

Varty is given little time to rejoice

By SIMON CLARKE

Mrs Rosemary Varty's new boss is dragging her into work this morning, despite the tiredness that showed clearly in her face yesterday in the wake of her win in the Nunawading byelection.

The Liberal Leader in the upper house, Mr Hunt, said Mrs Varty had to turn up at Parliament House today to begin to learn the ropes as member of the Legislative Council for the province of Nunawading.

There would be time for Mrs Varty to take a break later in the week, Mr Hunt said.

The speed with which the result of the byelection became clear on Saturday night quickly ended Mrs Varty's dread that she and her Labor opponent, Mr Bob Ives, would poll so closely that days, perhaps weeks, could pass before she would know whether she had a job at Spring Street or would be returning to work as an accountant.

Despite relief at having won so convincingly, nothing could hide the strain that showed in her face yesterday as she invited a succession of journalists, photographers and camera crews into the small living room of her unit in Box Hill.

She said she believed throughout the campaign that voting would either be very close — last time a tie was broken in Mr Ives's favor when his name was drawn out of a hat — or that "it would be a very decisive margin".

Party polls had consistently shown a swing of about six or seven per cent against the Government, Mrs Varty said. She had never felt that Mr Ives was creeping up on her. So her thoughts of a close result, it seems, were nothing more than baseless but understandable fear.

Mrs Varty said she believed the big difference between her campaign and that of Labor was that she concentrated on local issues while Labor ignored such matters

Nunawading



revisited

and turned on the Opposition Leader, Mr Kennett.

Not once did it disturb her, she said, that while the Liberals were spending only about \$90,000 on her campaign, the Government was summoning something like 20 times that value of self-promotion through the ALP's own advertisements and corporate advertisements for various Government authorities.

"That didn't bother me," she said. "I've lived in this area all my life and I know what the people here are concerned about."

Mrs Varty, who becomes the only woman Liberal in the upper house and the only woman not sitting on the Government benches, said she believed she had been elected to give voice to previously inarticulate groups in the electorate who, in this campaign, had expressed their concerns.

Mountain cattlemen, chiropractors and concerned churchgoers were among the groups that helped polarise the Nunawading electorate on Saturday, Mrs Varty said.

She said that although particular issues influenced Nunawading voters — especially whether the Premier, Mr Cain, should have a free run in the Legislative Council — two states were soon to have elections and her victory would have ramifications in those polls.

The defeated Labor candidate, Mr Ives, was at home in Balwyn yesterday trying to console him-



The morning after . . . Mrs Varty takes in the press reaction to her victory

Picture: BRUCE POSTLE

self with the belief that he had done everything right but was beaten by events beyond his control.

Mr Ives said he and party colleagues believed that nothing more could have been done in the campaign. "Still, we'll have to think very, very carefully about it," he said.

The past five weeks have not been kind to Mr Ives, who at times seemed close to exhaustion, then caught influenza towards the end of the campaign. That illness almost silenced his voice, which is about as damaging an affliction as a politician can suffer.

But life must seem all the more cruel to Mr Ives knowing that, for four months, he was member-elect for Nunawading and campaigned as such.

Having given up his job as a lecturer at Swinburne College, he must now, in his words, start trying to pull together the threads of his life.

He said his "horizons were limited to 17 August, so it's a bit difficult to think about what I'm going to do now". But he will look for a new job and "soldier on" in the ALP.

He is a member of the party's

important administrative committee, which is dominated by the Left and is now at loggerheads with Mr Cain on the issue of an inquiry into the trial and conviction of the secretary of the Builders' Laborers Federation, Norm Gallagher, on bribery charges.

Aside from the Liberal win, Mr Ives said one point that emerged from the Nunawading poll was that Mr Cain was seen "as a man of considerable strength and, despite eruptions in the party from time to time, will be regarded as one of the great premiers of Victoria".

Proceed with caution, say byelection voters

NEWS ANALYSIS

Tim Colebatch

to pass all its legislation unimpeded by the Opposition? Or should the Opposition be given control of the upper house as a safeguard against abuses by the Government?

Beneath the hyperbole of the Liberals' campaign (one of their pamphlets started off: "Warning: Democracy is under threat") and Labor's attacks on Jeff Kennett ("Don't put a spanner in the works"), both parties were essentially saying that control was the issue.

The voters clearly decided for the Liberals. And this puts Victoria in the unusual position of having an upper house controlled not by the Government or even by

a third party holding the balance of power, but by the Opposition whose sole purpose is to dethrone that Government.

In the Cain Government's first term of office this apparently unworkable arrangement actually worked quite well, partly because the Liberals' upper house leaders, Mr Alan Hunt and Mr Haddon Storey, were determined to use their power constructively. Labor complained of upper house obstruction, but few neutral observers agreed.

The Nunawading voters in effect have now renewed the Liberals' upper house mandate. And in voting for this improbable arrangement of forces, they have put a heavy responsibility on both sides to make sure that it continues working as it has until now.

All in all, the Liberals can be

pleased with the result. It was a long way from being the landslide they had hoped for at the beginning, but the campaign seemed to go so heavily Labor's way that any solid win was a good outcome.

Labor initially feared a Liberal landslide, poured enormous resources into the campaign to try to prevent it, and then became so buoyed up they believed they could win. The actual result was a severe disappointment, but it could have been a lot worse for them too.

The closest parallel to the circumstances of this poll was the byelection for South-Eastern province in 1964. In that election too, control of the Upper House was at stake, only months after an election in which the Bolte Government had won both houses for the first time.

Campaigning partly on the slogan "Put a brake on Bolte", Labor won that seat in a swing of 11 per cent. By comparison, the swing of four per cent against Labor on Saturday was a decidedly small one.

Indeed, Nunawading saw the second smallest byelection swing in any marginal government seat in Victoria since the Bolte Government came to power. The Liberals lost six seats in byelections between 1962 and 1978, and the swings in them ranged from 6.4 per cent (Greensborough 1977) to 11.4 per cent (Dandenong 1969).

The stakes were very high, but all things considered, the result was something less than either a triumph or a disaster. After all the leafletting and shouting, it was a normal byelection result.

As in the Federal Parliament, so in the State. The people of Nunawading gave their vote on Saturday for a system of checks and balances rather than an all-powerful government.

Just as the DLP and the Australian Democrats in turn won Senate power by presenting themselves as a check on the power of federal governments, so the Liberals have won Nunawading by offering themselves as a "safeguard" against abuses of power by the Cain Government.

Perhaps it is risky to single out one issue from the extraordinary variety of causes which bored down on Nunawading voters during the campaign. But one crucial question was at the centre of both the Liberal and Labor campaigns all along.

Should the Government be able