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How Did They Do It?

Explaining Queensland Labor's Second Electoral Hegemony

Paul D. Williams

Australia's entrenched liberal democratic traditions of a free media, fair and frequent elections and robust public debate might encourage outside observers to assume Australia is subject to frequent changes in government. The reality is very different: Australian politics have instead been 'largely unchanged' since the beginning of our bipolar party system in 1910 (Aitkin 1977, p. 1), with Australians re-electing incumbents on numerous occasions for decades on end. The obvious federal example is the 23-year dominance of the Liberal-Country Party Coalition, first elected in 1949 and re-endorsed at the following eight House of Representatives elections. Even more protracted electoral hegemonies have been found at state level, including Labor's control of Tasmania (1934–82, except for 1969–72) and New South Wales (1941–65), and the Liberals' hold on Victoria (1952–82) and South Australia (1938–65, most unusually under one Premier, Thomas Playford). It is therefore not a question of *whether* parties can enjoy excessively long hegemonies in Australia; it is instead one of *how* they achieve it.

Queensland, too, is susceptible to long political tenure and since 1915 — the beginning of Queensland's own bipolar party system — the state has been governed *only* under hegemonies (Williams 2004a). Three such periods — with minor interruptions — are evident: Labor's first hegemony (1915–57, except for 1929–32), Country (later National)-Liberal, then National alone, governments (1957–89), and the current second Labor hegemony (since 1989, except for 1996–98). The causes of single-party domination in Queensland across the first two eras have been explored widely elsewhere, with most explanations including an anatomisation of Queensland's unique political culture (Hughes 1973: 133; Murphy 1978; McQueen 1979; Boyce 1980, p. 5; Charlton 1983; Fitzgerald 1984; Smith 1985; H. Reynolds 1998; Williams 2004a; Williams 2005a, 2009; Wanna and Arklay 2010, pp. 377–425; Fitzgerald, Megarrity and Symons 2009: 270; P. Reynolds n.d., pp. 5–7). The third era, however, has been far less widely explored, and it is the purpose of this article to fill this vacuum when, at the time of writing, it appears increasingly likely that the second Labor hegemony is drawing to a close.

A key element of Queensland's political culture has been the electorate's gravitation towards 'strong' — even authoritarian — leaders who, in making populist appeals directly to the people over the heads of formal institutions, came to embody their respective parties and even the state itself. Yet concomitant influ-

ences were also found in Queensland's decentralised industry, a parochial and regionalised population undiluted by migration, low levels of education, 'connectional politics' (Reynolds n.d., pp. 4–5) and, from 1949 until 1989, a weighted zonal electoral system that favoured rural electorates at the expense of urban.

Yet, in the post-Fitzgerald era after 1989, such factors are inadequate in fully explaining Queensland voters' continuing predilection for re-electing incumbents. While Queensland's preference for strong leaders remains, urbanisation has increased to the point where at least half the state's population now lives in the metropolitan south-east. With logic suggesting increased education and rapid interstate (and international) migration have diluted traditional political culture, social ignorance and regional parochialism can no longer be sourced as major factors. Moreover, in the post-Fitzgerald reform era, a corrupt electoral system should also be eliminated as an influence. One question therefore remains: how has Labor convinced a substantial majority of Queensland voters for two decades — except for 1996–98 and despite often substantial public policy problems and scandals — that it is the 'natural' party of government?

This article explores this phenomenon and argues that Labor's second hegemony can be explained by four over-arching factors. First, the increasingly 'presidential' nature of Queensland elections has seen party leadership elevated to new levels of voter salience, to the point where leaders carry on their shoulders a disproportionate responsibility for their parties' images. While 'presidential' leadership is hardly unique to Queensland, for many Queensland voters 'strong' Labor leaders nonetheless became the embodiment of an ostensibly 'strong' Labor Party. This undoubtedly has been assisted by Labor's long trade union heritage that cultivated future leaders, thus delivering a distinct advantage over their Liberal counterparts; it could be argued that this is also one reason why the Liberal-National Party (LNP) was forced to recruit an alternative Premier from outside the parliament in the form of Campbell Newman.

Queensland Labor leaders since 1989 have therefore steered key policy programs that have become identifiable with their own particular premierships: programmatic 'big-picture' policies that have painted (with various degrees of success) both Premier and government as positive agents of state development. Second, these same 'big-picture' policies often provided a capacity for *flexibility* in policy execution. Inversely, when leaders eschewed flexibility and maintained a dogged commitment to unpopular policy, substantial electoral damage was sustained. Third, Labor has so effectively engaged the news media through strategies colloquially referred to as 'spin' that Labor's message as the 'natural' party of government has supplanted any opposition claim to the mantle. Fourth, in the zero-sum game of bipolar politics — where the actions of one side necessarily shape the life of the other — a pattern of under-prepared, unrepresentative and factionalised oppositions under tepid leadership has meant they have been viewed as unelectable by a majority of Queensland voters.

This article's method is to survey the three Labor Premiers — Wayne Goss (1989–96), Peter Beattie (1998–2007) and Anna Bligh (2007–12) — and their governments between 1989 and 2012. The surveys anatomise each government's tenure via the 'leadership', 'policy', 'media' and 'opposition' lenses outlined above to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of each administration in maintaining the electorate's confi-

dence. The article begins, however, by reviewing Labor's patterns of support, in terms of public opinion polls and votes attracted at sequential elections.

