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Political tsunami — the 2012 Queensland election and its aftermath in Parliament

Roger Scott

A Time of Transition

Paul Williams reported in this journal on a time of transition in Queensland identified with the 2009 state election. He argued two theses:

... that the years 2008–2009 produced the most dramatic shift in political fortunes to the conservatives in a decade and that, paradoxically, any election traction the (newly-merged) Liberal National Party gained outside the Parliament was matched by a tepid performance inside the House.¹

The last time the Liberals and the National Party contested separately against the ALP was in 2006 when Labor under Beattie secured 59 of the 89 seats, Nationals 17 and the Liberals 8. The amalgamated LNP claimed 34 seats at the 2009 general election. An analysis of the Electorate Commission results indicated that seven of the newly claimed seats in 2009 were nominally Liberal Party gains while only two could be considered National Party gains. The Liberals had begun to claw back their traditional constituency from Labor by 2009, but it was not yet altogether convincing. Failure to win that election when so many general factors were in favour of the LNP generated a sense of disappointment, especially in Brisbane and among the rapidly increasing mining interests within the State. The new, more united Liberal National opposition was not able to generate much enthusiasm among Brisbane voters, even though the Labor government was seen to be increasingly fragile. But it seemed only necessary to play a waiting game and build on the progress made in 2009 in terms of winning new seats, relying on exploiting many policy failures and growing economic stress. This strategy was turned upside down by the spate of natural disasters which befell Brisbane in the year preceding the next election in 2012. Bligh offered masterful leadership and displayed an enviable capacity to relate to community concerns — much admired by many in her own party after a dismal performance earlier in her term. An unexpected and significant upswing in her polling figures set alarm bells ringing in LNP ranks and created opportunities for dramatic change which party strategists were quick to exploit.

Bligh's popularity proved to be a false dawn for the ALP, as there was too much damage already inflicted, particularly on the core constituency of working class and trade union members, especially those employed in the public service and unreconciled to a regime which had pursued policies such as asset sales previously ruled out just before the preceding election.² However the LNP, confronting a fear of what would have been a nightmarish failure yet again in 2012, appeared to outsiders to panic in the face of what was to prove only a temporary upswing in opinion polls. In the absence of strong leadership talent on the Liberal front-bench, the new LNP party machine sought a radical way of gaining credibility with the south-east Queensland electorate.

In an unprecedented move, Campbell Newman was chosen to be the political leader of the State LNP opposition, without being a member of the State's legislature or even in a position to gain membership in advance of contesting a general election. He had pursued a highly successful and high-profile career as Lord Mayor of Brisbane and was well connected with the federal Liberal Party elite — both parents had held ministerial office nationally, albeit representing Tasmania and not Queensland. He would have appealed to the national leadership of the Liberals as someone altogether more predictable than local leaders of both coalition partners, who had a dubious track record when it came to toeing the national line. It was a symptom of the tensions remaining inside the local Liberal party with its small number of state parliamentarians, that no sitting member was prepared to give up his seat to create a winnable vacancy at a by-election. So Newman had the added stress of needing to win a marginal Labor seat to facilitate his entry to the premiership, as well as the burden of projecting his leadership to the wider voting public without access to the forum of Parliament available to his opponent. The press and the ALP both focussed on the uncertainty created in voters' minds by the possibility that the LNP might win sufficient support to gain a majority of members but not enough to get the higher swing required to return the party's leader.

The election campaign

The opinion polls and the consequential media coverage pointed to a landslide against Labor which had existed almost since Bligh's policy of privatising assets as a response to the global financial crisis. Because Bligh's record of achievements in government was seen so negatively, the ALP's campaign strategy was diverted to focus on Newman and his limitations. The Premier herself used parliamentary privilege to attack Newman's network of business connections and called on the local Crime and Misconduct Commission to investigate, resulting only in a humiliating climb-down in the last week of the campaign. As the ALP made so little effort to point to perceived strengths in its past achievements or to offer substantive new policies, Newman and the LNP were never subjected to any close analysis of their own promises or to the costs associated with implementing them. The main LNP themes were reducing costs of living on specific items and reducing government waste on activities which were unproductive and/or based on ideological preferences such as conservation — the ALP regarded the Greens as

their main competitor in some circumstances. Newman engaged in consultation with key stakeholders, including unions as well as business groups and advocates of socially-conservative causes. An extensive documentation of policies was provided on web-sites which remained largely unnoticed until after the election but provided the basis for a set response by Newman when asked challenging questions on policy detail.

