

Defying the Odds: Peter Beattie and the 2006 Queensland Election

Paul D. Williams*

Introduction

Speculation that Queensland would go to the polls some five months early on 9 September, 2006, was perhaps the state's worst kept secret, one confirmed when Premier Peter Beattie visited the Governor on 15 August to advise the dissolution of the State's 51st Legislative Assembly. But less expected was the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) easy return for a fourth term with the loss of just four seats after a sombre campaign lasting 26 days — the minimum legal period replicating the 2001 and 2004 campaigns. Beattie's third term (2004-06) had proven by far his toughest since becoming Premier in 1998. After a virtually trouble-free second term (2001–04), Beattie faced — from almost immediately after the 2004 poll — a litany of crises best described as controlled disasters. These included: 'Winegate' (the scandal over the carriage of a bottle of wine onto a 'dry' Aboriginal community and the hasty dismissal, then rehiring, of a scapegoated ministerial adviser); power outages caused by failing infrastructure amid accusations of Government asset stripping of energy providers *Energex* and *Ergon*; the suicide of *Energex* CEO Greg Maddock following allegations of corruption (a suicide performed near Beattie's home); the resignation of other *Energex* CEOs on child sex and insider trading charges; riots on the disadvantaged Indigenous North Queensland community of Palm Island following the death in police custody of Cameron 'Mulrunji' Doomadgee; the resignation of Indigenous Affairs minister Liddy Clark (previously embroiled in 'Winegate' and now alleged to have lied about payment of Palm Island protestors' airfares); the tardy removal of asbestos in schools; the unsafe macadamisation of Queensland roads; the resignation of Speaker Ray Hollis over

* Adjunct lecturer at Griffith University and senior writer at *The Courier Mail*.

allegations (later dismissed) of misusing entertainment expenses; the demotion, eventual sacking and disendorsement of Minister Gordon Nuttall for lying to a parliamentary committee (and the Government's contentious amendment of the Criminal Code to allow Nuttall to face only parliamentary censure and not criminal charges); the lengthy absences of Gaven Labor MP Robert Poole who preferred medical treatment in Thailand to the Queensland health system; the shock retirement of Deputy Premier and Treasurer Terry 'The Fox' Mackenroth who, it was believed, served as a political 'brake' on Beattie's excesses; and no fewer than six ministerial reshuffles (some only weeks apart).

But even these dramas paled against perhaps the two greatest public policy failures in recent Queensland history. The first was the allegation raised in Parliament in mid- 2005 by Nationals MP Rob Messenger that overseas-trained surgeon Jayent Patel — quickly dubbed 'Dr Death' — had contributed to the death of numerous patients at Bundaberg Hospital in central Queensland. The complaints spawned three inquiries: Peter Forster's independent review of *Queensland Health* bureaucracy, an initial Royal Commission under Tony Morris (later closed down by the Supreme Court for 'apprehended bias' when it was found Morris had favoured witnesses), and a fresh Royal Commission (set up after public disquiet when Beattie suggested the matter was closed) under retired judge Geoff Davies. But the dust from Health had yet to settle when rapidly falling dam levels — amid the worst drought in southeast Queensland's living memory — forced increasingly tight water restrictions. Labor and the Coalition (and State and Local Government) soon blamed each other for years of neglect of 'infrastructure' — the new political buzzword — as up to 1,500 interstate migrants continued to flood into greater Brisbane each week (*Courier Mail* 21 February, 2007). It was against this backdrop that the Beattie Government lost in by-elections the three safe seats of Redcliffe, Chatsworth and Gaven.

While few expected the Government to lose any general election, it was nonetheless believed that Beattie would at least be severely punished. But as 2006 wore on it became increasingly apparent the Liberals and Nationals were incapable of capitalising upon Labor's woes and, instead, were consumed by their own lack of unity, identity and policy development. Matters only worsened when Deputy Liberal leader Dr Bruce Flegg disparaged Nationals leader Lawrence Springborg by describing him as 'just a farmer from the Darling Downs' (*Courier Mail* 9 August, 2005). Around the same time, former One Nation-turned Independent Gympie MP Elisa Roberts alleged Liberal leader Bob Quinn had attempted to persuade her — with a \$50,000 bribe — to run for the Liberal Party. The matter was referred to the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) which found Quinn had no charges to answer (*Courier Mail* 25 January, 2006).