Patterns in Labor's Hegemony, 1989–2012

After 42 years of almost unbroken governance since 1915,¹ Labor split asunder in 1957 and, like its Victorian and federal counterparts, was relegated to seemingly perpetual opposition as a result of a conservative splinter — the Queensland Labor Party (QLP) and later Democratic Labor Party (DLP) — diverting preferences to the Country (later National) and Liberal Party Coalition. Despite QLP/DLP influence abating by the 1970s, Labor continued to be disadvantaged by a malapportioned zonal electoral system, first introduced by Labor in 1949 and refined to the National Party's (but not the Liberal Party's) advantage via redistributions in 1958, 1971, 1977 and 1985. Yet the zonal system was not the sole cause of Labor's woes, as evidenced in the party's failure to attract a majority of the two-party preferred (2PP) vote at any time between 1957 and 1989. Indeed, weak leadership and inchoate policy offerings — together with years of factional internecine warfare — produced divided oppositions that were wholly unready for government. The Fitzgerald Inquiry (1987–89) into official corruption in Queensland proved a watershed not just in the fortunes of the ruling National Party but also for the Labor opposition. Despite the Nationals' easy victory at the 1986 state election (winning 49 of the Legislative Assembly's 89 seats on less than 40 per cent of the primary vote), within a year long-term Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen (1968–87) had been discredited and forced to resign as the Fitzgerald Inquiry unfolded. Initial reforms by his successor Mike Ahern (1987–89), which included the establishment of Public Accounts and Public Works parliamentary committees, did little to stem voters' disaffection with the Nationals. Plummeting public opinion saw the party replace Ahern with Russell Cooper — a leader closer to the Bjelke-Petersen mould — just weeks before the 1989 election. Leaving little to chance, Labor itself switched leaders from the loyal but unelectable Nev Warburton to the urbane and articulate Wayne Goss. The party, with the skilled assistance of state secretary (and incoming MP) Peter Beattie and campaign director Wayne Swan, designed and executed a professional campaign that offered a comprehensive policy package and pledged fiscal prudence and public accountability under fresh and clean leadership. Critically, it appears that Labor could not have broken the Nationals' hegemony on the strength of corruption charges alone; victory required both the government's implosion and a reformed Labor opposition that had finally proven itself a worthy alternative after 32 years in the wilderness (Swan 1991).

Having won newfound support in a cross-section of seats including the Sunshine Coast, Central, North and Far North Queensland and, most importantly, across the suburbs of greater Brisbane, Labor had attained a mandate to implement a raft of Fitzgerald reforms across the state's Cabinet, parliamentary, electoral, criminal justice and public service institutions. Most were well received, and the Goss government went on to win the 1992 election and 54 of the Legislative Assembly's 89 seats with 53.9 per cent of the 2PP vote.² As discussed below, however, a subsequently reformed Liberal-National Coalition and a voter

backlash against economic rationalism and bureaucratic reform saw Labor suffer an unexpected rebuke in 1995. In that year, Labor won 45 seats (with 46.7 per cent 2PP) — a majority reduced to a 44-seat minority in early 1996 when the Liberals won the North Queensland seat of Mundingburra after a court-ordered re-election, thereby delivering government to the Coalition with the support of Gladstone Independent Liz Cunningham. The most significant disruption to Queensland's political system occurred in 1998, when Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party won eleven seats from both the Labor and National Parties with 22.7 per cent of the vote.³ Yet Labor under Peter Beattie formed minority government when newly elected Nicklin Independent Peter Wellington guaranteed supply. Beattie won his majority in December 1998 at the Mulgrave by-election, and returned to technical minority status in late 2000 as several Labor MPs resigned as a result of the Shepherdson Inquiry into vote rorting.

A major shift in parliamentary numbers — comprising something of a realignment in electoral loyalties — occurred in 2001 when Labor won 66 seats with around 60 per cent of the 2PP vote (Williams 2001a; Mackerras, cited in Newspoll 2004), the party's highest share since 1935. Importantly, Labor had won unexpected support in constituencies across the Gold and Sunshine Coasts, and in North and Western Queensland. Moreover, Labor's domination was then complete, with the Liberals reduced to holding just one seat in the state capital. At the 2004 election, Labor still enjoyed sufficient voter confidence to capture 63 seats; and in 2006, it took 59 seats after a negligible primary swing of just 0.1 per cent (Williams 2004a, 2007c). Despite significant public policy dilemmas and the merging of the Liberal and National Parties into a single entity in 2008 to produce Queensland's first two-party system since 1936, Labor — now under the state's first woman premier, Anna Bligh — was returned easily with 51 seats at the 2009 election after a 4.7 per cent primary swing.

The parties' primary vote and seat share between 1989 and 2009 are detailed in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1

Primary vote, Queensland state elections, 1989–2009, by party

Party	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001	2004	2006	2009
Labor	50.3	48.7	42.9	38.9	48.9	47.0	46.9	42.3
Liberal	21.1	20.4	22.7	16.1	14.3	18.5	20.1	–
National	24.1	23.7	26.3	15.2	14.2	17.0	17.8	–
(Total LNP)	(45.2)	(44.1)	49.0	(31.3)	(28.5)	(35.5)	(37.9)	41.6 ^a
Democrats	0.4	0.3	1.3	1.6	0.3	0.04	–	–
One Nation	–	–	–	22.7	11.1 ^b	4.9	0.6	0.4
Greens	0.3	0.7	2.9	2.4	2.5	6.8	8.0	8.4 ^c
Family First	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.9	0.8
Other	3.8	6.2	3.9	3.1	8.7	5.7	4.7	6.5

Notes: a LNP contested 2009 election for the first time as a single conservative party.

b One Nation totals in 2001 include the breakaway City-Country Alliance.

c Ronan Lee (Indooroopilly 2001–09) contested the 2009 election as a Greens candidate.

Source: Campbell (1996); Electoral Commission of Queensland Statistical Reports (1995–2009), <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/resources.aspx?id=106>. Accessed 25 April 2011.

TABLE 2
Seat share, Queensland state elections, 1989–2009, by party

Party	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001	2004	2006	2009
Labor	54	54	45 ^a	44 ^b	66	63	59	51
Liberal	8	9	14 ^a	9	3	5	8	–
National	27	26	29	23	12	15	17	–
(Total LNP)	(35)	(35)	(43) ^a	(32)	(15)	(20)	(25)	34 ^c
Democrat	0	0	0	0	0	0	–	–
One Nation	–	–	–	11 ^d	3	1	1	0
Green	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0 ^e
Family First	–	–	–	–	–	–	0	0
Other	0	0	1	2	5	5	4	4

Notes: a Labor initially won 45 seats in 1995 but this was reduced to 44 after the Court of Disputed Returns ordered a re-election in the seat of Mundingburra, won by Liberal Frank Tanti in February 1996. Independent MP Liz Cunningham (Gladstone) then supported the Borbidge–Sheldon Liberal-National minority government.
 b Labor governed with the support of Independent Peter Wellington (Nicklin) until gaining a majority of 45 seats at the December 1998 Mulgrave by-election.
 c The 2009 election was the first contested by a merged LNP. In May 2010, Rob Messenger (Burnett) and Aidan McLindon (Beaudesert) resigned from the LNP to sit as Independents. In June 2010, McLindon established the Queensland Party (QP) and in August 2011, he left the QP to join Katter’s Australian Party (KAP). In October 2011, Shane Knuth resigned from the LNP to join the KAP, thereby reducing the LNP to 31 MPs.
 d One Nation’s eleven MPs soon splintered. One resigned from parliament in late 1998 and in 1999 five resigned from ONP to sit as Independents, and six resigned to form the rival City-Country Alliance.
 e Ronan Lee won the seat of Indooroopilly as a Labor candidate in 2006, but resigned from the government to sit as a Greens MP in 2008. Lee lost his seat in 2009.