Brenton Holmes produced an excellent background note for the National Parliamentary Library.³

From the moment Campbell Newman announced his move from Brisbane City Council politics to the state level, interest was galvanised around the implications and challenges of leading a party and aspiring to a premiership when not yet even an MP.

As one newspaper had stated at the time, the LNP made an 'extraordinary decision to install Campbell Newman as the leader-in-waiting, 'a decision that history would reveal to be 'either a great political coup or an infamous own goal'.⁴ In the event it proved an even greater coup than might have been imagined when the LNP took its initial decision.

As academic Ian Ward argued in his post-election analysis:

The LNP's success [in the 2012 election] lay in convincing voters jaded with 'politics as usual' that it had changed, and that change was possible. Its master stroke was to pluck Campbell Newman from his lord mayor's chair and install him as the premier-in-waiting. Leaders are now crucial to the marketing of their party. Newman's 'can do' reputation gave him gravitas. But he was also a 'clean skin' from outside the parliament who had not been involved in his party's leadership wrangling.⁵

The LNP's strategy had been to provide as small a target as possible in terms of their policy platform, but rather run a presidential style campaign around the leader Campbell Newman.

The election result and the party system

The Labor party was annihilated at the 2012 general election. The LNP swept 78 of the 89 seat Legislative Assembly. The result saw the emergence for the first time of the 'Liberal' component of the LNP as predominant in the Queensland political scene, with Newman a Liberal and nominally Liberal candidates sweeping the urban electorates, particularly in the heavily populated south east of the state. The 2012 election saw the most overwhelming majority for a party in the State's history. Most commentators have a ready-made reason for the rout of the incumbent Labor administration. It is more likely to be a combination of many factors however, some of which were already present prior to the 2009 election. There will no doubt be much further analysis, both of a trite and serious nature, to identify the reasons for such a dramatic shift in electoral sentiment in three years. One of the key factors in the overwhelming scale of the victory was the nature of the campaign itself. Well before the campaign started, most people expected Labor to lose and interest groups

like business and trade unions shaped their strategy accordingly to seek to establish positions of relative neutrality. But, as mentioned above, the ALP strategists seem to have believed that the government's past record was indefensible and concentrated not on comparing alternative future policies but on the uncertainties and personality of the opposition leader. Subsequent opinion polls suggest that this personal vendetta proved counter-productive across a wide social spectrum.

The result was that minor parties were squeezed out in what became a plebiscite on a leader. Greens voters might have been expected to benefit from disillusionment with Bligh over privatisation and they also campaigned strongly on environmental issues, especially on coal seam gas where they could make common cause with rural discontent at the perceived sacrifice of agricultural land to external mining interests. But their vote dropped by one per cent and came in significantly lower overall than Bob Katter's Australia Party (KAP), which contested fewer seats and barely existed before the start of the campaign.

Given the Queensland electorate's past proclivity for supporting parties to the right rather than to the left of centre, the KAP could take heart from this performance. It made significant inroads in seats on the outskirts of Brisbane which had once supported Pauline Hanson. In far north Queensland, it averaged near 20% in three seats; it scored 30% in Mulgrave, just behind the LNP; further south it received 36% in Hinchinbrook and in Dalrymple it won the seat with 55% of the vote; across in Mount Isa, previously held by Labor, Katter's son was elected with 42% of the primary vote. This suggests a continuing electoral presence, especially in the federal Senate, and the potential for growth if Newman policies reduce the scale of government intervention which has tended in the past to favour regions outside Brisbane. Given the conservative/progressive divide that characterised previous coalition arrangements both within and out of power, the new LNP government is facing the challenge of melding a moderate conservative force or risk losing its ultra conservative base to a grouping such as Katter's Australia Party. In his first announcements in taking up government, Newman appears to have recognised this by announcing spending cuts of a *prima facie* trivial nature, but nevertheless very much aimed at recognising the conservative wing. In addition, his attendance at his first COAG meeting provided the opportunity to undertake the 'Canberra bashing' that so endeared Bjelke-Peterson to the rural conservatives. (This continued when he stood out in July against the growing national consensus on a disability insurance scheme — holding fast when other Liberal regimes gave up on their strategy of trying to force the imposition by Gillard of a levy which could then be described as another 'great big new tax' by her federal opponents).

