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Electorate craves a new politics

By Paul Williams

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Rarely has a change of government on such a mammoth swing been so widely expected at an Australian election. One can almost hear champagne corks already popping in Coalition campaign headquarters, even with a week of the campaign remaining. We've seen big swings at state level before, including a nine per cent movement against Labor in South Australia in 1993. But the 2011 NSW poll promises to rewrite political history, and recast the electoral geography of Australia's most populous state.

Yet this election will be long remembered also for the unusual circumstances preceding it; indeed, the size of the swing, the ruling party's position at the end of its electoral cycle, and the events of the 54th parliament cannot be separated. A revolving door of Labor leaders, policy failures, ministerial scandals and an avalanche of retiring MPs have all fallen like runes to spell out Labor's impending doom. Put bluntly, the Labor government is a 16 year old relic living on borrowed time. Paradoxically, with other variables controlled, Labor probably would have lost the previous 2007 poll on long-term incumbency alone, but for a then-unelectable Coalition opposition handing Premier Morris Iemma another chance. But all fortunes are a double-edged sword, and Labor's extra term has, in 2011, only compounded the perception of a tired government carrying every possible piece of electoral baggage.

A Labor wipe-out is all but a foregone conclusion – one underscored by betting agencies now pegging a Coalition win at a paltry \$1.01, compared to \$16 for a Labor upset, with the real chance of the books being closed early. Yet casual observers would suspect that Labor, after four previous victories, would today be clinging precariously to a clutch of ultra-marginal seats. But of Labor's 50 electorates (down two from its 2007 election total after a pair of disastrous by-elections), just eight districts are technically marginal, that is, held by less than five percentage points. Compare this to Queensland where a slightly younger Labor government (in office since 1998) saw, after the 2009 election, one third of its remaining seats reduced to margins below five per cent. It's true that, in NSW, Labor needs to lose just four seats on a 3.3 per cent after-preference swing to lose its majority, but an outright Coalition win demands 10 seats and an unusually high 7.2 per cent swing. Electoral movements of that magnitude are rare, and usually recorded only by seismographs. But a train of opinion polls extending back months assures us a once in a generation earthquake is about to strike.

According to *Newspoll*, not since early 2008 has Labor led on the two-party preferred (2PP) vote, and then only marginally. Indeed, Labor's primary support has been stuck in the mid 20s for about a year, while the Coalition's broke 50 per cent earlier this month. The Government's fate is equally grim when 2PP ratings are considered, with the Coalition entering the mythical territory of the 63rd percentile. *Nielsen, Galaxy* and *Essential Research* surveys only confirm the awaiting avalanche that will bury the government in a swing possibly as high as 16 per cent, and leave Labor with as few as 13 seats. Such swings are usually reserved for by-elections, and even then only when voters want to send a clear message of revolt. Not surprisingly, the long faux campaign over the past year has produced a climate of rebellion, and this environment – a kind of state-wide by-election frenzy – will be ripe for what some suspect will be Labor's poorest result since 1904. The indication that nine out of 10 voters have already decided their vote choice augurs especially badly for Premier Kristina Keneally who, despite obvious realities, has campaigned with the optimism of a more closely run contest.

It should come as no surprise that the Coalition is targeting, with real expectation of victory, not just marginal Labor seats but those normally beyond reach. Districts to watch include Riverstone (10.1%), Rockdale (10.3%), Mulgoa (11.1%), Blue Mountains (11.1%), Cessnock (12.4%), Bathurst (13.0%) and Parramatta (13.7%), all of which have retiring members. While Premier Keneally will hang on in Heffron (23.7%), former Premier Nathan Rees will be tested in Toongabbie (14.5%). Also expect Newcastle (1.2%) to fall to Independent John Tate, with Balmain (3.7%),

and even Deputy Premier Carmel Tebbutt's seat of Marrickville (7.5%) probably going Green.

