

The Forthcoming Queensland Election

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Introduction

The forthcoming Queensland State election is due by March 2012, though it can be held as late as June. Queensland has three year non-fixed terms. A complicating factor in the calling of the State election is that local government polls are set for 31 March. So, Labor Premier Anna Bligh has to decide to call an election in February, risk going in March near the local government election or to wait till the local government elections are finalised and go considerably later. The other option would be to delay the local government elections to make room for the State election in March. All this uncertainty sets the scene for what will be the most interesting Queensland election during the last decade given current polls, which put the incumbent Labor Administration behind the new Liberal National Party (LNP). The LNP formed in 2008 is an amalgamation of the National and Liberal parties, not a coalition of two separate as occurred previously in Queensland.¹

At the 2009 election Premier Anna Bligh led the Labor Party to its fifth consecutive election win. Although suffering a 4.6% swing against it and losing 10 seats, Labor still won easily with 51 out of 89 seats in Queensland's unicameral parliament. The LNP won 9 additional seats and saw its numbers increase from 25 to 34 – better than the previous four elections, but not good enough (see **Tables 1 and 2**). The 2009 election confirmed Labor's dominance of Queensland's state politics – a dominance that began when Wayne Goss led Labor to victory following the Fitzgerald Inquiry into corruption after 32 years in opposition. It was a dominance only slightly interrupted by the brief, chaotic Borbidge Coalition Government (1996-98). Labor, in effect, has been governing Queensland for over 20 years. Bligh's victory in 2009 cemented her personal hold on the premiership that she had inherited from Peter Beattie in 2007 and maintained Labor's stranglehold on government. The future looked bright for the Labor in Queensland.

Matters were less certain for the newly amalgamated LNP after the 2009 election. While winning nine new seats was a welcomed boost and the swing towards the LNP made many Labor seats more marginal, the LNP's tilt at the government still fell well short. In the important Brisbane area the LNP only increased its representation to four out of 20 or so seats in this important area. It had been just two seats previously. Also, the LNP failed to win key seats held by Independents on the Sunshine Coast (Nicklin) and regional areas (Nanango) that would normally have been safe LNP seats. Certainly, the LNP had positioned itself better for the next election, but there was still no guarantee they could win. They needed to win 11 extra seats to secure government in their own right.

There were other problems facing the LNP post the 2009 election. Premier Bligh remains a formidable opponent. The Labor Party enjoys the benefits of incumbency and is the State's most professional political machine. Also, within the newly amalgamated LNP there remained personal, political and policy tensions. This is not surprising given that the amalgamation brought together the National and Liberal parties that had been as much rivals as partners during the last 40 years (see footnote 1). And there were doubts about the capacity new LNP leader, John-Paul Langbroek, once a Liberal. He had been chosen to replace former National Party member and Opposition leader Lawrence Springborg after the election more because he represented an urban seat on the Gold Coast and was not tainted by Liberal Party faction fighting than because of his leadership qualities.

Table 1: State of the parties 1998-2009 elections

Party	1998	2001	2004	2006	2009
ALP	44	66	63	59	51
National Party	23	12	15	17	34
Liberal Party	9	3	5	8	
Total Non-Labor	32	15	20	25	
One Nation Party	11	3	1	1	0
Independents	2	5	5	4	4

Table 2: Results by party at the 2009 election

Party	Percentage of primary vote	Swing	Seats	Seats lost/won
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*

*This seat should be counted as a Labor seat loss as it was only a Green Party seat because the incumbent Labor member changed parties just prior to the election. The seat was won by the LNP.
Source: A. Green, ABC, 2009

Developments since 2009

Times have changed and for several reasons the fortunes of the major parties have reversed so that the forthcoming election will be more hotly contested than originally expected. Indeed, opinion polls since 2009 have consistently indicated a strong swing to the LNP. Polls taken by Newspoll in July-September 2011 suggested that the LNP had 61% of the two-party preferred vote compared to Labor's 39%. This would be not just a win to the LNP, but a landslide. Premier Bligh's performance during the 2011 January-February floods temporarily reversed these trends. However, the polls soon swung back against Labor and despite improvements in the more recent October-December Newspoll that has Labor at 44% compared to the LNP's 56%, Labor still faces probable electoral defeat.

