

The 2009 Queensland Election: The Beginning of The End?

Scott Prasser*

Introduction

There was a lot riding on the recent March 2009 Queensland state election for both sides of politics.

For Labor, seeking its fifth consecutive term in office, Queensland has been home to one of its most successful state governments that has delivered much to federal Labor in personnel, experience and votes. For Labor's new leader, Premier Anna Bligh who replaced the charismatic Peter Beattie as premier some 17 months earlier, the challenge was to not just win a fifth term, but to win well. Otherwise her tenure as premier would be limited and she would not have had the authority to reform her government or to take the tough decisions the Queensland needs. Also, Labor had been in power for 11 years and was beginning to be weighed down by scandals and mismanagement. A key issue at the 2009 election was whether Labor had run out of steam.

For the Opposition and its reinstated leader Lawrence Springborg the stakes were higher. This was crunch time for the non-Labor cause in Queensland. After years of rivalry and intermittent half-hearted truces between the dominant National Party and the junior Liberals, the two parties finally amalgamated to form the new Liberal National Party (LNP) in August 2008 just seven months before the March 2009 election. It was the realisation of long time ambition in non-Labor circles (Costar and Prasser 1990). In Queensland discussions about amalgamation can be traced back to the 1960s and even during the mid-1970s formal meetings between the parties were held to discuss the issue (Trundle 1975). They came to nought as the threat from the Labor subsided at both state and federal levels and each party sought to overtake the other in the scramble for seats that was a feature of non-Labor

* Dr Scott Prasser has been appointed Executive Director of the Australian Catholic University's Public Policy Institute based in Canberra.

politics in the late 1970s (Cribb 1981). It had been further undermined when the Coalition fell apart in 1983 and the National Party had then governed in its own right for six years. Amalgamation had founded as recently as 2005 when opposition from the federal Liberals and fears in some Liberal circles that the LNP was nothing more than a short term National Party manoeuvre to prop up their declining fortunes scuttled the proposal. So success or failure of the LNP and indeed the very future of non-Labor politics and a viable opposition were dependent on the 2009 election.

The State of the Parties

The state of the parties before the election tells the story. Under Peter Beattie's leadership Labor turned its 1998 minority into a landslide at the 2001 election and has maintained its large majority since despite minor, but consistent swings against it at the 2004 and 2006 elections (see Table 1). Moreover, following the recent 2008 electoral redistribution that created more seats in south-east Queensland, Labor entered the 2009 with an even greater majority having a notional 63 seats compared to the LNP's 22.

Table 1: State of the Parties 1995–2006 Elections

<i>Party</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2006</i>
ALP	45	44	66	63	59
National Party	29	23	12	15	17
Liberal Party	14	9	3	5	8
One Nation Party		11	3	1	1
Independents	1	2	5	5	4

The LNP's position was far more precarious. Although the Nationals won 17 seats at the 2006 election and regained their regional base previously lost to the One Nation Party, their numbers had been reduced to just 14 seats following the redistribution. Meanwhile, the Liberals, ground down first by the Nationals in the 1970s and 1980s, and then by Labor; hollowed out by internal faction fighting, a high turnover of leaders and lack of resources, had failed to retain their once large base in Brisbane and surrounding growth areas. Not only had the Liberals just 8 seats after the 2006 election, but more significantly the Liberals, and hence the LNP, had just 2 out of 30 or so seats in the vital Brisbane area. Moreover, one of these had become notionally Labor after the redistribution! The LNP did not hold seats in the growing suburban corridors north and south to the Sunshine and Gold Coasts. While it dominated the Sunshine Coast, it held only three of the nine to ten seats on the more populous Gold Coast.

The failure of the non-Labor parties in Queensland had been the failure to win seats in these pivotal areas in and around Brisbane. This was to be the battleground for the 2009 election. To gain power the LNP not only needed to win more than 20 seats and gain a swing of 8%, but win in seats where they presently had a small base. It seemed like a gap too far and a swing too great for any party, let alone a newly formed one to achieve in so short a period. However, the election campaign was to be fought more closely than anticipated and the results, on closer analysis, were not quite the emphatic victory that Labor has since proclaimed.