Source: Campbell (1996); Electoral Commission of Queensland Statistical Reports (1995–2009), <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/resources.aspx?id=106>. Accessed 25 April 2011.

For a more accurate representation of Labor’s fortunes, a longitudinal study of authoritative opinion polls is warranted (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 reveals that Labor in early 1989 trailed the non-Labor parties’ primary vote, thereby supporting the thesis that the Goss opposition found it necessary to earn the electorate’s confidence, and not rely on anti-National Party sentiment alone, to win government. From December 1989 until well after

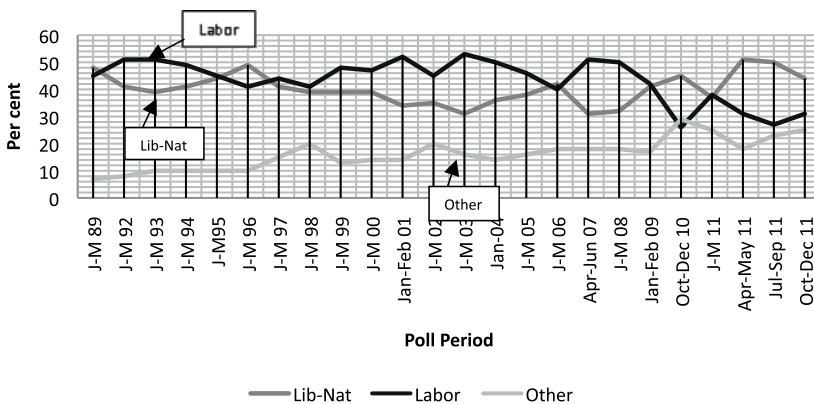


FIGURE 1
Newspoll survey of first-preference support, Queensland, 1989–2011.
Source: Newspoll. Various surveys, 1989–2011, <http://www.newspoll.com.au>.

the 1992 election, the Goss government enjoyed a long electoral 'honeymoon', but as less popular economic and administrative reforms took effect, Labor's primary support declined after 1993–94, and by 1995 the party had fallen behind the Coalition — a position not reversed until 1997. The impact of Pauline Hanson's One Nation on the major parties between 1998 and 2000 is clearly evident, after which Labor's support again grew, culminating in the first Beattie landslide in 2001 despite the Shepherdson Inquiry's adverse findings. After the 2004 election, public policy disasters in health (especially the infamous Bundaberg Hospital scandal involving Dr Jayant Patel) and severe water restrictions amid a record drought saw Labor's vote plummet. Indeed, the Morris and Davies Commissions of Inquiry into the Patel incident, and the concomitant Forster Inquiry into Queensland Health bureaucracy, uncovered a range of governmental problems. From exposing 'loopholes in freedom of information laws' to 'highlight[ing] the politicisation of the public service and poor administrative processes', fallout from the Bundaberg Hospital affair extended far wider than Queensland Health to become emblematic of a government losing its way (Prasser and Aroney 2009, p. 597). Indeed, allegations soon arose of a government more interested in media relations than sound public policy, with the executive controlling the public service to the extent that 'any mistakes [would] be borne primarily by the public service rather than elected officials', with an objective of 'blame minimisation' and 'after-the-fact damage-control' tactics (Prasser 2010).

It was therefore unsurprising that by 2006 the Coalition again led (Williams 2006c). Bligh succeeding Beattie as Labor leader in 2007 thereafter revived Labor's fortunes — at least until 2008, when the Liberal and National Parties merged to form the Liberal National Party. Widespread public opposition to Labor's asset sales policy from 2009, however, plunged the government into its greatest public opinion crisis, and Labor's primary support dipped in late 2010 to just 26 per cent — below the collective support for minor parties and Independents. The wide acclamation Premier Bligh received for her handling of the state's flood and cyclone crisis in early 2011 saw a dramatic turnaround; however, with the LNP's bold tactic of replacing leader John-Paul Langbroek with popular Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman in March 2011, Labor's support again collapsed. The birth of Katter's Australian Party (KAP) in mid-2011 — and its later merging with the fledgling Queensland Party led by the first-term MP Aidan McLindon — threatened the LNP in northern and western districts, especially after LNP MP Shane Knuth (Dalrymple) announced his defection to the KAP late in 2011 (Viellaris 2011). Interestingly, Labor would claw back some of the conservatives' lead. By December 2011, Labor had climbed to 31 per cent primary vote (or 44 per cent after preferences) and the LNP had fallen to 44 per cent (or 56 per cent after preferences) (Walker 2011).

The Goss Years, 1989–96

This section examines the Goss Government through the leadership, policy, opposition and media lenses to identify those factors sustaining Labor’s hegemony between 1989 and 1996.

LEADERSHIP

Wayne Goss’s appeal as a ‘fresh’ leader — standing in strong contrast to the Nationals, and even the Liberals, whose reputation Labor alleged was tarnished by association — has already been established. Yet Goss has also been described as a ‘strong’ leader in the Queensland tradition (Wear 1993), a ‘meticulous controller’ who ‘led from the front’, and a Premier who exercised tight control over Cabinet as well as Labor’s parliamentary and organisational wings (Wanna 2003). These dual perceptions of a strong and clean leader, committed to the popular Fitzgerald reform process, earned the new premier the epithet of ‘Goss the Boss’ (Wear 1993, p. 28; Miller 2011, p. 4).

