

The 2016 federal election in Queensland: never a more exciting time to be an Australian voter?

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Now that the final electorate result has been declared for the seat of Herbert in north Queensland (for the time being, at least¹), it's clear that the Turnbull Coalition government has been returned in its own right by the barest of margins, with 76 lower house seats (down from 90) compared to the ALP's 69 (up from 55). On paper, it's not hard to imagine the Prime Minister walking on eggshells as he negotiates his way through a fractious and disgruntled party room, let alone the 'minefield' of a new Senate with more unknown crossbenchers to accommodate than before the double dissolution election. On the flip-side, it's easy to understand Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten's, eagerness to set off on a 'victory lap' of sorts shortly after the poll, having worked the ALP into a 50/50 election-eve poll standing vis-à-vis the government and doing as well as could be expected to reverse much of the anti-Labor sentiment from the 2013 election result. Yet these impressions overlook that, for Labor as much as the Coalition, the seat-by-seat voting figures make for some sobering reading, particularly from parts of Queensland.

As identified by several commentators since election day, and quite pointedly recently in *The Guardian*, on face value the results of federal election voting in Queensland were distinctive – and as obvious in Herbert as elsewhere – owing to the strong showing of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.² This was especially so in regional seats outside the southeast corner of the state, where in the case of the latter region the party chose to stand only a few candidates. Even then, in the seat of Wright, taking in some of the Scenic Rim and Lockyer Valley to the west and southwest of Brisbane and the Gold Coast, despite being comfortably retained by the incumbent LNP member, a first-time One Nation candidate attracted almost 21 per cent of first preference votes (interestingly, roughly the same vote as won by the Katter and Palmer parties' candidates combined in 2013, neither of which fielded candidates this time around).³ But a broader view of voting trends shows the mirror image to the success of One Nation and other minor parties – Family First, for one, having almost doubled its Queensland primary vote – is the struggle both major parties face in attracting and retaining more electoral support.

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¹ Stephanie Anderson, 'Election 2016: Ewan Jones concedes defeat in seat of Herbert but leaves door open to legal action', *ABC News*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-01/election-2016-ewen-jones-concedes-defeat-in-seat-of-herbert/7677244>, 1 August 2016.

² Jason Wilson, 'Queensland is not backward: it's an early warning system', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/15/queensland-is-not-backward-its-an-early-warning-system>, 15 July 2016; Ben Raue, 'Herbert cliffhanger: why Queensland marginals hold the key to Labor's fate in 2019', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/jul/17/herbert-cliffhanger-why-queensland-marginals-hold-the-key-to-labors-fate-in-2019>, 17 July 2016.

³ 'Electorate guide: Wright', *ABC News*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/federal-election-2016/guide/wrig/>.

In Queensland, this seems a troubling reality for the ALP in particular, at least in the short term. Peter Brent's analysis of two party-preferred (2PP) swings across the nation found that the smallest statewide swings (discounting the ACT) against the Coalition were in the two states with first-term Labor governments, Victoria (-1.7 per cent) and Queensland (-2.5 per cent) – and it was in the latter that the 'disruptive' force of the anti-major party vote was so prominent (though not to the extent of the huge 'Xenophon factor' in South Australia), in the shape of One Nation.⁴ This goes some way to explaining why Labor in this state only attracted a meagre 1.1 per cent increase in its primary vote, and a modest 3.3 per cent 2PP swing, when Turnbull's Coalition government was said to be 'on the nose'. Frank Bongiorno neatly recognised the impact of the 'federal-state election cycle' too, noting how "the Victorian and Queensland Labor governments have now been in office long enough for their shine to wear off, and for the odour that had emanated from their conservative predecessors to have dissipated."⁵

Queensland was billed repeatedly as the key battleground state in the federal election, home to many of the nation's most marginal seats, including some with a history of voting with Labor, or at least in line with the national swing. Pools of ink were spilled and hours of commentary devoted throughout the eight-week campaign period explaining why, after the effective departure of the Palmer United Party from the electoral landscape and the seeming re-emergence of Pauline Hanson as a protest force, 'Queensland mattered'.⁶ With so many seats here on a veritable knife's edge, and with an expected swing against the first-term Turnbull Government, even in the primarily 'staunch' conservative territory north of the Tweed, Queensland's growing reputation as a 'swing state' election barometer had several incumbent Coalition MPs set for a nervous wait while votes were counted.