**Table 2: State of the Parties Before the 2009 Election
Based on 2008 Redistribution**

<i>Party</i>	<i>2006 Election</i>	<i>2009 Redistribution</i>
ALP	59	63
NP	17	14
LP	8	8
LNP	25	22
Independent	4	4
One Nation	1	-
Total	89	89

The Campaign

The 2009 election was about two key issues.

First, was Labor, which has ruled the state since 1989 except for a brief Coalition interregnum between 1996-8, had to take a lot of responsibility for much that was not right in the Sunshine State. Queensland's inadequate infrastructure, poorly performing education system, haemorrhaging public hospitals, rising government deficits, outdated governance, compromised and politicised public service and weak parliamentary system, were largely of Labor's making. Labor had to show that it had the answers to these problems and that Anna Bligh as the new premier had the leadership qualities to respond to these pressures.

The second issue was about the LNP and whether the electorate believed that this new party was more than just a temporary patch up of two parties hungry for power or a rebadged National Party desperately seeking survival. The electorate needed to assess whether the LNP could be sustained in the long term and if it had the capacity in terms of talent, ideas and political skills to address Queensland's problems. Indeed, the question facing the electorate was a swing to what for what? What did the LNP stand for and would it be any better than the incumbent? The LNP's brief existence and the appalling inter-party rivalries between its former component parts militated against initial voter support at the election.

Labor's strategy stressed its experience in the light of the impending economic crisis in contrast to dearth of talent within the LNP's ranks. This approach had potential drawbacks given Labor's recent poor track record in key policy areas e.g. health and infrastructure. Labor's campaign also focussed on the LNP's lack of firm policies and the credibility or otherwise of its leader, Lawrence Springborg, in managing economic crisis. Typically, Labor raised the perennial issue often used by governments about 'where is the money coming from' in relation to the LNP's election promises, but given the State's deficit the Opposition's retort to this in terms of 'where did the money go?' largely blunted this line of attack. Nevertheless, there were concerns within the public service that the LNP would conduct a slash and burn approach to government once in power. Support from Prime Minister Kevin Rudd highlighted Labor's connections to the federal government and Labor's capacity to deliver future benefits to Queensland.

The LNP while identifying many of the problems facing Queensland adopted both before and during the election a low target approach seeking to avoid any controversial policies in tackling the deficit or restoring integrity to the public service. The LNP sought not to alienate voters. The problem was that this approach relied too much on dissatisfaction with the government to get the LNP over the line. If the margin had been smaller such a strategy may have been more viable, but the LNP had too much ground to make up to play it so safe. Consequently, although the LNP ran a professional and seamless campaign that was the best the non-Labor parties had mounted in Queensland for over a decade, it was too safe and failed to convince voters that the LNP was ready for office.

The Results

Opinion polls at the beginning and during the election had indicated a considerable swing to the LNP and even a possible win or close result. Such polls certainly had the government running scared. However, some commentators saw the swing required by the LNP as just too large and suggested that this election had to be seen as part one of a two part process to win government for the LNP. Nevertheless, when the results showed a clear Labor victory there was extraordinary disappointment among LNP supporters. Table 3 summarises the results.

In summary, the election resulted in an overall swing to the LNP of 3.6% on first preferences and a 4.5% swing on a two party preferred basis. This was far short of the 8% swing needed to win office and less than opinion poll projections. Although Labor lost 10 seats it still has a large and comfortable majority. Labor with 42.5% of the primary vote gained 57% of the seats. It has been suggested that there is a 2% bias in favour of Labor in the current electoral system (Blade 2009).

Significantly, the LNP made only partial gains in Brisbane and the surrounding suburban regions. Its new Brisbane seats included Clayfield, Indooroopilly and Aspley which along with its existing seat of Moggill brings to only four seats in this

vital area now held by the LNP. The LNP failed to win any of the 19–20 seats on the south side of Brisbane with the exception of Cleveland. This was not the Brisbane breakthrough that the LNP needed. The LNP did not so much as storm Brisbane as knock at Labor's door, though some of the large swings it received in many Brisbane seats suggest that the knock was at least heard.

Table 3: Results by Party of the 2009 election

<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage of primary vote</i>	<i>Swing</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Seats lost/won</i>
ALP	42.3%	-4.6%	51	-9
LNP	41.6%	+3.6%	34	+10
Independents	7.8%	+0.6%	4	No change
Greens	8.3%	+0.4%	0	-1*

Note: * This seat should be counted as a Labor seat loss as it was only a green seat because the incumbent Labor member changed parties.