The reasons for Labor's electoral decline are fourfold.

First, there has been Queensland's declining budgetary situation. Queensland had long been able to produce budget surpluses and enjoyed a triple A credit rating. However, on the eve of the 2009 election the State's budget situation deteriorated sharply. Deficits for the following financial year (2009-10 and 2010-11) were now being forecast. Also, in February 2009, just a few weeks before the election, Queensland lost its triple A credit rating. What made these matters worse for the Bligh Government were subsequent post election reassessments of the fiscal situation that suggested falls in revenue were greater than expected. All this raised doubts about the Bligh Government's economic management. More importantly was the Government's subsequent scuttling of several key election promises and its sudden announcement of a massive privatisation program that had not been

canvassed during the election (Bligh and Fraser 2009). Many voters felt betrayed by the privatisation initiative for which the Government had no electoral mandate. So too did many in the Labor Party, especially the trade unions, causing considerable instability within Labor circles. It was a bad start for the Bligh Government so soon after the 2009 election success.

Second, the Bligh Government's integrity was further undermined by other scandals. These concerned: a former Beattie Government minister, Gordon Nuttall being found guilty of taking funds from a mining magnate; lobbying activities by former Labor (and some Liberal) ministers and staff; reappointment processes for the Police Commissioner and wrangles with the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) over a host of issues including police discipline and review processes and the Palm Island affair. There were also complaints about politicisation of the public service. A withering critique by Tony Fitzgerald (2009) the former chairman of the 1989 corruption inquiry, about Queensland's poor record of reform concerning corruption and integrity, reinforced the perception that Labor was failing in this area – the very issue that had brought it to power in 1989 on the back of the Fitzgerald Inquiry.

Third, Queensland has been plagued by continuing infrastructure delays, public project cost blowouts and poor administration such as the failed new payroll systems for public hospitals (Auditor-General 2010). That no minister was ever sacked or stood down in relation to some of these and other issues added to the public perception that no-one senior in Queensland Government ever took responsibility for these debacles.

Altogether these continuing problems created the perception that Labor was tired, incompetent, less than honest with the electorate and has been in power too long.

Fourth, the amalgamated LNP has ended the public dissent between the National and Liberal parties that has marred every election campaign since 1998. The LNP at last appears to be a viable and united Opposition. The LNP wins in the 2009 election just eight months after its formation highlighted what a united non-Labor party might achieve. However, as noted above, there was still an undercurrent of dissent between the former rivals. And although the LNP performed well in the opinion polls after the 2009 election, stop-gap leader Langbroek was having trouble managing his parliamentary colleagues and frontbench. By the beginning of 2011 Langbroek was also doing less well in the polls as preferred premier. Consequently, there were rumours in early that LNP was to explode in another damaging leadership spill. The circuit breaker to this impending leadership crisis and parliamentary party instability was the unexpected implantation in March 2011 of Campbell Newman as leader of the LNP. Newman was the politically successful and popularly elected Liberal Lord Mayor of Brisbane.² Newman's move was orchestrated by the now more assertive organisational wing of the LNP. However, Newman did not have a seat in State Parliament so became the "Leader of the LNP" and the alternative premier, while former National Jeff Seeney replaced Langbroek in Parliament as the "Leader of the Opposition." Seeney will stand aside for Newman if he wins the safe Labor seat of Ashgrove that he is contesting. Newman brings a high profile to the LNP especially in the important Brisbane area. His elevation has ended further damaging leadership speculation and united the LNP – at least for the present.

The 2012 election challenges

Each side of politics faces several challenges at the forthcoming election.