It is important to separate Goss’s public opinion ratings from those for his party. In early 1991, for example, and after more than a year in office, Goss commanded a personal approval rating of 73 per cent (Wanna 1991, p. 486). More remarkably, even during the 1995 election campaign that saw Labor’s unexpected electoral reversal, Goss still attracted a personal approval of 60 per cent, with just 32 per cent dissatisfaction (Newspoll 1995). The 1995 election result therefore appears to have been more a rejection of Labor’s comprehensive economic and administrative reform program than of Goss himself. Much of Labor’s success in maintaining its 1989 levels of support until after the 1992 election can be attributed to the Goss style. Quite apart from Goss’s scrupulous preparation for Cabinet and parliament — ably assisted by public servants such as Glyn Davis and Kevin Rudd — the new Premier’s adroit handling of Labor’s factional system (the source of innumerable conflicts in Labor’s past) proved especially important (Wanna 2003, p. 359). The fact that Goss, despite a nominal AWU association, largely transcended factional (and union) politics meant that Labor could present a moderate and cohesive public face while simultaneously allowing Goss to appear to govern for all Queensland and not merely sectional interests. Moreover, much of the Labor caucus — especially the 24 new members elected in 1989 — demonstrated loyalty to the leader as they owed much of their success to Goss’s personal style.

Yet, despite an able front bench (supported by experienced deputy Tom Burns) and strong personal approval ratings, the ‘Goss gloss’ inevitably dulled after the 1992 election. With the electorate’s memory of corruption under the Nationals fading — and with harsher economic reforms biting — the momentum of the Goss government slowed. Public perceptions of Goss as aloof — even arrogant (Tiernan 2006, p. 373) — also hurt Labor, and undoubtedly compounded the problems (discussed below) of policy inflexibility and of a reformed Coalition. Moreover, despite early harmony, attitudes to privatisation hardened within some Labor quarters, with a split in Labor’s Socialist Left faction into rival Queensland Left and Labor Left camps (Griffith 1996; Williams 2008).

POLICY

A key element underpinning Labor premiers' identity as state developers has been their propensity to champion 'big-picture' policy programs. That 'big picture' for Goss would include *Leading State* — an ambitious economic blueprint released in April 1992 that established a 'fiscal trilogy' to fund social infrastructure while shifting the state to a market economy — all while retaining a commitment to Queensland's low-tax status (Novak 2011, p. 15). The program was widely praised and went far in establishing Labor's economic credentials. Procedural and accountability reform also emerged as the Labor government scrupulously implemented the Fitzgerald blueprint across Cabinet, parliamentary, electoral and public service institutions. Thorough policy reform also evolved, with the school curriculum enjoying modernisation via the introduction of Asian languages in the primary sector, and with social reform in the areas of environmental protection, gay rights and prostitution.⁴ But it could be argued that Goss — sensitised to the lack of transparency and *ad hoc* decision-making of the Bjelke-Petersen years — paid so much attention to due process that the tangible outcomes voters craved were often lost in the mire of procedural detail. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that Queensland's public servants — the teachers, police, nurses and others initially enamoured with Labor's program — came to resent the government after 1992 for its rapid pace of administrative reform (Tucker 1995).

As argued above, Queensland Labor premiers enjoy strong rapport with voters when they demonstrate flexibility over public policy, and suffer electoral wrath when unpopular policy is pursued despite stringent opposition. In Goss's case, the Premier earned kudos when, after a trial of daylight saving between 1990 and 1992, Goss — rather than unilaterally imposing a potentially divisive policy — sought a referendum in 1992. When the plebiscite returned a 'No' majority, Goss contentedly shelved the issue and undoubtedly insulated his government from regional backlash (Roberts 1992).

By contrast, Goss — spurred on by the Hilmer reforms under National Competition Policy (NCP) — earnestly pursued after 1993 a series of economic rationalist policies that proved especially unpopular in the regions. These included the closure of regional courthouses and kilometres of commercially unviable rail line (McGregor 1998). While these reforms saw a slow decline in Labor's support, the most powerful 'lightning rod' for public angst came in 1994–95 when protest over a proposed Logan Motorway (dubbed the 'koala road' for its alleged impact on wildlife) came to a head on Brisbane's southern outskirts. Importantly, protestors articulated the frustrations of a range of NIMBY⁵ groups — from Indigenous to the public service — each resentful of an alleged lack of public consultation (Williams 2004b). The four seats most affected by the road (Mansfield, Albert, Springwood and Redlands) were all lost by Labor at the 1995 election. It has also been argued that the unpopularity of the federal Keating Labor government, itself soundly defeated in 1996, impacted adversely upon the Goss government (Smark 1996; Wanna 2003, p. 373).

MEDIA

Not unexpectedly, Labor's long honeymoon owed much to its clamorous engagement with the media. Assisted by an efficient Media Unit headed by journalist

Dennis Atkins, Goss inherited a tradition of governments vigorous courting news organisations.⁶ Indeed, it has been argued that Goss's Labor–media connection was a form of 'symbiosis' (Davis 1993, p. 77), with the media especially supportive of the new government's Fitzgerald reforms. However, after 1994, as voter disenchantment with economic reform increased, and amid perceptions of a government in retreat from Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, the media thereafter adopted a significantly more critical approach (Schultz 2010, p. 50).

OPPOSITION

It is difficult to overstate the importance of a reformed Liberal-National Coalition in late 1992 as a factor driving the later decline of the Goss government. Voters endorse only united parties, and the friction between the Liberals and Nationals — especially over successive three-cornered electoral contests — had proven especially debilitating. A change in the leadership of each party also proved critical, and the affable Rob Borbidge's succession (1991) of the restrained Russell Cooper as National Party leader — and Joan Sheldon's succeeding (1991) of the relatively unknown Angus Innes as Liberal leader — saw something of a breakthrough. The newfound and genuine rapport between non-Labor leaders soon led, in late 1992, to the first Coalition since 1983, and the so-called 'Rob and Joan Show' (Secombe and Kingston 1995) saw ubiquitous joint public appearances where the pair successfully urged a protest vote against both Goss and Keating.