In late 2005, the Liberals and Nationals showed some promise when — more than a year after its last dissolution — the two parties announced yet another Coalition agreement. This new-found closeness was taken to a new level in early 2006 when Springborg and Quinn shocked all by announcing an official merger of the two

parties similar to that attained between two conservative parties in Canada. But the leaders were forced into an embarrassing back down just days later when senior figures in both parties, including the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, vetoed the plan that was so obviously announced without the consultation of either party's organisational wing, caucus or grassroots membership (*Courier Mail* 31 May, 2006). The plan only succeeded in squandering the Coalition's earlier momentum. The entire electoral mood swung back to Labor from that point, and remained there for the remainder of the year.

Pre-Campaign

Just days before the election's formal announcement, Deputy Liberal leader Flegg — who had carved out a laudable niche as Opposition Health spokesperson — successfully spilled leader Quinn over the party's inability to find electoral traction. Quinn immediately announced he would not recontest his Gold Coast seat of Robina, observing that 'not all one's political enemies are on the other side.' Quinn's wife then described the Liberals as a 'pack of dastards' (*Courier Mail* 8 August, 2006). Quinn was joined by 11 other MPs who retired at the election including, from the ALP: Jim Fouras (Ashgrove); Terry Sullivan (Stafford); Nita Cunningham (Bundaberg); Daryl Briskey (Cleveland); Dr Lesley Clark (Barron River); Don Livingstone (Ipswich West); Tony McGrady (Mt Isa); Tom Barton (Waterford); Henry Palasczuk (who would be succeeded in Inala by his daughter Anastasia); Gordon Nuttall; and, from the Nationals, Marc Rowell.

The campaign was prefaced by a *Courier Mail* poll providing grim news for Labor. With 55 per cent of voters now blaming the Beattie Government for the water crisis, Labor's primary vote dipped to 42 per cent while the Coalition's rose to 43 per cent. This equated to a 51 to 49 per cent split in the Coalition's favour on a two-party-preferred (2PP) basis. But Beattie remained preferred Premier on 53 per cent, compared to Springborg's 25 per cent. The poll also found 12 per cent of voters more likely to vote Liberal because of Flegg's accession, and only 5 per cent less likely: a net gain of 7 points (*Courier Mail* 12–13 August, 2006). A later poll found the usual issues rated as 'very important' by the following proportions: health (86 per cent); water (83 per cent); education (71 per cent); law and order (63 per cent); roads (52 per cent); transport (37 per cent). Importantly, while Labor was rated the more competent handler of every issue except health, a staggering one in four voters still remained undecided as to primary vote choice (*Courier Mail* 14 August, 2006).

The Campaign

On the weekend before calling the poll, Peter Beattie had feigned indecisiveness over whether to call a by-election in Bundaberg for the ailing Nita Cunningham, or a general election. But Beattie was caught out on the first day of the campaign when

it was revealed voters had inadvertently received early Labor campaign literature confirming 9 September as polling day (*Courier Mail* 16 August, 2006). Yet the Coalition suffered a worse start when, at the leaders' first press conference, Springborg and Flegg failed to answer the basic question of who would be premier should the Liberals win more seats than the Nationals, despite the standing Coalition arrangement assigning the top job to the majority party leader. The two dismissed the query as 'mere speculation' but the gaffe featured heavily in that night's television news (*Courier Mail* 16 August, 2006). Labor could not believe its luck, and hastily reconfigured its campaign theme around the issues of Coalition disunity, indecision and inexperience. The Coalition failed to recover. A few events added colour to an otherwise lacklustre campaign. Noosa Labor MP Cate Molloy, for example, confirmed she would run as an independent after losing Labor endorsement for opposing the Government's plan to construct the controversial dam at Traveston Crossing on the Sunshine Coast. Neighbouring Independent Gympie MP Elisa Roberts also kept voters amused with no fewer than four declarations of her intention to run dead in the campaign, only to re-enter the race another four times.