Newman dismantled the machinery changes Labor had made in 2009 and reverted to the traditional portfolio arrangements, with 19 Ministers and the same number of Assistant Ministers. His appointment of ministers according to the 'rural/city' divide provides perhaps some insight into how the previous National/Liberal division has been reconciled with the LNP now in government. Six of the 19 person ministry came from outside the south east corner of the State, while 'non-Brisbane'

electorate members of the ministry numbered in total 14. Eight of these ministers were from either Sunshine Coast or Gold Coast electorates. These eight were nominally Liberals when considered against the old National/Liberal divide. So in fact the 'Liberals' had not only built on their 2009 comeback, but had clearly become the preeminent grouping within the LNP. This Liberal resurgence is underlined by the detailed analysis provided to me by Dr Paul Reynolds, Honorary Research Fellow in the Queensland Parliamentary Library.

Although there is some arbitrary decision making, I calculate the balance within the LNP as 52 Liberals and 25 Nationals which equates to a 68:32% ratio. Thirty two Liberals (62%) are in 'safe' seats, defined as protected by margins in excess of 10.0%, as are 15 Nationals (60%). In three of these seats the KAP is runner up. 11 Liberals (21%) can be classified as in 'fairly safe' seats (5.0 - 9.9% margins) as are five Nationals (20%). In one of these five the KAP was runner-up and in another one an Independent was the runner up. Nine Liberals (17%) are in 'marginals' (0.1 - 4.9%) as are five Nationals (20%). In two of these, KAP was the runner up.

This breakdown supports the observation that the Liberals have finally (and historically for Queensland) supplanted the Nationals. If the LNP lost all its marginals in a subsequent election, it would leave 43 Liberals to 20 Nationals, increasing the ALP to 19 and KAP to four. If half the 'fairly safe' seats were lost, Liberals = 38 Nationals = 19 ALP = 26, KAP = five, Independents = three. If all the fairly safe went, it would leave the LNP with 49; ALP 33; KAP five and an extra Independent. The internal LNP balance would be 36:13. For the ALP to regain Government, there would need to be a 13.2% swing. This would yield LNP 37; ALP 45; KAP 7, but this presumes no Independents. On this scenario the LNP balance would be 22:15.

Obviously there is far more at play here than merely arithmetical calculations, but on these results there is no way that the Liberal component can ever again be required to play second fiddle to the Nationals, who might be facing a second front anyway in the KAP, presuming this party survives. One somewhat minor caveat is that the Liberal dominance within the LNP and more widely rests heavily on Labor's decimation in outer Brisbane and the nearby north and south coasts. In the past these areas have proved volatile and may do so again, but over what time period?

Managing Parliament and its committees

There was a strong sense of *deja vu* in the growing intolerance of expressions of dissent. The new Speaker was a long-serving staunch conservative, with National Party links over two generations. She was reported in the press as being disappointed not to be awarded a ministry but rapidly reasserted the authority of the Speakership which had been undermined in the later days of the Bligh government (and discussed at a recent ASPG conference). She is clearly determined to assert her authority in hew new domain, usually to the benefit of protecting the image of the government. Independent television camera operators were banned from the floor of Parliament for more than month after news bulletins broadcast footage of a protest in the public gallery over changes to the law on civil unions. She warned

that future bans would be imposed for any similar breach and later foreshadowed banning members from the public gallery ‘in circumstances when authorised officers are in possession of credible intelligence that protest activity is intended or occurring in or immediately outside the parliamentary precinct and/or that certain individuals or groups are intending to disrupt the proceedings of the assembly.’ (When the author attended Question Time recently, he was surprised to find himself sharing the second row of the public gallery with a police officer — the front row and the side rows, which give a better field of vision in each direction, were off-limits, to accommodate members of guided tours, usually tourists and school children.)

What was new about Parliament was a committee system revised and expanded on the recommendations of a bi-partisan report to the previous government. The original concept of party balance among the membership was clearly difficult to maintain when there were so few members available from outside the LNP. The original intention was for each of the seven portfolio committees to have at least six members each, half of whom should be from outside the governing party, with the functions of scrutinising legislation, investigating issues and reviewing budget spending. Shortly after the election, the new Leader of the House indicated that this could not be sustained with only 7 ALP members and four others (2 Katter Party and 2 regional independents), since the new arrangements provided for all seven committees to meet simultaneously. A month later, it was decided to increase the size of each committee from six members to eight, giving the LNP 75% of the membership in each, giving all LNP backbenchers an opportunity to serve and thus be gainfully employed (with additional remuneration). The expanded system also allowed the former party leader (and current Deputy Premier) to justify backing away from the LNP commitment at its 2009 conference favouring a referendum to re-establish an upper house.

