

Trapped by the ballot paper

ONCE it was a nice area inhabited by genial homebodies who worried most about garbage pickups, Tattslotto numbers and marauding aphids in the rose bushes.

If outside impressions count, Nunawading has changed — although matters to do with rubbish, lotteries and pests still loom large.

War-weary and bedraggled, the typical resident must, by now, have been reduced to a hounded and brooding soul who endures endless nightmares about being swallowed alive by a blank ballot paper.

Travelling outside the eastern suburbs, he adopts a disguise and feigns to believe Eastland is a Soviet satellite country. He is reluctant to disclose his address for fear of being mocked or suffering further torture at the hands of political flunkies.



One imagines, too, that business for the local licencess has boomed as voters, weighed down by the stern responsibility thrust upon, them have turned to the bottle for comfort.

This metamorphosis, Frankenstein-like in its impact, has been accomplished in just four weeks of an election campaign designed to



● Jeff Kennett's shoes show the signs of a wearying campaign

enlighten the public and illuminate the issues.

Some hope.

At times, the 119,000 voters in the electorate must have felt as if they were trapped in a hall of mirrors with a circus troupe, such has been the swirling involvement of special interest groups.

Mountain cattlemen found an unlikely haven in Whitehorse Rd and competed for a slice of the action with conservationists, dairy farmers, business lobbyists, the BLF, and just about anyone with a beef against the Government.

Along the way, almost as a sideshow to the main attraction, has been a fierce but little recognised war of words between the Australian Democrats and their opponents over the role of preferences in the outcome.

Both the Liberals and and National Party have unloaded salvos to try to discredit the Democrats over their decision to direct preferences to Labor. The conservative parties have appealed to wavering Chippocrats not to "sell out" their commitment to being an independent third-force in politics.

Meanwhile, the Democrats, aware that their credibility will be determined by their ability to deliver for Labor, have been busily shoring up support and hitting back in determined fashion.

This type of intrigue, which has helped to make the campaign perhaps the most intense yet fought in one electorate, has tended to divert attention from what on day one appeared the main issue:

whether a Government with reformist aspirations should be hindered/checked by a hostile Upper House.

The campaigning also seems to have done little to help voters break the deadlock.

A last-minute poll for The Sun shows less than 1 per cent separating the main parties, with 10 per cent opting for other candidates and 6 per cent still undecided.

In such a close contest, the outcome could swing on matters as mundane as the weather; or whether a voter has trouble finding a parking spot outside the polling booth. So much for political science.

That the outcome should be so uncertain is a tribute to Labor, which started the campaign from behind and had to contend with the weight of historical evidence showing how hard it is for governments to win by-elections (although Nunawading is not technically a by-election).

One theory had it that the Premier, Mr Cain, was not too keen to win control of the Upper House, opening the way as it would for pressure from the Left for more reformist legislation at the cost of electoral support.

Such misgivings have been countered by the sheer weight and cost of the Labor campaign, which also contained a calculated element of risk.

By seeking to make leadership a major issue, and using the spanner-in-the-works TV commercials, the party could have faced a backlash of sym-

pathy in favor of the Opposition Leader, Mr Kennett.

The same could be said for the more aggressive approach to all issues by Mr Cain.

Instead, the campaign seems to have paid off — helped by old-fashioned techniques such as pork-barrelling, and modern ones such as a sudden splurge on corporate advertising for government agencies.

It's not often that the Liberal Party makes a virtue out of spending less on an election than Labor, but that has happened at Nunawading.

But money alone does not explain the lethargy in the Liberal camp, a mood not entirely erased by dramatic charges against the Treasurer, Mr Jolly, in Parliament on Wednesday.

While Labor insiders do not discount the chances of an upset win, the Liberal candidate, Mrs Rosemary Varty, appears set to win the seat — although not necessarily by the margin imagined at the opening of the campaign.

As for the people of Nunawading, they'll no doubt have to endure a period of political decompression.

Gradually they will get over such ingrained habits as clearing glossy political brochures from the letterbox and expecting the Man from Snowy River outside Safeway on shopping day.

No longer will they fear a knock at the door and hope it is a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness.

Soon there'll be just the aphids and the garbo to worry about again.