In the end, though, none of these marginal electorates really came into play – the Coalition held on in Petrie, Capricornia, Brisbane, Bonner and Forde, and held off ambitious challenges in the safer Dickson, Dawson and Flynn, with Labor only gaining surprise wins in the formerly safe LNP seats of Longman and, now, Herbert. Despite the 2PP swing to Labor being enough to safely retain its own marginal seats in Queensland, this was a disappointing return from a state where the ALP held high hopes and had expended much time and energy boosting its prospects – typified in Capricornia, a historically Labor seat requiring a 2PP swing of only 0.8 per cent or greater to oust its LNP incumbent, but ultimately delivering only 0.1 per cent to Labor. Perhaps the greatest disappointment, and possibly the most interesting aspect of the statewide vote, was the results in inner-city seats in the capital.

The extent of the sentiment turning against the first-term Turnbull government was such that, among all 150 federal electorates, there was a 2PP swing to the Coalition in only 18 seats, and these were in only four states. South Australia and Tasmania, and likewise the Northern Territory and the ACT, recorded no 2PP swings to the government whatsoever. Victoria provided some resistance to the national swing, with 8 seats showing a 2PP swing to the government, including in

⁴ Peter Brent, 'What is it about Queensland?', *Inside Story*, <http://insidestory.org.au/what-is-it-about-queensland>, 14 July 2016.

⁵ Frank Bongiorno, 'Labor has cause for hope – and some concern – in this election loss', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/labor-has-cause-for-hope-and-some-concern-in-this-election-loss-62043>, 11 July 2016.

⁶ See Cameron Atfield, 'Federal election 2016: The seats to watch in Battleground Queensland', *Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2016/federal-election-2016-the-seats-to-watch-in-battleground-queensland-20160509-gopwnx.html>, 9 May 2016; and Anne Tiernan, 'State of the states: 19 reasons why Turnbull and Shorten keep flying to Queensland', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/state-of-the-states-19-reasons-why-turnbull-and-shorten-keep-flying-to-queensland-60046>, 14 June 2016.

the formerly Labor-held Melbourne seat of Chisholm, the government's only electorate win at Labor's expense. What stands out about these seats going 'against the grain' is that all but four of the 18 are capital city seats. In fact in Queensland, all four such seats are in Brisbane (or its outer suburbs) – Ryan, Petrie, Griffith and the seat of Brisbane itself. This latter seat, and even more so Petrie – the second most marginal Coalition seat in the nation – were among the handful of Queensland marginals targeted by Labor for attention before the election campaign as probable gains.⁷ It was no coincidence that both major party leaders made a beeline for Brisbane at the very start of the eight-week marathon.

That these four seats, all marginal save for Ryan, and Griffith already held by Labor, were alone in Queensland in swinging to the government, says something about both the uncertain appeal outside the major inner city areas of a Malcolm Turnbull-led Coalition to many conservative-leaning voters, as well as the inability of the ALP to capitalise on this 'drawback' in its opposition. It also reinforces the impression that, in the inner suburbs of Brisbane and seemingly other state capitals (think the seats of Grayndler in Sydney, and Batman in Melbourne), Labor is leaking votes to the Greens but also to Liberal voters (or at least those willing to preference the Liberals above Labor). These are voters who, as posited by one observer, perhaps see more in Turnbull's 'innovation boom' motto than others elsewhere. Another commentator speculatively corroborated that view: "perhaps Turnbull's agile hipster/innovator types live in the Queensland capital rather than further south."⁸ Either way, it seems to translate into a shrinking ALP primary vote in the inner cities, and the emergence there of new strongholds for non-Labor parties.⁹