Newman felt able in this circumstance to decide unilaterally to by-pass the whole apparatus on any issue where he wanted rapid action and minimal analysis and discussion. This was rationalised on the grounds that he had such an overwhelming mandate that he could legitimately remove any obstacles that stood in the way of his personal preferences, irrespective of what had been said during the election campaign. In the event, Parliament was able to make little impact on public opinion because of the overwhelming numerical superiority of the LNP. Each of the seven members of the ALP ‘shadow cabinet’ needed to develop expertise across multiple portfolios and their collective lack of previous experience inside government limited their capacity to make an impact — all the logical successors to Bligh had perished in the electoral avalanche. It was often the two experienced, longer-serving independents occupying seats outside Brisbane who supplied any balance in lop-sided debates soon after the election.

Reforming and re-populating the Executive

The new government set about immediately dismantling the previous machinery of government arrangements put in place by the Bligh administration. A number of Directors-General either moved on or were replaced. The Newman administration reverted from a complex and unwieldy hierarchy devised by the ALP to a system of 19 portfolios with each minister's portfolio aligned to a single department, and each minister having a direct, one-to-one relationship with a departmental Director-General. In addition, each minister was assigned an assistant minister to the portfolio, equivalent to what Labor had called parliamentary secretaries. The Newman administration argued that this arrangement restored direct lines of ministerial accountability whereas under the previous government, it argued, this accountability had been diminished by the complex reporting arrangements.

It is usual for newly installed governments, especially those in opposition for as long as the LNP, to replace at least the Under Treasurer and the Department of Premier and Cabinet Director-General with their 'own' appointees and this occurred almost immediately. What was a somewhat more surprising move for the new administration was the installation of a former LNP party president as Director-General of Transport and another senior party official also became a Director-General. Several senior executives also moved across from positions in local government, especially the Brisbane City Council.

Commenting at a lecture in Brisbane soon after this announcement, Tony Fitzgerald⁶ expressed concern at what he called the 'current toxic political culture' and identified these appointments as 'the jobs for the boys' gravy train (having) already started — that's a shame'.⁷ Newman, predictably, brushed off the claim and it barely raised a whimper among the media that had previously pilloried the Bligh administration for what it regarded as similar appointments. He made a similar response when a drug overdose emergency inside the Executive Building led to police prosecution of a ministerial staffer for possession of banned substances — the ensuing publicity highlighted that the staff member involved was the youthful offspring of another Minister and that minister had in turn employed the offspring of the first Minister. Other offspring started to be identified in the press as occupying notionally non-partisan posts: for example, the aforementioned DG of Transport had found merit in an appointment of a liaison officer within the regular public service where others found only evidence of nepotism. (The ALP front bench remained very quiet about this, given its similar dynastic relationships and career histories, so Newman was again able to brush off the claim that these sorts of familial appointments were a normal part of politics.)

Newman was provoked to stronger corrective actions by what he judged to be inappropriate behaviour of his new ministers. The new Police Minister served for a spectacularly short time before being dismissed for failing to notify the Premier that persistent failure to pay fines for speeding offences were about to see court action against him, something which only surfaced when the Police Commissioner was

informed of this by his own department in the context of normal security checks. The new Minister for Housing — and a former leader of the lilliputian Liberal Party of the pre-merger era — saw nothing wrong in calling in an LNP party official to conduct a review of a small departmental business unit as a basis for planning privatisation and staffing cuts. When called to account by the Premier, he failed to mention to him a second incidence of similar behaviour until press coverage forced disclosure.

In addition to a formal rebuke (and some shrinking of the area of the minister's range of responsibilities) the Premier ensured that the matter was explicitly dealt with in a draft code of ministerial conduct prepared by the Integrity Commissioner, David Solomon, who had been appointed by the previous ALP regime. The document states that there must be a clear delineation between the activities of the executive government under ministers' portfolio and that of their political party so party officials ought not to become involved in, or to review or oversight the operations of executive government. The new draft softened the previous blanket requirements for ministers not to hold shares or interests in for-profit companies and requires only divestment in companies where a minister judges a conflict of interest exists or may exist in the future. On the same day as the draft code was tabled, legislation was introduced to re-criminalise knowingly lying to Parliament, reversing changes made by the Beattie government after disgraced former minister Nuttall misled the house about his own conflicts of interest.

Policy confrontation with the public service

Over the time since his election in March, Newman's commitment to a traditional conservative agenda made its way from internal party policy documents into the public arena. On the economic side, he articulated the hostility towards service delivery by public service organisations, an hostility which lined up with the economic rationalists agenda of the federal Liberal Party, and contrasted to the practice of using governments to promote rural interests which had typified the old National/Country Party. Socially he articulated or at least accepted the conservative social agenda of the old National/Country Party and rejected the libertarian impulses of the 'small-l' liberals who inhabited the wetter corners of the Liberal Party.

