

Where Queensland sits on the political Richter scale

By Paul Williams

Posted Wednesday, 4 April 2012

The temptation to use the earthquake metaphor to describe the outcome of the 2012 Queensland State election is strong. Then again, even the semiotics of seismology don't really do the Liberal National Party's record parliamentary haul – at time of writing still either 77 or 78 (up from 31) of the Legislative Assembly's 89 seats – genuine justice. With approximately 50 per cent of the primary vote, or 61 per cent after preferences, the LNP now commands the parliament like no other party in the State's 152 year electoral history.

It will take months to properly anatomise exactly what went so wrong for Labor. While the defeat of the Bligh Labor Government (Labor's first election loss since 1986) was always certain – especially after the LNP, in March, 2011, broke with Westminster tradition and elevated popular Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman to the party's leadership, despite Newman not holding a parliamentary seat – the sheer scale of Labor's rout could not have been anticipated. Reduced to just seven or eight seats (down from 51), Labor attained a Queensland – and likely Australian – record low seat share for a major party. For a worse result in modern times, one must turn to Canada's ruling Progressive Conservative Party's drubbing in 1993 when, under Kim Campbell, the party lost 151 seats and was reduced to just two federal MPs.

In the interim, however, some reasons for the Bligh rout are eminently clear.

First, there is, of course, the "It's Time" factor that, after 14 years' incumbency – and 20 of the past 22 years – created a sense that Labor was indeed a tired government. In addition, Queensland – and especially Brisbane – was ripe for the electoral "correction" overdue since Labor's 2001 landslide in which Premier Peter Beattie captured 66 seats. Many, then, assumed a substantial swing against Labor would have occurred in 2009, one built on some significant policy failures over previous years. But it seems Brisbane could not then elect the rural-based Lawrence Springborg as premier. Thus, when the swing came in 2012, it swept across the state, and arrived with a ferocity few could have foreseen.

A more specific theme – one left largely unaddressed by Labor yet carefully exploited by the LNP – was a series of 'cost-of-living' issues. When the Opposition seized on electricity and car registration costs and promised price freezes, the Government was forced on to the defence.

Yet Labor was always its own worst enemy. For one, weak public policy from health to water to asset sales – a major point of voter dissatisfaction left over from 2009 when, weeks after that election, the Government announced, despite silence during the campaign, the sale of five major public utilities, including the coal freight arm of *Queensland Rail* – policy became a lightning rod for all sorts of grievances. Add to that a series of bureaucratic blunders from payroll jams to pilfering public servants, and a picture of duplicity and clumsiness soon emerged.

But anecdotal evidence – and some statistical evidence from Textor-Crosby exit polling on election day – indicate that Labor's bitter, personal campaign (targeting the financial interests of Campbell Newman and his family) severely backfired. For much of the five week campaign – reduced to four weeks after the first seven days were ignored by a news cycle more concerned by the Julia Gillard-Kevin Rudd federal Labor leadership showdown – Labor argued that Newman could not be trusted because of an alleged paper trail of political donations. When, late in the campaign, Premier Bligh herself conceded there was no real evidence of misdeed, and when the Crime and Misconduct Commission also cleared Newman, Labor stood accused of running the state's dirtiest campaign to date.

It's important to note, however, that Labor's defeat cannot be sheeted home to the government alone. And while federal issues, such as the carbon tax, played almost no part, the positive reception of the LNP as the most united, credible and policy-heavy opposition seen in Queensland since 1989 must be apportioned credit. Add to that the energetic leadership of the popular Campbell Newman – his "Can Do" mantra fits neatly with Queensland political culture – and the non-Labor forces were always on track to win government from the opposition benches for the first time since 1957.

The ramifications of the LNP's record victory echo widely. Of course, the Gillard Government has much to ponder: the Labor

brand is severely tarnished and, more critically, it appears electorates now adopt an anti-incumbent mood, eager to take their cost-of-living wrath out on any tier of administration.

But the most significant implication remains for Queensland – a state that, while accustomed to large parliamentary majorities and diminished oppositions, is really yet to get its collective head around exactly what lies ahead for an opposition so small it will struggle to meet even its most basic requirements. With 19 ministers to shadow and a range of portfolio, procedural and Budget Estimates committees to sit on, genuine questions have been raised as to how much legislative scrutiny Labor – and the two Independent and two Katter Australia Party MPs – can apply to the new government.

Queensland has a long and chequered history with hegemonic governments, unworried by a Legislative Council, enjoying enormous lower house majorities. How the LNP manages its unparalleled mandate in its first term will determine not just policy and legislative outcomes, but the fate of Queensland itself.

Dr Paul Williams is a lecturer with the Department of Politics and Public Policy, Griffith University

© The National Forum and contributors 1999-2013. All rights reserved.