Terri Butler in Griffith will be only too aware of this development, as will the defeated Labor candidate for Brisbane, Pat O'Neill. Both seats have been Labor strongholds more often than not in the last fifty years, yet with the changing demographics and 'gentrification' of areas of inner Brisbane, this can no longer be taken as given. Butler, seen by many as a 'rising star' in federal Labor's ranks, now sits on a nervy margin of 1.6 per cent, after she recorded the biggest hit to the ALP primary vote (-7.2 per cent) in any Queensland seat;¹⁰ worryingly for Butler and Labor, her 33 per cent of first preferences was easily surpassed by her LNP opponent's 41 per cent, with the Greens candidate gaining an additional 7 per cent for a total primary vote of 17 per cent.¹¹ Despite a highly publicised campaign, O'Neill attracted only 26 per cent of first preferences in Brisbane, while the Greens improved their vote by 5 per cent to 19.5, with the victorious LNP candidate, Trevor Evans, securing practically half the primary vote. The story in leafy Ryan was grimmer, with a paltry 23 per cent Labor primary vote, nearly caught up by the Greens candidate with 19 per cent. All told, this leaves an uncertain and challenging legacy for the ALP in Queensland after this election contest.

⁷ James Massola, 'Labor's Sunshine State strategy puts spotlight on 11 Queensland seats', *Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/labors-sunshine-state-strategy-puts-spotlight-on-11-queensland-seats-20151109-gku1uv.html>, 9 November 2015.

⁸ Paul Rodan, 'Dust settles, history mostly vindicated', *Inside Story*, <http://insidestory.org.au/dust-settles-history-mostly-vindicated>, 15 July 2016.

⁹ Matthew Knott, 'Australian federal election 2016: The swings you might have missed: new strongholds emerge', *Brisbane Times*, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2016/australian-federal-election-2016-the-swings-you-might-have-missed-new-strongholds-emerge-20160711-gq39tk.html>, 11 July 2016.

¹⁰ 'Electorate guide: Griffith', *ABC News*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/federal-election-2016/guide/grif/>.

¹¹ Anne Tiernan et al, 'State of the states: what were the issues and seats that mattered in Australia's state and territories?', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/state-of-the-states-what-were-the-issues-and-seats-that-mattered-in-australias-state-and-territories-61429>, 10 July 2016.

Throughout the long election campaign, the government's frontbenchers engaged in 'warring' rhetoric, with the PM and his 'sergeant-at-arms', Treasurer Scott Morrison, lambasting the ALP for supposedly 'declaring war' on business, jobs, the economy, and seemingly the Australian way of life.¹² To borrow from the Coalition's provocative war-like terminology, the election produced something of a tense stalemate, with pockets of Coalition resistance hunkered down in the trenches (mainly the capital city trenches, at that) and warding off the worst of an anti-first term government swing, in the end amounting to only roughly -3 per cent. Labor, on the other hand, for all its scare campaigns and brazen incursions into enemy-held territory (such as Coalition strongholds of regional and outer metropolitan Queensland), made enough ground to look respectable in defeat, but was forced to settle for bolstering its stocks behind the front lines (such as seats in inner and outer Sydney, and reclaimed seats in Tasmania).

The 'shock and awe' of an eight-week campaign delivered more of a 'phoney war' once the election battle was fought, where – besides obviously pleasing gains for Labor in New South Wales and Tasmania – the status quo more or less reigned for the major parties, at least going on seats won and lost in Queensland. Of course the new status quo means, worryingly for the majors, a lesser share of primary votes than they've been accustomed to, as voters increasingly direct first preferences to minor parties, Independents and protest groups. In such a landscape, it's probably fair to assume that little political risk-taking will follow in the life of this federal parliament – with potential implications for advocates of same-sex marriage and Indigenous constitutional recognition. Similarly, don't expect either major party to make moves to introduce optional preferential voting at federal elections, which the Palaszczuk government in Queensland – seeing the writing on the wall here – abandoned at state level earlier this year.

¹² Stephen Koukoulas, 'The anti-business Labor hyperbole is wrong. Just look at the facts', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jun/04/the-anti-business-labor-hyperbole-wrong-just-look-at-the-facts>, 4 June 2016.