The Borbidge–Sheldon Interregnum, 1996–98

As outlined above, the Liberal-National Coalition initially 'lost' the 1995 election, despite attracting 49 per cent of the primary vote, or 53 per cent after preferences. Labor was returned to government with 45 seats, but only 43 per cent of the primary vote. When the Liberals later won the court-ordered Mundingburra re-election, Borbidge and Sheldon governed without a clear majority, and this constraint — together with other factors such a comparatively weak and gaffe-plagued front bench — impeded the Coalition from the outset. Despite a largely adequate performance by Borbidge, Coalition rumblings of discontent regarding colleagues permeated the news media. It was claimed, for example, that the Coalition 'hid' the gaffe-prone Deputy Premier Sheldon from voter scrutiny in the lead-up to the 1998 state election (Emerson 1997). Yet while Borbidge dismissed three ministers in early 1998, Sheldon retained her position as Treasurer, as did Attorney-General Denver Beanland (who refused to resign despite losing the confidence of the Legislative Assembly) and Bruce Davidson (who proposed a rhinoceros park to revive Queensland tourism) (Wear 2000: 393; Madigan 1998). Yet the Coalition was more seriously debilitated by two major issues: the High Court's 1996 *Wik* decision, which validated native title claims on pastoral leases, and tighter national gun laws in the wake of the 1996 Port Arthur tragedy. Each affected regional Queensland, where fears of centralised control — a sentiment at the heart of traditional Queensland political culture — played a critical role in the genesis of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party (PHON). Yet it was the Coalition's appeals to PHON, including their exchange of preferences at the 1998 state election, that cost Brisbane Liberal candidates dearly (Wear 2000, p. 399). By 1998, a largely discredited Coalition front bench, a united Labor opposition under the

affable Peter Beattie and One Nation's populist attack had robbed the Liberals and Nationals of momentum and, ultimately, government.

The Beattie Years, 1998–2007

The following section offers a similar analysis of the Beattie government through the leadership, policy, opposition and media lenses.

LEADERSHIP

Much of the success of the Labor government between 1998 and 2007 is owed directly to Beattie's distinctive leadership and personal style. In his eleven years as Labor leader and nine years as Premier, Beattie wedded many of the old elements of traditional Queensland populism to more novel elements of his own invention to forge a metapopulist model: a self-deprecating leadership style that, while championing strong leadership and local parochialism, ventured beyond traditional populism to include a variety of 'everyman' traits and, importantly, a ubiquitous media presence (Williams 2001b). Beattie's leadership therefore produced for voters a perception of an affable and inclusive 'Mr Fixit' who was accessible to, and identified with, ordinary voters. Moreover, Beattie's relationship with the electorate overrode all other institutions, including the Labor Party itself, to cultivate a powerful psychological effect that — in painting Beattie as a genuinely transcendent leader — allowed the so-called 'Beattie Liberals'⁷ to endorse state Labor at the 2001, 2004 and 2006 elections⁸ (Williams 2004c; Steketee 2004).

Yet strong leadership remained central to Beattie's application of traditional populist elements. Like Goss, Beattie — strengthened by his massive election wins from 2001 — mollified the factions and extended his authority across Cabinet, caucus and organisation. Indeed, after the 2006 election colleagues dubbed Beattie the 'Emperor of George Street' (Williams 2006a). Like Goss, Beattie was also supported by a skilled front bench (especially Terry 'The Fox' Mackenroth as Deputy Premier, 2000–05), and by adroit Directors-General of the Department of Premier and Cabinet.⁹ Beattie's strong leadership also saw him intervene in ministers' sensitive portfolios when public backlash threatened (Atkins and Franklin 2000; Walker 2006). Indeed, so total was Beattie's control of Queensland Labor that election campaigns from 2001 on — like those under Bjelke-Petersen years before — were focused almost entirely on him.

Beattie also pushed other traditional electoral 'buttons' as part of his metapopulist appeal. For example, his penchant for law and order — particularly his trumpeting of 'anti-hooping' laws, increased police 'move-on' powers and DNA testing for prisoners — struck a chord among voters (QPD 1999, 2002, 2005). Beattie also tacitly portrayed himself as Queensland's moral guardian. Whether vowing to purge Labor of rorters in 2000–01 (a strategy that wrong-footed an opposition hoping to pillory Beattie during the Shepherdson Inquiry), denouncing former Labor minister Gordon Nuttall¹⁰ or virulently opposing heroin injecting rooms, surrogate pregnancies and abortion reform, Beattie identified with conservative Queenslanders. Yet it was in his Queensland state chauvinism that Beattie's most easily recognisable populist elements lay. Moving rhetorically far beyond the pedestrian economic assaults on Canberra's financial parsimony, Beattie exalted his state's alleged cultural superiority. From his description of New South Wales

politicians as ‘cockroaches’ (Shanahan 2001) to his insistence on serving Queensland wines at state functions, and from declaring Queensland the most desirable location on earth to his suggestion to annex northern New South Wales (*Daily Telegraph* 2005), Beattie won applause for an unabashed parochialism.

Beattie’s chauvinism would have counted for little had he targeted his rhetoric only at the state’s south-east; like most Premiers before him, he was at pains to engage the state’s regions. In addition to reminding voters of his North Queensland childhood,¹¹ Beattie — undoubtedly as a bulwark against future One Nation-inspired backlashes — pioneered the Community Cabinet program (of which he chaired more than 100) and regional sittings of parliament in Townsville and Rockhampton. Beattie also took pre-election ‘listening tours’ to the regions (during which he indulged in ‘left populism’ with visits to Labor’s ‘Tree of Knowledge’ at Barcaldine) and established a Community Engagement division within the Department of Premier and Cabinet (Tiernan 2006, p. 371). Beattie also ignored calls to introduce the rurally unpopular daylight saving, spent more



A hard-hatted Premier Peter Beattie inspecting a capital works project.
Source: Newsgallery, image no. M11666216-262803. Reproduced courtesy *Courier Mail*.

than half the state's capital works budget in regional areas, and denounced the US–Australia Free Trade Agreement's omission of sugar in 2004. Indeed, in distancing his style from Goss's predilection for economic rationalism and NCP, Beattie instead promoted his own 'social rationalism', which aimed to put people before profits (AAP 1998; Williams 2006b).

Another of Beattie's traditional populist elements was state development and, in an echo of Bjelke-Petersen, he boasted of cranes on the horizon as evidence of material progress (Sommerfield 2002). Importantly, Beattie's first bold election pledge in 1998 was to reduce the state's unemployment to 5 per cent, with the new Premier later appearing regularly in a building site 'hard hat' amid repetition of his 'jobs, jobs, jobs' mantra (Day 1998). When acting as his own Trade Minister, Beattie also took pride in Queensland's ability to host global events — from CHOGM to the Masters and Goodwill Games — and in the headquartering of major corporations, including Virgin Airlines (Arklay 2000, p. 577).

