

COMMENTARY: A QUEENSLAND PERSPECTIVE ON THE 2016 FEDERAL ELECTION

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The TJRyan Foundation provides a resource with multiple contributions interpreting the causes and consequences of the 2016 Federal Election. Taken together, they pose some central questions about the connections between ideology and electoral behaviour. For a start, there is the relevance of Queensland political behavior for the rest of Australia. On the one hand, there were writers who doubt this relevance because Queensland is so very different. On the other there is a view that the election results demonstrated that Queensland is a harbinger for the future in the rest of the country and in national politics.²

My wife and I first participated in this debate back in the early 1980s when we wrote monographs and book chapters with titles like ‘Reform and Reaction in the Deep North’ and ‘Fundamentals and Fundamentalists’, both related to Ann’s thesis on policymaking and education in Queensland.³ (We dusted off our notes when Campbell Newman seemed committed to resurrecting the ghost of Bjelke Petersen).

The alternative position about the country-wide nature of radicalism was held by Humphrey McQueen.⁴ The jury may need to reconvene with the election of Malcolm Roberts to the Queensland Senate for One Nation.

There is an emerging consensus that the bipolar “two party” system is dead because of the depth of support for alternatives. As Paul Rodan, an interstate ex-Queenslander, pointed out:

The election reconfirmed the death of the two-party system, though some people seem to have trouble adjusting to that reality. In an emerging multi-party system, major parties are bound to lose primary votes, but the preferential system ensures that this isn’t fatal: it merely necessitates a decent harvesting of preferences. Contrary to suggestions that Labor needs a given primary vote (40 per cent, 37 per cent, whatever) in order to govern, no such figure exists: it is a variable, dependent on the votes for other parties (especially the Greens) and the flow of their preferences.⁵

¹ An abbreviated version of this commentary will appear in *Australian Options*, 84, August 2016.

² For example: Brent P, ‘[What is it about Queensland?](#)’ *Inside Story*, 14.7.16; and Wilson P, ‘[Queensland is not backward: it’s an early warning system](#)’, *The Guardian*, 15.7.16.

³ Scott A, ‘[The Ahern Committee and Education Policymaking in Queensland](#)’, PhD thesis, 1984.

⁴ *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism*, Penguin, 1970, 1971; 2nd edition 1976, 1978, 1980; *Aborigines, Race and Racism*, Penguin, 1974, 1976.

⁵ Rodan P, ‘[Dust settles, history mostly vindicated](#)’, *Inside Story*, 15.7.16.

Queensland is certainly different to the rest of Australia in that there has been in the recent past a genuinely two-party confrontation (LNP v ALP) whereas elsewhere the ALP faces a coalition. This coalition gives freedom for individuals and party leaders to manoeuvre and establish distinct identities.

In Queensland, the L/NP merger in 2008 required individuals and branches to identify a common position on state issues but allowed federal members to determine which of the two coalition partners they identified with. The identity crisis experienced by Ian Macfarlane emphasized this when he tried to change allegiances as a basis for survival in the first Turnbull Cabinet.⁶

It also meant that Queensland federal members could pursue a distinctively more authoritarian and socially conservative position than many in the national Liberal Party. So Queenslanders were an important component of the Abbott support group, rewarded with more rapid advancement than perhaps their intellectual achievements and charisma deserved, and then conciliated and retained by Turnbull after the election.

The Queensland election results were broadly in line with the dominant role of the LNP's conservative wing in appealing to traditional values which have been manifest historically in Queensland. Dutton is as conservative as Canavan, even though they are in separate parties federally. The consolidation in the election result of a non-ALP majority vote in Queensland was hardly surprising to those who have followed Queensland politics in the longer term.

What was more interesting was the extent to which the non-ALP vote in Queensland incorporated many voters who were alienated from 'professional politicians' and prepared to desert to minor party alternatives. The final analysis of the Senate preference distribution pointed to surprisingly large numbers of 'rogue' ALP and LNP voters ignoring their official How-to-Vote cards and preferencing Hanson second.

The resurgence of support for ultra-conservative minority parties is an episodic phenomenon in Queensland rather than merely part of the growing slippage manifest in the rest of the country. Issues of rural fundamentalism, religion and race had become the support values to which Hanson appealed, resembling and drawing upon long-standing ideas from the US currently identified with 'The Tea Party'. Whereas Palmer had provided an undifferentiated policy-free zone for malcontents, Hanson had a bedrock of ideas proven to be politically viable in the past. As recently as the last state election, ALP rogue preferences almost allowed the Blair electorate to provide entry into a local parliamentary career for Hanson.

