



Labor turns state election spotlight on 'polarising' Liberal mayor Zempilas

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Body

Basil Zempilas was supposed to be the great hope of Western Australia's embattled Liberal Party, but so far he has featured more prominently in the Labor campaign than in his own party's efforts.

WA Premier Roger Cook spoke at length about Mr Zempilas - a prominent WA television figure who has been lord mayor of the City of Perth since 2020 - at his press conference on the first official day of the campaign, and Mr Zempilas's likeness features prominently in Labor's attack advertisements.

Labor has formed a view, based on doorknocking and research, that Mr Zempilas is a polarising figure among voters, and is trying to exploit that both on the campaign trail and in its material.

On Sunday, however, Mr Zempilas made his first official media appearance of the campaign when he appeared alongside Liberal leader Libby Mettam to announce the party's latest health policy. Supporters of Mr Zempilas late last year attempted to roll Ms Mettam for the prominent "Perthonality", but it was all smiles between the pair as Mr Zempilas spoke glowingly of the "remarkable" job his leader was doing.

Labor's targeting of him, he said, was an attempt to distract from its own shortcomings.

"If you hear the Premier or a minister mention my name, they are doing that because they want you to take your eye off their chronic un-delivery," he said. "They have botched health, the cost of living is through the roof. They use my name as a diversionary tactic to take people's eye away from the ball, and they do that by playing the man and not the ball." Mr Zempilas is the red-hot favourite to claim the seat of Churchlands in Perth's wealthy western suburbs, one of a host of once blue-ribbon seats lost in the extraordinary 2021 loss to Mark McGowan.

While Ms Mettam hit out at the "cowards in the shadows" in the aftermath of last year's failed leadership coup, she said Mr Zempilas was an important part of the Liberals' election push.

"He's an asset to our team and Roger Cook will do anything to distract from his own failings and appalling record in government," she said. "Let's not forget as either health minister or Premier, Roger Cook is responsible for breaking

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our state's health system." Mr Zempilas' defence of his leader came after Mr Cook on Saturday attacked the Liberals as the "laziest opposition" in WA history.

The Premier was highly critical of Ms Mettam's decision not to appear before the main press pack on Saturday, choosing to campaign in WA's southwest, including her own seat of Vasse. On Sunday he said the "lazy" slur was not directed at Ms Mettam personally.

Mr Zempilas said Mr Cook should be "embarrassed" by his criticism of Ms Mettam. "Libby Mettam has been outnumbered with a massive shortage of resources through no fault of her own, and the extraordinary job she has done to lead the Liberal Party with a lack of resources and a lack of team members is nothing short of inspiring for all of the Liberal candidates," he said. Both parties announced health policies on Sunday: Labor promising \$104m for a new emergency department at the ageing Royal Perth Hospital, the Liberals unveiling a plan to reduce ambulance ramping by covering the cost of diverting non-urgent cases to urgent care clinics.

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