Source: A. Green, ABC, 2009

On the Gold Coast the overall swing to the LNP was 5.6% and the LNP won two extra seats – Gaven and Mudgeeraba and also the new seat of Coomera on the corridor south of Brisbane. This means the LNP has six of the ten seats in this region. Several of the remaining Labor seats such as Broadwater and Southport are now within striking distance for the LNP at the next election. On the Sunshine Coast the LNP held all of its five seats with increased majorities, but except for the Glass House failed to win any of the other six seats on the corridor to the Sunshine Coast. While the marginal Labor seat of Pumicestone recorded a minor swing, safer Labor seats like Pine Rivers saw a more substantial 8.7% movement to the LNP.

In north Queensland despite some very large swings to the LNP in safe seats like Cook (9.3% swing) and Thuringowa around Townsville (8.4%) these were not enough to win. However, the nominal Labor seat of Burdekin fell to the LNP as did the newly merged, but already LNP nominated seat of Dalrymble.

In central Queensland, the overall swing to the LNP was just 3.3% allowing the LNP to win Hervey Bay and Mirani. Other very marginal Labor seats like Whitsunday, that needed only a 0.4% swing, failed to fall, recording low swings to the LNP (0.29%). The LNP also failed to win the independent seat of Nanango.

In western and outer regional areas the LNP retained all their seats but these areas recorded the lowest overall swing to the LNP of just 1.8%. Indeed, in the LNP seat of Toowoomba South there was a 3.1% movement away from the long term incumbent LNP member.

What was interesting about the election was the diversity of the swings not just between different regions of the state, but also between seats in the same area. For

instance, the safe Labor seat of Bulimba received an 8.2% swing to the LNP, while in the adjacent marginal seat of Chatsworth that Labor held by only a 0.1% the swing to the LNP was too miniscule to change the outcome. This pattern, if it can be called that, was repeated all over the state. In the Brisbane set of Everton held by Labor with a 10.6% margin there was a swing of over 9%, but in nearby Ashgrove the swing was only 1.2%.

Conclusions

In summary, the swing to the LNP was only 3.6% state-wide on the primary vote. While that swing gave the LNP 10 new seats, the issue was whether this result was good enough to keep the LNP together given the expectations before the election. However, these were really unrealistic expectations. It was too much to expect for a party that had only been operating for seven months to win office from such a low base. The results for the LNP must be seen as reasonable rather than spectacular especially in the context of non-Labor politics in this state.

With 34 seats compared to Labor's 51, the LNP is still a long way behind. This is no automatic springboard for a win next time and it will require more work to achieve office, but at least now the LNP has a larger base, more members and resources and will be more able to attract support from the community. That the LNP failed to win many seats in Brisbane remains the fundamental challenge for the future. Moreover the LNP failed to win any of the four independent seats, two of which should be in the LNP camp.

Indications are that the LNP will continue. The Nationals component of the LNP has accepted the need for a leader with a more urban connection and the appointment of former Liberal member based on the Gold Coast with Lawrence Springborg as deputy highlights the pragmatism that now drives the LNP. Indeed, this new leadership line-up reflects a changing of the guard in Queensland non-Labor politics. For so long the Nationals supplied the leader and Liberals the deputy. This has now been reversed. Amalgamation of the two parties, as once predicted (Prasser and Wear 1990: 30) made the difference at the 2009 election and despite sniping from some federal Liberals, the non-Labor cause in Queensland has no option but to continue with this approach.

For Labor the victory was a relief and while its margin of seats is high Labor has received swings against it at the 2004, 2006 and 2009 elections. Its primary vote is the lowest since 1998. Moreover, many once safe Labor seats have now become marginal.

Premier Anna Bligh has received two mandates from the recent election. One was from the electorate on a range of both specific and vague policy issues. More importantly, it has given Bligh the status to exert control over a party and government that needs a real shakeup, reform and tackling of issues that have been

in the 'too-hard' basket for too long as well as the emerging ones now confronting Queensland in the hard times ahead. It is now Anna Bligh's show. Whether the 2009 election marks the beginning of the end for Labor in Queensland, or the beginning for a different style of politics, will depend on how effectively Bligh uses her new found status and power. The real battle for Queensland government has only just begun. ▲

References

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