For the Bligh Government the challenge is how to overcome the “it’s time” factor – the sense that the government had been in power too long, that it has done too many deals and that it is good for democracy to have a change. Bligh has been unable to respond successfully to this. While making changes to her ministry to bring in fresh blood during 2011, she is still tied to the Labor faction process. Also, Bligh like her predecessor, Peter Beattie practises the “dear-leader” cult, dominating all aspects of Queensland Government. She is everywhere on every issue, no matter how minor with hardly a minister in sight. However, while competent and formidable Bligh does not quite have Beattie’s charisma. Moreover, some of Bligh’s worthwhile integrity reforms that involved tighter laws over lobbying, pecuniary interests and a more enhanced role for the Integrity Commissioner were seen as reaction to pressure and were not without their own political motivations. The Bligh Government’s management of the death of Cameron Doomadgee while in custody on Palm Island and the subsequent police investigations into the matter that were found sadly wanting by the Crime and Misconduct Commission underlines problems with Queensland’s integrity arrangements (Moynihan 2011). The failure of any minister to resign or even be reprimanded over the Palm Island affair or over the failed payroll system in public hospitals whereby many staff were not paid, has also not helped. Recent revelations in December 2011 that the Health Department may have been defrauded of \$16m by one of its own staff and again the lack of any ministerial sackings over this issue, has added to the perception that the Government is incompetent and lacks accountability for its administration.

Despite consistently favourable opinion polls the LNP however faces formidable challenges to win the next election.

Most importantly, the LNP has to understand that Queensland has changed considerably since the conservative parties dominated state politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Queensland is less regional, more economically diverse, more urbanised and dare one say, more sophisticated. Queensland is still different from other states, but not as much as before (see Aroney, Prasser & Taylor 2012). The growing south-east region around Brisbane now has over 65% of the State’s population and economy. And thanks to a fairer electoral system introduced by Labor in the 1990s, the region has a lot more seats. To win government, the LNP must appeal to voters in the urban south-east corner, not just regional Queensland. It must have policies to tackle Queensland’s urban and social problems. It is in Brisbane and surrounding areas where the LNP is weakest thanks to the ineptness of the former faction-driven Liberal Party (the Liberals at one stage had only one seat in Brisbane) and the rural focus of the Nationals.

Also, the LNP has to win a lot of seats to gain office in 2012. That 11 seat gap after the 2009 election gap has widened because of the defections of three LNP parliamentarians. One has become an Independent. The other two have joined the Katter Australian Party.³ Fears that the Katter Australian Party might repeat the One Nation Party’s 1998 electoral success when it gained 25% of the vote, are an exaggeration. The political context has changed and so has Queensland. Katter’s electoral base is in northern and regional Queensland, not in south-east Queensland where the real electoral contest will be fought. Nevertheless, the Katter Party is a

distraction for the LNP and has the potential to win 3-5 seats and thus take some of the gloss off the LNP's drive to victory. Consequently, with little hope of winning the Independent seats of Nicklin or Nanango, the LNP now has to win 14 plus seats to form government in its own right. This is possible on current polls, but the defections and the emergence of the Katter Australian Party have made winning office just a little bit harder for the LNP.

An added challenge for the LNP, as mentioned, is that the new leader Campbell Newman has to win the relatively safe inner-suburban Labor seat of Ashgrove. He needs a 7.1% swing (Mackerras 2010). While the opinion polls suggest that Newman's leadership has paid off for both himself and the LNP, this is still a risky venture. There is always the possibility that the LNP may win office, but Newman himself fails in Ashgrove. The Newman model of external leadership also makes coordination of policy and tactics with the LNP parliamentary wing difficult. So far, so good, but during the heat of a possibly long election campaign much can go astray in these sorts of unchartered and novel arrangements.

Then there are the Greens. They are attracting 10% support in the latest opinion poll. Though less influential in Queensland than elsewhere in Australia some emerging issues like the coal-seam gas drilling in regional farming areas has the potential to dent traditional strong LNP support. The Greens provide an alternative for disgruntled rural voters to park their protest vote on this emerging issue. The worry for the Greens is that if they do less well in Queensland than they have elsewhere then their current momentum in national politics may be slowed.

