the people in the suburbs, not only of Sydney but in the regions, the people who just get up every day and go to work, have families, who are just battling through every day doing their best," he says.

If that sounds similar to Prime Minister Scott Morrison's pitch, he insists the difference will be in the "manifestation of that attitude in policy". He cites plans to bring transparency and accountability back into urban development with so-called "Public Planning Inquiries".

"It means if we are going to build a project near your community, we will turn up, in the town hall, and make all the plans and documents and business cases available for you ... I'm going to give the people of NSW truthfulness and transparency and a say in what happens to them. That has not happened for eight long years."

He will campaign heavily on the billions "wasted" from the proceeds of asset sales by the Coalition government. "That's once in forever money. You will never get those assets and their precious golden revenue streams back again ... It makes me cry, it makes me so angry, when I say that out of that 70 billion they have wasted blowouts of 13 billion.

"That will not happen under me."

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/a-labor-government-will-civilise-the-place-says-leader-michael-daley-20190111-p50qq1.html>