Interestingly, Beattie from the start adopted an entirely new campaign style. Where previous campaigns had been Beattie's solo efforts (despite the long-used 'Team Beattie' tag), this campaign emerged as a genuinely co-operative partnership with Deputy Premier Anna Bligh. From even before the election's announcement, the two leaders' faces adorned suburban billboards proclaiming — in a throwback to Joh Bjelke-Petersen's populism — 'Strong leadership / Strong economy / Strong Queensland'. Such claims were plausible given Queensland's economic indicators were robust, with unemployment at a 30 year low of 4.5 per cent (*Courier Mail* 18 August, 2006). The issues of leadership and party unity therefore took precedence, with water, health, electricity and roads assuming — surprisingly — only secondary salience. Except for some localised coverage in the regional electorate of Gladstone (once strong Labor but now held by Independent Liz Cunningham), the federal issue of industrial relations failed to feature. Promises thus resembled the traditional and included, from Labor: major upgrades of Gold and Sunshine Coast hospitals; a \$35 million literacy program; a five per cent mandated ethanol content in petrol within five years; extra training for emergency workers; \$3 million for school chaplains (in a bid to placate potential Family First voters); and — Labor's centrepiece — a promise to cut stamp duty for first home buyers. The Coalition similarly pledged: the 'naming and shaming' of juvenile offenders; improved rail transport; English as a compulsory school subject; the cutting of small business 'red tape'; four new dams; underground power cables; inner city tunnels; and — its centrepiece — taxpayer-funded surgery in private hospitals for anyone who has waited longer than the recommended period. Labor's pledges totalled \$3.88 billion while the Coalition's topped \$5.75 billion (*Courier Mail* 9-10 September, 2006). The campaign was unusually devoid of stunts, except for Burnett MP Rob Messenger's failed attempt to hijack — with megaphone in hand — a Beattie regional press conference (*Courier Mail* 18 August, 2006), and the launch of an internet website that, being deemed defamatory of Beattie, was forced to shut down (*Courier Mail* 17 August, 2006).

Coalition fears of lost momentum were confirmed when a new poll revealed that, after the first week, the parties' fortunes had reversed. Labor's primary vote had risen to 45 per cent, with the Coalition's slipping to just 40 per cent (Liberals 24; Nationals 16), yielding a 2PP vote of 53 to 47 per cent in Labor's favour (*Courier Mail* 19–20 August, 2006). The Coalition's problems were perhaps best encapsulated in one television news item where one voter, on meeting Springborg, declared her enthusiastic support for the Coalition, pausing only to ask the Opposition leader's name. Negative advertisements no doubt contributed to a public opinion turnaround, with Labor exploiting the Coalition's disunity gaffe with a high frequency television campaign that declared, *ad nauseum*, 'If you can't govern yourselves, you can't govern Queensland' (*Courier Mail* 19 August, 2006). But the Coalition hit back with its own negative advertising that paraded a woman personally blaming Beattie for the death of her brother while awaiting surgery in a public hospital (*Courier Mail* 9 September, 2006). Indeed, so fearful was Labor of a public backlash over health and water that the party's campaign directors confined Beattie's public appearances to organised events, with a shopping centre 'meet-and-greet' included only late in the campaign. But the Coalition was the architect of many of its own misfortunes. Dr Flegg, for example, while lamenting the lack of history teaching in schools, failed to identify the arrival date of the Second Fleet, or after whom the City of Brisbane is named (*Courier Mail* 22 August, 2006). And, after remonstrating about the poor standard of Cairns Hospital, Flegg failed to capitalise on a health emergency there that saw a woman complain of her elderly father's wait inability to be admitted. The fair-headed Flegg's other setbacks included criticism for suggesting he suffered 'blonde moments', his hiring of an alleged 'image consultant', and the backfiring of Liberal director Geoff Greene's stunt to invade ALP headquarters. It seemed the Liberals' importing of two interstate advisors did nothing to improve the campaign. Springborg met similar difficulties. After facing mild criticism for attending his children's sports carnival, the Opposition leader suspended his campaign upon the death of his father-in-law — a development that saw the initial promise of a brief campaign 'truce' ignored (*Courier Mail* 2 September, 2006). Even the intervention of Flo Bjelke-Petersen — former Nationals Senator and wife of former Premier Joh — did not improve the Coalition's campaign, with her efforts even failing to see her son, John, elected to Joh's old seat of Barambah.

Peter Beattie, by contrast, caught every media break. When the Premier's ubiquitous Akubra hat blew off during a press conference on the Gold Coast, for example, it afforded the grinning Beattie an opportunity for generosity and to offer an interstate school boy reward money for fetching it. And, in a throwback to the folksy populism of Joh and Flo, Beattie's wife, Heather, baked for travelling journalists a batch of chocolate chip cookies. But the leaking of a Coalition email urging members to go to the media and complain how poorly they tasted endeared the Liberals and Nationals to no one (*Courier Mail* 25 August, 2006). Perhaps Beattie's only humiliation was when former television sports broadcaster-turned-celebrity Labor candidate Chris Bombolas embarrassed his leader in urging aggrieved doctors to speak out against the system (*Courier Mail* 30 August, 2006).

