Scandalous, but Bligh won’t fall

Paul Williams

23 July 2009 | If the Queensland government gets into electoral trouble it will be a result of policies rather than corruption cases, argues Paul Williams.

SOMETIMES political scuttlebutt gets it wrong. Very wrong. The Gordon Nuttall affair seems to be one of those times. The topical view is that Nuttall’s conviction and imprisonment on corruption charges is hard evidence that Queensland has slipped back twenty years to the pre-Fitzgerald days of institutionalised political corruption, and that Labor’s humiliation will spell the end of the Bligh government, in the same way the Fitzgerald revelations in 1989 brought to a close 32 years of non-Labor rule.

Political scandals – money, sex, conflict – always make for compelling news, but they rarely bring down governments, unless they’re so huge that the implications of sex or corruption threaten the fabric or security of the state. That’s why the Fitzgerald inquiry brought down the Nationals in Queensland, and why Britain’s 1963 Profumo Affair, where cabinet minister John Profumo and a Soviet agent enjoyed a mutual relationship with showgirl Christine Keeler, ended the career of prime minister Harold Macmillan.

Clearly, the Nuttall affair is no Fitzgerald, and it’s reasonable to conclude that Nuttall is the exception to, and not the rule of, the way business and politics engage today.

Of course, to have a former member of its inner circle imprisoned for misconduct is embarrassing for any government. But it’s hardly debilitating. Premier Anna Bligh has almost turned the affair into a positive, remarking that her government will not tolerate such behaviour and that, if nothing else, Nuttall’s conviction proves the system works.

In that sense, Queensland is nothing like the pre-Fitzgerald era. Even though the declaration of conflicts of interest on the pecuniary interests register comes down to the personal integrity of each minister, there are sufficient checks in the system to pick up, somewhere down the track, even minor transgressions, simply because the media, the Crime and Misconduct Commission, the parliamentary CMC, the integrity commissioner, the information commissioner, freedom of information and estimates committees do their jobs.

It is a good system, but far from perfect. That’s why former integrity commissioner, Gary Crocke, is right to call for a review of the relationship between government and business. As he suggests, the relationship – no doubt thanks to stringent political donation laws – may well be at a healthy arm’s length. But it’s still in everyone’s interests to keep an eye on developments.

How and how much political parties charge business for fundraising dinners or access to ministers is one dark corner into which new integrity commissioner, David Solomon, should shine a light.

The reality is the Nuttall affair will fade into the media background in coming weeks, with the Bligh government suffering no long-term damage. Just look at how quickly Utegate dropped off the radar. In short, it’s usually failed or unpopular public policy, and not scandal, that brings a government down.

If the Bligh government does come to grief at the next election, it will be because voters have reached breaking point about overcrowded hospitals, congested roads, unruly schools, lawless streets, petrol and car registration cost increases and – as an opinion poll commissioned by the Electrical Trades Union indicates – the sale of public assets.

The ETU poll has found up to double-digit swings in even safe Labor seats as anger over the privatisation of government-owned corporations leaches through the community. The Courier-Mail’s Galaxy poll last month had already identified this hostility, with most voters not only opposed to asset sales but also believing they had been duped by the premier during an election campaign only months before.

If Labor is scuttled at the next election, it will be because of tough public policy – and the way that policy was sold to voters – and not isolated incidents of scandal.

Paul Williams is a lecturer at the School of Humanities at Griffith University on the Gold Coast. This article first appeared in the Courier-Mail.

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