For those unwilling to embrace Hanson's racist/anti-Muslim variant of nationalism, but still wishing to register their distaste for professional politicians, the federal election offered an array of viable alternatives. The Senate is rarely controlled by the governing party but in recent years 'preference-whispering' has provided greater measures of uncertainty which concentrated the mind of the media. A libertarian philosophy and a plausible intellect gave a platform for Leyonhelm to promote a conveniently confusing name of the Liberal Democrat Party and a populist anti-bureaucratic policy agenda. And Queensland only narrowly missed out on a Leyonhelm standard-bearer as an alternative

⁶ See Scott R and Guille H, '[Palaszczuk's First Year: a political juggling act](#)', TJRyan Foundation, 2016, pp 82-83.

to a double helping of Hansonism.⁷

The biggest loser in the Queensland Senate race was rugby-league superstar, Glen Lazarus. Of all the disappointed candidates this election, his exemplary parliamentary performance suggests he represents a genuine loss of talent compared to his replacements.

If Lazarus was the biggest loser, then the Greens and the ALP were not far behind in terms of disappointed expectations. It was not that they did badly in terms of holding their own – the ALP secured 35% of the primary vote, which was enough to win 45% of the seats; the Greens marginally increased their share of the vote but could not build on their single Senate seat. It was the lack of improvement in Queensland which was depressing.

The problem is how to deal with the future, especially for the ALP in holding onto control of the finely-balanced State parliament. In other states, especially Victoria and NSW, the election was marked by hostility between the ALP and the Greens. That this did not occur in Queensland is a tribute to sensible behavior of local leaders on both sides, even if some branches were spoiling for a fight.

The political reality is that the ALP and the Greens will need to work together or risk cannibalizing their voter base. This would free up the LNP to concentrate on winning back the sort of parliamentary support it attracted during the Newman era.

If we accept that the two-party system is dying, then the arithmetic in a multi-party parliament is simple. A party like the ALP with the support of a third of the Queensland electorate, based on union resources, needs the support of the Greens who could provide up to another fifth from groups in the city and country not especially sympathetic to trade unionism. There will be points of differentiation - particularly with regard to the stress between environmental issues and employment in resource-intensive industries. So there will always be strategic sense in acceptance of the existence of two separate organisations despite the tactical 'turf-warfare'. But the survival strategy in a multi-party future for both ALP and Greens lies in working out deals which offer voters choices but provide for parliamentary coalitions to carry through negotiated policy outcomes.

If a model is needed, it may exist in the behavior of the Palaszczuk government towards another minor party, Katter's Australian Party. Katter senior will have an interesting role to play in the federal lower house after his quirky attention-seeking campaign provided him with increased support against an LNP opponent. But Katter junior has proved an adept negotiator locally, even though his electoral base does not contain many voters likely to move to the ALP next time around. The same logic should apply to the relationship between the ALP and the Greens, exploiting their proximity along the ideological spectrum rather than fighting border wars.

This seems to be a healthier choice than Peter Beattie's more tolerant attitude towards Hansonism and some of the issues with which her party is associated.⁸ Beattie is correct about the need for the ALP to consider more mainstream 'Hansonite' issues which have alienated voters from both major parties, such as the problems of rural and

⁷ Gabe Buckley was depicted in the *Courier-Mail* (31.07.16) as a 'web-designer and front-man in a cowboy rock band' whose policies were sympathetic to bikie gangs and marihuana growers.

⁸ Moore T, '[Pauline Hanson deserves recognition, so work with her: ex-Premier Peter Beattie](#)', *Brisbane Times*, 4.8.16.

regional unemployment and the predatory behavior of the major banks. But the victory of Queensland Senator Malcolm Roberts is a timely reminder of the demons which lurk at the far extreme of what has been characterized 'the loony right'.⁹

Most observers accepted that Hanson would be a personal beneficiary of Turnbull's too-clever changes to the electoral mechanisms in the Senate. But the unanticipated victory of Roberts and two further One Nation candidates in other states caused a media frenzy which will be sustained through the whole term of the incoming Turnbull government.¹⁰

Already, even before Parliament has convened, the fallout is affecting Queensland. The opinions of Pauline Hanson (and Bob Katter) are required reading on diverse topics of public interest, most recently the fatal stabbing attack at the Home Hill hostel.¹¹ More ominously, the same edition of *The Courier-Mail* reported that the LNP was open to making preference deals with One Nation at the next state election.

⁹ Slezak M, '[One Nation's Malcolm Roberts vows to halt 'ridiculous' lies on climate change](#)', *The Guardian*, 4.8.16; Koziol M, '[One Nation senator Malcolm Roberts wrote bizarre 'sovereign citizen' letter to Julia Gillard](#)', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6.8.16.

¹⁰ Colebatch T, '[Fear puts One Nation back where it counts](#)', *Inside Story*, 4.8.16; Colebatch T, '[Senate update: the challenge for the government intensifies](#)' *Inside Story*, 2.8.16; Wilson J, '[What you need to know about One Nation's Malcolm Roberts' 'sovereign citizens'](#)', *The Guardian*, 5.8.16. Grattan M, '[Grattan on Friday: Twenty years on, the Perils of Pauline haunt another Liberal leader](#)', *The Conversation*, 4.8.16.

¹¹ 'Pauline Hanson demands answers following fatal stabbing attack at Home Hill hostel', *Courier Mail*, 26.8.16. Both Hanson and Bob Katter gave long interviews on Sky News the same day addressing the relevance of immigration control.