Conclusions

If the LNP wins the forthcoming Queensland state election it will be a major watershed for state and national politics, not unlike the times when the National-Liberal Party Coalition reduced Labor to only 11 members in the 1974 State election and set the scene for the eventual demise of the Whitlam Labor federal Government. At a state level an LNP win after so many years in opposition would be like Labor's win in 1989 after 32 years in the political wilderness.

For Labor nationally, another state domino to fall following losses in Western Australia (2008), Victoria (2010) and New South Wales this year would give further credence to the view that the Labor brand is tarnished and under serious threat. A Queensland Labor loss will not be as easily quarantined from impacting on the Gillard Labor Government as other state elections. Queensland now has a large number of federal seats. Queensland votes and trends increasingly count. And for the Gillard Government it means another State government to say "no" to its latest delicately negotiated policies with the Independents.

For Bligh, a loss would mean the end of a career largely based in politics. Her post-office options will be limited. There will be no sympathetic Queensland Government to send her on an overseas posting as occurred with Peter Beattie.⁴

For the Queensland Labor Party machine it would mean the end of using taxpayer funded positions to play party faction games and to allocate favours to supporters.

The election is also a real test not just of the new LNP brand, but also of the long held dream in non-Labor circles of amalgamation between the Liberal and National parties across Australia (Costar and Prasser 1990). Menzies never achieved it. An LNP win in Queensland would give considerable momentum to similar amalgamations elsewhere, especially federally. This would really be the beginning of the end for the National Party which has been a declining force in federal politics for over two decades.

However, an LNP loss would see the new Queensland LNP quickly unravel and the scuttling of the amalgamation idea for some time to come. It would also cause organisational, financial and political headaches for the Abbott Opposition similar to the way the 1987 'Joh for Canberra' campaign undermined the Howard federal Opposition.

Also, if Newman fails to win Ashgrove and the LNP does not win office it means the end of his political career. He cannot go back as Mayor of the Brisbane City Council. That place has now been ably taken by long time deputy mayor, Graham Quirk. There is always the federal option, but which seat?

For the Queensland Public Service a change in government after such a long period of Labor control would pose numerous challenges in terms of senior personnel appointments, machinery of government changes and the management of the transition process.

This election will test the Newman external political leadership model. If Newman and the LNP are successful, then it is a model that may be adopted by other political parties frustrated with poorly performing incumbent parliamentary leaders. It would add new pressures on incumbent opposition leaders around the country – including Tony Abbott.

Last, the question many are asking is whether the LNP is ready for office. The last non-Labor government in Queensland, the 1996-8 Borbidge Coalition Government, failed because it was unprepared for power. Only three current members of the LNP parliamentary wing have had previous state ministerial experience. And given the lack of any public detail about the LNP's transition to power arrangements and post-election plans the issue is whether the LNP has the capacity to govern effectively and the policies to tackle Queensland's growing problems this time round. The difficulties that the Victorian Baillieu Liberal-National Party Government is now having partly reflect its lack of preparation for office. The Queensland LNP could do well to observe this problem and the electorate is right to question their readiness for office.

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¹ The National-Liberal parties were in Coalition government from 1957-1983, with the Nationals being the senior partner. The Coalition split in 1983 and the National Party subsequently won the 1983 and 1986 elections and formed government in their own right. The Liberals were reduced just six seats and sat on the cross-benches. It was only after the Nationals lost office in 1989 that they again worked with Liberals. However, until amalgamation in 2008, this was a coalition of two separate parties which frequently competed for the same seats and had different policy stances on certain issues (see Prasser 1984 for details of the 1983 Coalition split).

² The Brisbane City Council (BCC) unlike local government in other Australian capital cities covers the most of the Brisbane metropolitan area. It has a population of over a million and a budget in 2011-2012 of \$3billion. The BCC is a significant player in the Queensland system of government and its mayor a leading public figure.

³ Bob Katter was a State National Party member and minister. He later took over his father's federal seat of Kennedy, initially as a National and since 2001 as an Independent. In 2011 he formed the Katter Australian Party.

⁴ Beattie became the Queensland Trade Commissioner to the USA in 2008 but has since returned to Queensland.