It is unlikely Beattie would have enjoyed continued electoral success had he confined his leadership to traditional populism alone. Indeed, while Beattie — a professional politician and lawyer living in an upper middle-class inner-city suburb — in reality shared little in common with the average Queenslanders, the Labor leader frequently extolled his 'ordinariness'. Even as opposition leader in 1998, for example, Beattie argued against pay rises for MPs (Lehmann 1998), and defended the use of the 'great Australian adjective' (Madigan 1999). He also conceded a personal battle with weight, and happily deprecated himself as an 'amiable boofhead' and 'just a boy from Atherton' (Wanna and Williams 2005). An additional element of Beattie's appeal was his ability to identify with family life. The Premier made his own parenting anxieties known, and advocated heavy state intervention to save children of 'bad' parents (Thomas 2003). As the owner of Rusty the dog, Beattie frequently was photographed walking in his neighbourhood dressed in a Brisbane Broncos football jersey.

Beattie's predilection for the policy 'backflip' — and the concomitant *mea culpa* during which he apologised for policy error — proved equally successful (Williams 2005b). For voters inured to bull-headed 'boss' premiers (Williams and Wanna 2005: 18), reluctant to concede wrongdoing, a flexible leader who admitted mistakes and who bent policy to the electorate's will was refreshingly novel. Examples are numerous, with Beattie's more memorable backflips including the reversal of a decision to abolish the state's popular 8.3 cent per litre petrol subsidy (Atkins 2000), abandoning a push for local government (LGA) to collect an ambulance levy (Odgers and Heywood 2002) and reversing a heavy-handed edict to outlaw LGA referenda on council amalgamations (Williams 2007a). Interestingly, while critics branded Beattie's flexibility as weakness, voters instead saw a Premier who was genuinely responsive to their needs (*Courier Mail* 2001).

Beattie's willingness to consult pressure groups — even those opposed to his government, saw the Premier engage in genuine pluralism, which led Noel Preston (2003) to tag Beattie the 'inclusive populist'. A notable example is found in Beattie's spontaneous meeting in 2006 with the Save Our Spit group, an organisation hostile to the government's development on the Gold Coast. When the group castigated Beattie on a local street, the premier placated aggrieved members via an informal discussion over coffee (Chalmers 2006). Like Goss, Beattie suffered sig-

nificant public opinion rebuke when eschewing flexibility. When, for example, the Premier refused in 2007 to shelve his contentious local government area (LGA) amalgamation legislation, anti-Beattie sentiment reached its zenith (Steketee 2007). Yet Beattie retained one power: by retiring voluntarily in 2007, he was the first Premier since Frank Nicklin in 1968 to choose the timing of his own departure.

POLICY

Consistent with many of his predecessors, Beattie was more at ease when trumpeting Queensland's 'grand vision' than in listing policy detail (Wanna and Williams 2005, p. 71). On coming to office, the new Premier set about constructing a narrative of activity, with seven priorities constituting his mission. In 2000, these were reduced to five — jobs, safer communities, community engagement, the environment and building the regions — and thus became the rudder steering Queensland public policy (Williams 2007b). Urban development projects such as Roma Street and Lang Park in Brisbane also earned him applause in the south-east (but not in the regions), as did the mammoth \$55 billion South-East Queensland Regional Development Plan announced in 2005 (Williams 2005c). Yet the apex of Beattie's vision was undoubtedly the 'Smart State' program — the Beattie and Davis 'big-picture' plan to move Queensland from 'farm and quarry' to a global leader in biotechnology and similar industries — a program that would, in Beattie's words, see Queensland become the 'California of Australia' (AAP 1999). Ironically, many Queenslanders disparaged the 'Smart State' tag, with drivers objecting especially to 'Smart State' logos on vehicle registration plates (Wenham 2002).

MEDIA

The last but arguably most effective strategy in Beattie's electoral arsenal was his wide accessibility to the news media, and his government media officers' capacity to control its public messages. Indeed, so accepting was Beattie of his penchant for publicity that, when the opposition labelled Beattie a 'media tart' in 2000, the Premier happily agreed and adopted the moniker for himself (Franklin 2000), thus neutralising further criticism. There is little doubt that media engagement was central to the Premier's daily routine, or that the Beattie 'spin doctors' were assiduous in setting the daily news agenda via Corporate Communications Units that stretched from the Department of Premier and Cabinet to deep inside ministerial offices. During election campaigns and times of policy crisis, Beattie would also distract attention via media 'stunts', with the Premier's swim with the sharks during the damaging Shepherdson Inquiry a notable example (Emerson 2003). Beattie also cultivated friendly relations with journalists by using their first names, called regular Sunday press conferences, and often appeared in 'hard hat' or Broncos jersey to underscore his 'ordinariness'. A Galaxy poll taken days after Beattie's retirement found remarkable results. After nine years in office, 42 per cent of respondents rated Beattie's premiership as 'very good' or 'quite good', with another 37 per cent deeming it 'average'. Just 21 per cent rated Beattie a poor Premier (Wardill 2007).

OPPOSITION

Yet a significant part of Beattie's triumph must also be attributed to the parlous state of the opposition. After enjoying momentary success in the mid-1990s, the Liberal and National Parties soon retreated into familiar patterns of mutual mistrust, factionalism (especially within the Liberals), policy differences (over trading hours and daylight saving) and a revolving door of tepid leaders who proved incapable of attracting urban votes. The Coalition thus disbanded in 2001 after a particularly dismal performance by the Liberals — long the weak link in the Coalition chain — reduced to just three seats, only one of which was in Brisbane. The Coalition reformed in 2003, and again dissolved in 2004. When the Coalition was reformed in 2005, new leader Lawrence Springborg took the two parties on a long and arduous road to amalgamation. Despite internal resistance — especially from Liberal state and federal quarters — Queensland's first merged conservative party in 72 years was unveiled in mid-2008. Voters received the new LNP favourably, delivering a 4 per cent 2PP swing and nine new seats at the 2009 election (Williams 2010a). However, it was not until after the 2009 poll and the Bligh government's widely condemned announcement that she would sell state assets that the LNP was able to maintain a significant public opinion lead over Labor.