The minor parties received little coverage but did face negative publicity when one candidate was arrested for ‘lewd’ behaviour in a Townsville public toilet — allegedly for researching police harassment of gay men — a development that did not prevent him from contesting the poll (*Courier Mail* 31 August, 2006). And while the Greens’ later announcement of not allocating preferences at all to the Coalition surprised nobody, the party’s decision to allocate to Labor in just seven seats (Cairns, Chatsworth, Clayfield, Hervey Bay, Indooroopilly, Keppel, Maroochydore) was not predicted. Nor was it surprising when the major parties again urged voters to take advantage of Queensland’s optional preferential voting system and ‘Just Vote One’, especially since the Liberals and Nationals, for the second time, had decided to avoid any three-cornered contests. But, undoubtedly, the greatest shocks came in the campaign’s last week and from outside politics when two Australian icons, wildlife promoter Steve Irwin and racing car champion Peter Brock, were accidentally killed in separate incidents. Any momentum the Coalition had hoped to gain from its late campaign launch was now completely subsumed.

Candidacies

A total of 329 individuals nominated for election — about one third of whom were women — down from 342 in 2004. There were from fewer non-aligned candidates but most of the drop can be attributed to the near disappearance of One Nation which chose to field just 4 candidates, down from 41 in 2004. While all other parties retained presences comparable to 2004, it must be noted with astonishment the Australian Democrats, for the first time since their creation, failed to nominate a single candidate (*Courier Mail* 23 August, 2006). Table One, below, offers a full break down of candidacies.

Table One
Queensland Election 9 September, 2006
Seats contested, and change from 2004, by party

Party	2006	2004	Change
ALP	89	89	0
Liberals	49	47	+2
Nationals	40	41	-1
(Coalition)	(89)	(88)	(+1)
One Nation	4	41	-37
Greens	75	72	+3
Democrats	0	1	-1
Family First	26	-	+26
Independents	46	51	-5
Total	329	342	-13

Source: ECQ <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2006/results/summary.html>

Final Opinion Polls

Election eve opinion polls all confirmed the Government's easy road to re-election. *Newspoll*, for example, placed Labor on 48 per cent primary vote, with the Coalition on just 38 per cent (Liberal 21; National 17). This translated into a 2PP prediction of 55 per cent to 45 per cent in Labor's favour (http://www.newspoll.com.au/cgi-bin/polling/display_poll_data.pl). *Roy Morgan* polling was only slightly less generous, positioning Labor's 2PP support at 53 per cent to the Coalition's 47 per cent (<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2006/4082/>). The *Courier Mail* poll, by contrast, placed Labor on 56.5 per cent of the 2PP to the Coalition's 43.5 per cent. This poll saw Beattie rated by 62 per cent of voters as the campaign's 'best performer', with 18 per cent rating Springborg, and only 2 per cent nominating Flegg. But perhaps the most revealing data are found in response to questions regarding the major parties. Just 39 per cent of voters, for example, said Labor 'deserved to win', with 57 per cent saying the party did not. But an even heftier 68 per cent of voters stated the Coalition also did not deserve to win (a net advantage to Labor of 11 points), with only 26 per cent believing the Coalition worthy of victory (*Courier Mail* 8 September, 2006). This data, perhaps more than any other, offer the most telling explanation as to why Labor was returned despite a pattern of public policy failures. In short, voters appear to have only grudgingly returned Labor after conceding the Coalition's apparent inexperience, disunity and lack of credible policy rendered it unelectable. Table Two, below, provides a breakdown of candidatures by party.

The Results

The Government was returned for a third consecutive landslide with 46.92 per cent of the primary vote in a negligible 0.09 per cent negative primary swing. On a 2PP basis, Labor secured 54.9 per cent, translating into a tiny 0.6 per cent swing from 2004. The ALP was relieved to be returned in 59 of the 89 seat Legislative Assembly — ostensibly the loss of four seats from 2004. In reality, however, this represented the loss of only one district given Labor had already surrendered three seats at by-elections during the last Parliament. Few were surprised, then, when Labor's only gains were the reclaiming of these three by-election seats (Chatsworth, Redcliffe and Gaven). By contrast, the Government lost four seats: Kawana (marginally held by short-lived Minister Chris Cummins — dubbed by the media the 'Minister for Nothing' given his light portfolio duties); Bundaberg (only narrowly lost despite the district's geographic centre at the 'Dr Death' scandal), Noosa (lost in the splitting of the vote between incumbent-turned-independent Molloy and the endorsed Labor candidate); and Clayfield (a marginal seat lost because of another troubled former minister).