It's difficult to predict any Legislative Council outcome, lest to say the Greens, currently polling 11 per cent (up two points from 2007, but down six points in recent weeks) are expected to make gains. With a quota for election set low at around 4.55 per cent – and, according to Antony Green, perhaps as low as 2.1 per cent given the vagaries of optional preferential voting – virtually any mix of minor- and micro-party is conceivable. Even former One Nation MP Pauline Hanson, in her eight electoral contest (and third in NSW) enjoys a real chance.

Long term incumbency is clearly the overarching agent of change in NSW, but that factor alone cannot account for the level of voter rage against Labor. Scandals involving sex and finance (some involving ICAC) have combined with policy bungles, factional brawling and the removal of two premiers and numerous ministers since 2007. After years of instability compared to the relative Labor harmony under former Premier Bob Carr, the Liberals, now seemingly united behind Barry O'Farrell, have assumed the mantle of a stable government-in-waiting.

The mass exodus of no fewer than 18 sitting Labor MPs from the Legislative Assembly (and six more from the Legislative Council) have only compounded the metaphor – accurate or not – of sinking sea vessels and small furry creatures. By-election results forced from earlier departures have only confirmed Labor's downward spiral, and demonstrated to voters elsewhere that enormous swings against the government were not only attainable, but probably deserved.

The government in 2008, for example, retained the seats of Cabramatta and Lakemba despite huge 2PP swings of 21.8 and 13.5 per cent respectively, but later lost Ryde after a 23.1 per cent collapse in Labor's vote. Yet nothing really matched the Penrith rout in 2010 that saw Labor fall to a seismic swing of 25.7 per cent. If the state-wide swing this Saturday is half that figure, history will be made and the NSW Labor Party will be a smoking ruin.

Despite the inevitability of the outcome, national eyes will still be drawn to NSW this Saturday in anticipation of what lies in store for the parties federally, and interstate. Yet we must be cautious in what lessons we draw from a poll which remains very much a contest around NSW issues. A recent *Newspoll*, for example, found health, education, the local economy, law and order, public transport and government scandal the overriding issues for voters. Despite this local focus, and because cost of living issues also rated highly, it's intuitive the Gillard Carbon Tax has been an unwelcome burden for state Labor, despite climate change rating lowly. While electricity privatisation has also damaged the government – in both its broader unpopularity and in exposing Labor schisms – transport and urban congestion have adopted a particularly sharp focus, and underscores the political reality of two Sydneys: the West and the Rest. It's no accident that both major party leaders have courted the outer suburbs.

The popular conclusion most likely to be drawn – after changes of government in Western Australia and Victoria and poor opinion poll ratings in South Australia and Queensland – will be that the Labor across Australia stinks. Yet it would seem instead that long-term incumbency is more on the nose, and that the early 2010s resemble the 1990s: after a period of relative stability, electors everywhere – undoubtedly irritated by the two-speed economy – are looking for groundbreaking change. In short, there are very few lessons in NSW for the federal parties. After all, voters are adroit at distinguishing between state and federal issues. Look no further than Liberal Prime Minister John Howard's successive victories, despite those same voters opting for Labor state and territory governments. If the Gillard ship does later run aground, it will be on a federal reef of its own making.

The 2011 NSW election will stand as a watershed in Australian politics. There will be the obligatory inquiry into why Labor performed so poorly, with recommendations undoubtedly urging, yet again, deeper voter engagement, with, yet again, innovations such as open primary ballots to select popular candidates. Labor's factional system will also fall under scrutiny, as will the way Labor makes policy at conference.

Importantly, the anticipated size of the Coalition's majority means the Liberal and National parties will have a mandate not just for *what* they legislate, but also a special responsibility for *how* they govern over the next three or more terms for which they will probably be entrusted. Voters not just in NSW but everywhere will look to the new administration to turn a page on the old politics of factionalism, sectional interest and obfuscation, and instead set the standard for a new era of accountability, transparency and consensus. Importantly, Barry O'Farrell recognises this, and has offered a contract with the people of NSW that, O'Farrell says, will see him resign should he breach his commitments.

O'Farrell had best take this contract seriously. And major parties everywhere take note: the electoral mood has well and truly shifted.

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