As stressed above, any commitments made during the election campaign are seen to have been negated by the overwhelming popular mandate seen to have been conferred upon him by the electorate. Everything was open to re-interpretation, sometimes on the grounds of his own ignorance about previous party commitment (as when he responded to questions during the campaign concerning systemic discrimination against gays) or more usually because he has found 'a budgetary black hole' as a result of advice from a carefully-selected committee of experts chaired by former federal Treasurer Peter Costello. This freedom of action allowed him to pursue a strategy of imposing across-the-board budget cut requirements on

all ministers. A total reduction ('right-sizing') of the public service is likely to appeal in general terms to conservatives seeking wider opportunities for the private sector and/or reduction in taxation and living costs. Moreover there is ideological resonance for core supporters in the specific policy cancellations arising from these cuts in areas such as the arts in education, the environment, welfare housing, public health (especially relating to AIDS), reductions in the size of national parks, removal of subsidies for travel from remote settlements for health reasons (relevant to ATSI communities) or from public transport serving disadvantaged suburbs.

The swingeing cuts in public service numbers have been devastating. The premier has persistently refused to nominate a precise figure, leaving it to individual ministers to meet percentage cut requirements in time for a September budget by initiating their own cuts in people and programs. An interim total of 5,000 departures has been identified and perhaps three times that number are likely to be delivered before the end of September. This carnage is especially galling to a group of trade union leaders who were alienated by Bligh's performance because she privatised state assets at the start of her time in office after she had promised not to. They sat on their hands in the current campaign and adopted a studiously non-partisan posture towards Newman on the basis of repeated and well-publicised promises that the public service had nothing to fear from a Newman government. In the aftermath, these leaders articulating their own anger and their members' fears constitute the main opposition to the government. They have been aided by a similar shift in the local press where previous hostility to Bligh and fulsome endorsement of Newman's candidacy has been replaced by an equal measure of distaste for Newman as his duplicity becomes obvious.

The ALP could draw two contrasting lessons for the bleak future it faces. The first is that Newman has shown that someone not currently in Parliament may prove a more electorally attractive candidate as leader than anyone inside. Holmes quotes a newspaper from outside Queensland drawing this conclusion: 'No longer will the political power-brokers have to dip into the shallow gene pool of their elected representatives, which after years in opposition are often depleted by the public's dislike of the profession, the daily trench warfare, what they consider to be low pay and a lack of life experience in the real world'. Given the unprecedented shallowness of the Queensland pool which has left stranded several of the main contenders for Bligh's mantle, the processes of party reform currently under discussion might wish to add to the concept of a whole-of-party membership ballot for the leadership the idea that candidates can be drawn from outside Parliament. It is clear that the Queensland electorate has no problems whatever with this arrangement. The second lesson relates to the efficacy of campaigning and the ethics of concealing intentions when elected to government. Lawrence Springborg, the most experienced parliamentarian on either side and the strong proponent of the LNP merger, advocated as part of his campaign platform the need to reconsider the total size of the public service. This was turned against him by union activists and became the major determining factor in the Bligh victory and denied Springborg the ultimate prize. Contrast the Newman campaign strategy, saying as little as possible

during the campaign about its future intentions, beyond generalities about the need for fiscal discipline and honeyed words of reassurance to the same union activists. It was Quintus Tullius Cicero who said ‘now is the time to sound a note of caution. Politics is full of deceit, treachery and betrayal.’ Although this was said around 64BC, it was not heard by Queensland public servants in 2012. ▲

Endnotes

- ¹ Paul D Williams, ‘Time of transition : the Queensland Parliament and electoral volatility’, *Australian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2010, 25(1) p 224.
- ² Williams had noted that, as far back as 2009, immediately after Labor’s comfortable victory (but with a considerably reduced majority), ‘the public regard for Bligh’s administration was severely tested by questions of integrity in government-business relations, and by a contentious policy of government asset sales.’ op cit.
- ³ Brenton Holmes, ‘Background Note on Queensland Election 2012’, Parliamentary Library Research Publication, 7 June 2012
- ⁴ S. Wardill, ‘Plenty of capital for Labor in this ploy’, *The Courier Mail*, 23 March 2011_cited by Holmes.
- ⁵ I. Ward, ‘Historic brand headed for oblivion’, *Australian Financial Review*, 23 March 2011_cited by Holmes.
- ⁶ The chairman of the 1987/88 Royal Commission into official corruption.
- ⁷ Quoted in *The Courier Mail*, 30 March 2012