The Bligh Years, 2007–11

The relatively seamless transition from Beattie to Anna Bligh, Queensland's first woman premier, contributed significantly to the new leader's extended electoral honeymoon. Beattie had groomed Bligh as his successor since at least 2005 and, after a plethora of publicity in the lead-up to her accession, Bligh reinvigorated Labor support. A Galaxy poll taken days after Bligh's accession in September 2007, for example, found Labor's primary vote had climbed to 48 per cent, or 57 per cent after preferences. Importantly, 36 per cent of voters believed Bligh would prove to be a better Premier than Beattie (Wardill 2007). By late 2008, Labor was still attracting 45 per cent primary support, with Bligh enjoying a personal satisfaction rating of 50 per cent (Newspoll 2009) — a notable result in a state steeped in bucolic, masculine political culture. Part of this success was owed to Bligh's determination to emerge from under Beattie's shadow. Bligh immediately announced reform of the state's Freedom of Information (FOI — now Right to Information, or RTI) laws and, at Labor's 2008 State Conference, criticised Beattie's alleged 'legacy of short-sighted policies, reactive decision-making and publicity stunts' (Parnell 2008).

Bligh's early public approval can also be attributed to the new Premier's servicing of traditional populist elements. Like her predecessors, Bligh trumpeted regionalism (the Premier championed her Gold Coast origins, and would convene parliament in Cairns and Mackay) and an unabashed state chauvinism, especially regarding Queensland's sporting prowess (Dorries 2011).¹² Yet the degree to which Bligh practised genuinely 'strong' leadership is open to debate. While casual observers might rate Bligh's rhetorically thinner leadership style as 'weaker' than that of Beattie or Goss, the new Premier took quick control of policy, caucus and Cabinet. For example, she crashed through vocal opposition to fluoridate Queensland drinking water (Elks 2007), and 'carpeted' those ministers who

attended under-prepared (Personal communication 2010). But there is little doubt that Bligh's maintenance of state development policies — especially her commitment to mining — painted the Premier favourably. Where 'Leading State' had been Goss's 'big picture', and 'Smart State' Beattie's vision, 'Towards Q2: Tomorrow's Queensland' became the Bligh hallmark (Queensland Government 2008).

It is important for this article to determine the causes driving not only Labor's longevity but also those forces behind the government's — and especially Bligh's — public opinion decline. While it is usually imprudent to attempt to pinpoint precisely when media honeymoons end, there is anecdotal agreement that news organisations viewed Bligh's Labor with a significantly more critical eye after the 'gravy train' saga in April 2008, during which Labor party branch members enjoyed, at public expense, a lavishly catered tour of Brisbane's rail stations (O'Loan 2008). By year's end, after additional reports emerged of other generous taxpayer-funded parties for public servants, a sea-change in government–media relations had clearly taken place.

Overcoming a perception of arrogance and lack of accountability born of excessively long incumbency thus became Bligh's most significant challenge — one deepened by allegations of 'jobs for the boys' after Peter Beattie's appointment as Los Angeles Trade Commissioner (Fraser and Elks 2008), and after reports of Labor identities receiving enormous 'success fees' for work as lobbyists (Australian 2009a). History may judge Bligh as a reactive rather than proactive leader — especially after a rare and scathing critique of contemporary Queensland politics by former corruption inquiry commissioner Tony Fitzgerald¹³ — but the Premier soon launched the most far-reaching accountability reforms since the early 1990s. Bruised by lingering perceptions that Labor in more recent years had lost its zeal for Fitzgerald-inspired reforms, Bligh called for public submissions via the 2009 Integrity and Accountability in Queensland green paper, banned success fees for lobbyists, established a lobbyists' register, barred lobbyists from holding government or statutory authority positions, prohibited the 'payer-view' practice of ministers attending exclusive business dinners, lowered the threshold at which political donations required declaration and, in time for the 2012 election, capped election campaign spending (Williams 2010b, 2011). The Premier also initiated Australia's first online 'People's Question Time' forums, and oversaw sweeping change to the parliament's committee system.¹⁴

Yet, for many voters, these reforms appeared to be too little too late. Moreover, public accountability undoubtedly became secondary as Queensland lost its AAA economic rating as the state plunged deeper into the global financial crisis during 2008–09 (Parnell 2009). Any reputation Labor may have enjoyed as a superior financial manager evaporated as unemployment rose and mining royalties fell, and as the government shelved enormous capital works projects — including Traveston Dam, the Tugun desalination plant and Zerogen clean energy — despite record public investment (Lion 2010). When Queensland Health launched a flawed payroll computer system in 2010 that saw thousands of public servants incorrectly paid — or indeed unpaid — and after a senior public servant in late 2011 allegedly misappropriated \$16 million, a new perceptions of Labor as financially reckless and administratively inept emerged.

Even these paled against the public and trade union opposition to the Bligh government's plan to remove the state's petrol subsidy and, more damagingly, to sell five key state assets, including the lucrative coal freight arm of Queensland Rail. The fact that Bligh and Treasurer Andrew Fraser announced the sale just weeks after the 2009 state election — during which no reference to state assets was made — struck voters as especially duplicitous. Indeed, an opinion poll found that 84 per cent of Queenslanders were opposed to the sale, and that 72 per cent believed Bligh had misled them during the campaign (Wardill 2009). It seemed that, like her predecessors, when Bligh eschewed policy flexibility and pursued unpopular public policy — possibly because she and Treasurer Fraser calculated growing budget deficits to be even more of a political disaster — severe electoral damage was sustained.

Bligh's media performance was never as polished as Beattie's, and to many the Premier appeared uncomfortable and lacking in warmth before the television cameras (Fraser 2009). But natural disasters shape leaders in curious ways, and for Bligh the devastating Queensland floods of January 2011, and Cyclone Yasi weeks later, offered the often-stilted Premier an opportunity to genuinely empathise with a heart-broken people. Apart from her grasp of geographic and technical detail, Bligh won plaudits for her 'Queensland Speech', in which she struck an especially chauvinistic chord and reminded Queenslanders that 'we are the people that they breed tough, north of the border ... the ones that they knock down, and we get up again' (*Brisbane Times* 2011). Public approval of both Bligh and her government soon soared. In March, Labor's primary vote had recovered twelve points to an election-winning 52 per cent after preferences. Bligh's satisfaction rating over the same period climbed 25 points to 49 per cent, and her dissatisfaction fell 24 points to just 43 per cent. It was the most dramatic turnaround in Newspoll history (Newspoll 2011).