The Liberals attracted 20.10 per cent of the primary vote (a 1.6 per cent swing) and gained just three seats to yield the still paltry total of eight, including gains in Kawana, Noosa and Clayfield. But any joy was subsumed by three realities: they

failed, despite long-held ambitions, to overtake the Nationals' seat share; they lost two MPs victorious in 2005 by-elections (including potential leader Michael Caltabiano in Chatsworth); and gained only one seat (Clayfield) in metropolitan Brisbane. Their failure to win back other previously safe leafy suburban seats such as Indooroopilly and Aspley confirms that no Brisbane Liberal revival is imminent.

Despite the Nationals' seat share of 17 exceeding the Liberals' (thus confirming their right to head any Coalition), the party could take little comfort. First, its primary vote (17.82 per cent) was, for the fourth consecutive occasion, lower than the Liberals'; second, the swing to it (0.86 per cent) was also smaller than its Coalition partner's (and suggesting the future of Queensland conservatism rests with the Liberals); and, third, the Nationals fell short of their unofficial target to hold more than 20 seats. But the party did secure Bundaberg, and won back the once safe district of Gympie. The loss of its own 2006 by-election seat (Gaven) was, however, cause for concern. The total vote for Independents, at 4.68 per cent, was down on 2004, partly because fewer Independent candidates stood. Overall, one fewer Independent was returned to leave just four non-aligned MPs. And, despite some handsome double digit returns in inner metropolitan districts, the Greens again failed to secure a seat, although the party later talked up its record 7.99 per cent primary vote. One Nation's vote again plummeted, this time to a record low of just 0.60 per cent — again largely due to far fewer nominations. The party did return, however, its sole MP, Rosa Lee Long (Tablelands), largely on the strength of her personal following. Family First performed poorly with just 1.89 per cent of the vote despite its leader's confident claim of winning up to five seats. One shock result was the narrow win of the once enormously popular Independent Liz Cunningham: the MP who delivered Government to the Borbidge-Sheldon Coalition in the 1996-98 hung Parliament. Labor's industrial relations blitz in this seat undoubtedly forced this result. The parties' seat share, primary and 2PP vote results are tabled below.

Table Two
Queensland Election 9 September, 2006
Seats won, and change from 2004, by party

Party	2006	2004	change
ALP	59	63	-4
Liberals	8	5	+3
Nationals	17	15	+2
(Coalition)	(25)	(20)	(+5)
One Nation	1	1	0
Independents	4	5	-1
Total	89	89	-

Source: ECQ <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2006/results/summary.html>

Table Three
Queensland Election 9 September, 2006
Primary Vote (%), and change from 2004, by party

Party	2006	2004	% change
ALP	46.92	47.01	-0.09
Liberals	20.10	18.50	+1.60
Nationals	17.82	16.96	+0.86
(Coalition)	(37.92)	(35.46)	(+2.46)
One Nation	0.60	4.88	-4.28
Greens	7.99	6.76	+1.33
Democrats	-	0.04	-0.04
Family First	1.89	-	+1.89
Independents	4.68	5.85	-1.15
Total	100.00	100.00	-

Source: ECQ <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2006/results/summary.html>

Table Four
Queensland Election 9 September, 2006
2PP Vote (%), and change from 2004

Party	2006	2004	% Change
ALP	54.9	55.5	-0.6
Coalition	45.1	44.5	+0.6

Source: Roy Morgan Polls <http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2007/4129/>

Conclusion

The 2006 Queensland election will be remembered as the poll in which Premier Peter Beattie's Labor Party — after two previous landslides — defied the odds and, on the heels of a host of otherwise crippling public policy disasters (such as health and water), managed to secure a fourth term with an insignificant negative swing. *Courier Mail* opinion poll data offer perhaps the most compelling reason as to why Labor achieved the unattainable. The poll, taken on election eve, revealed that, while a majority of voters believed the Labor Government did not deserve re-election, an even larger majority felt the Coalition Opposition unready for office. It seems Queensland voters continue a long-held tradition of allowing such concrete determinants as policy to be subsumed by the more insubstantial qualities of strong leadership and party image. The central role of Premier Peter Beattie in securing yet another Labor victory appears reaffirmed, and raises interesting questions as to how his party will fare once he retires. But, given colleagues after the poll quickly dubbed Beattie the 'Emperor of George Street', this question may not need answering any time soon. ▲