The opposition's fortunes reversed just as rapidly, with the LNP's primary vote falling eight points to 48 per cent after preferences. Importantly, positions for preferred Premier also reversed, with Bligh leading Langbroek 53 to 26 per cent. LNP powerbrokers moved quickly to counter Bligh's rehabilitation, and internal LNP polling was leaked suggesting Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman — a figure whose profile was similarly enhanced during and after the floods — would, as state opposition leader, easily topple Bligh with 66 per cent 2PP (Viellaris and Fraser 2011). On 22 March, Newman confirmed his bid for his party's leadership via his nomination for the Labor-held seat of Ashgrove in Brisbane's inner north-west. Later that evening, the LNP party room elected former Nationals leader and now Newman ally Jeff Seeney (Callide) as 'interim leader'. The gamble of eschewing Westminster conventions and anointing an extra-parliamentary leader appeared to pay off. By April–May, according to Newspoll, Labor's support had fallen seven points while the LNP's had climbed fourteen points. Internal LNP polling in May also confirmed that Newman was on track to win Ashgrove, with the former Lord Mayor registering a 19 per cent primary swing, or 53 per cent 2PP after preferences (Wardill 2011). The July–September period confirmed Labor's slide statewide, with the government attracting just 27 per cent primary support, or one point higher than its 2010 nadir. With the LNP now attracting 50 per cent of the primary vote, or 61 per cent after preferences, annihilation for the government again appeared likely. Interestingly, while Bligh's satisfaction rating had again fallen, by September 2011 (at 38 per cent)

it was still fourteen points higher than in late 2010. This suggested that while voters again mistrusted the government, not all had turned against Bligh personally.

Yet the resurgent LNP also faced hiccups. In September, there were allegations that a member of Newman's extended family had sought to benefit financially from the floods via consultancy services. Later it was reported that Newman had failed to update his pecuniary interests, and that his LNP 'salary' exceeded a backbencher's, despite earlier denials. The LNP's ethics were also questioned after so-called 'dirt files' on Labor candidates were leaked, and after senior party organisers were accused of bullying candidates. Yet the LNP faced more uncertainty when, in mid-2011, former National-turned-Independent Kennedy federal MP Bob Katter launched his Katter's Australia Party (KAP) — a grass-roots populist organisation akin to One Nation that appealed to regional Queenslanders' disenchantment. Katter's initial prediction that he would steal seats from the LNP were largely dismissed but, when sitting MPs joined KAP, observers revised their predictions, especially after Galaxy polls found the fledgling party attracting up to 29 per cent support (Vogler 2011).

Conclusion

Perhaps counter-intuitively for a vibrant Australian democracy, long incumbency at federal and state levels is not uncommon — indeed, long hegemonies have been the norm for Queensland for almost a century. Yet while the existing political science literature has explained well the factors enabling the long tenure of both the Labor (1915–57) and non-Labor (1957–89) parties, the factors underpinning the state's third electoral hegemony (1989–2012) have not been canvassed adequately. This article has sought to meet this need in arguing that Labor's hegemony in the post-Fitzgerald years can be attributed to four principal factors: successive Premiers' 'strong' leadership styles; 'big-picture' policy programs, especially when delivered flexibly; a comprehensive program of media management; and divided oppositions often led by unelectable leaders. Importantly, Labor governments have been re-elected despite poor public policy decisions and concomitant political scandals when oppositions have been weak. Conversely, the non-Labor party (or combination of parties) has overtaken the government in opinion polls when the LNP (or Coalition) has presented a unified front behind a leader with urban appeal. It can therefore be concluded that no single factor is universally responsible for enabling long political hegemonies in Queensland and that, at any given point in time, any one or combination of factors will exert a critical influence. For example, where strong leadership, adroit media management and a poor opposition were critical in 2001, in 2012 Labor's leadership and media engagement mattered little. Instead, the LNP's revival from 2011 depended more on LNP leadership and government policy failures. Given that at the time of writing, the LNP appeared on the brink of attaining a parliamentary majority so large as to insulate it from defeat for years to come, perhaps the only certainty is that the era of long electoral hegemonies in Queensland is not yet over.

Notes

- 1 Labor was in opposition only during Moore's Country and Progressive National Party government, 1929–32.
- 2 These and other electoral statistics, unless otherwise stated, are drawn from Campbell (1996), and from Electoral Commission of Queensland, *Statistical Reports* (1998–2009). See <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/resources.aspx?id=106>. Accessed 25 April 2011.
- 3 One Nation's disruption makes a reliable 2PP calculation difficult, but Malcolm Mackerras calculates that Labor attracted around 51 per cent 2PP to the Liberal-Nationals' 49 per cent. See http://mumble.com.au/queensland/mack_in_oz.htm. Accessed 25 April 2011.
- 4 For detailed coverage of policy and procedural reform, see Stevens and Wanna (2003).
- 5 Not In My Back Yard.
- 6 It can be argued that successive Queensland governments pioneered modern 'spin' practices, with Joh Bjelke-Petersen, ably advised by Allen Callaghan, infamous for his 'feeing the [media] chooks' (see Callaghan 2005; Secombe and Kingston 1995).
- 7 The 'Beattie Liberals' tag is applied colloquially to Brisbane's non-Labor voters who endorsed the Howard government federally between 1998 and 2007 while electing Beattie's Labor candidates during the same period. The power of Beattie's personal style is assumed to have driven this cross-party support.
- 8 The National Party has won no seat in the Brisbane metropolitan area since 1986, and the Liberals won only two seats in Brisbane at the 2001 election, one seat in 2004 and two seats in 2006.
- 9 Department of Premier and Cabinet Directors-General were Glyn Davis (1998–2001), Leo Keliher (2001–05) and Ross Rolfe (2005–07).
- 10 Jailed in 2009 for receiving secret commissions while a minister in Beattie's Cabinet.
- 11 Beattie was born in Sydney but raised on the Atherton Tableland in North Queensland. See Wanna and Williams (2005).
- 12 In 2011, Bligh was the Number One Ticket Holder for NRL Gold Coast team The Titans.
- 13 In July 2009, Tony Fitzgerald, on the 20th anniversary of his report's submission, chided both the Labor and conservative parties for unhealthily close relationships with business. See *Australian* (2009b).
- 14 Following a standing committee report into committee reform in late 2010, legislation in 2011 established a series of portfolio committees designed to vet all Bills, extended powers to Estimates Committees to question senior public servants and, most contentiously, established a Legislative Assembly 'super-committee' that largely by-passed the Speaker and handed unprecedented powers of the legislature's management to the Executive. See McKenna (2011).

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