

## Post-purchase dissonance and the 'Can-Do' brand

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I have been a regular reader of the Courier Mail since 1975 – although more recently only a spasmodic subscriber. There have been times and issues when I have found it infuriatingly biased in its political coverage and I sought to send a one of those 'market signals' so beloved by Mr Abbott.

I recently re-subscribed, to the digital edition as a greener alternative to accumulating mountains of newsprint. I wanted to be able to write a fair overview of the campaign as the final chapter in the revised edition of our recent e-monograph. (footnote)

And, given its past record since the halcyon years of the Joh era under editors like Greg Chamberlain, I have been surprised by the frequency with which it has allowed space for critics of the Newman government to supplement the regular objective contributions from Dr Paul Williams. In the interests of appearing 'balanced' there have been 'OpEd' pieces from designated and clearly labelled spokespersons from across the political spectrum. But the balance has been firmly tipped in the conservative direction, by about eight to one as estimated by one observer. And there has been unwavering editorial support and choice of headlines and articles favouring the LNP going back to the time of Beattie.

This time around there have been contributions from within the ranks of regular journalists which have offered strident criticism of particular LNP policies – especially relating to climate change and environmental issues, often linked to the protected status of the mining and property developer interests. Rupert Murdoch's own unabashed climate change denialism has clearly not penetrated the organizational ethos, with journalists daring to respect and acknowledge the weight of scientific evidence – on rising sea levels and dropping inland water tables and dangers to the Barrier Reef.

Terry Sweetman has also voiced concerns about public accountability and the secrecy over the link between political donations and public policy outcomes:

Given the shenanigans over what is now the Crime and Corruption Commission and its mishandling of the parliamentary oversight committee, the Government has a case to answer. And, after its illiberal laws of association and outbursts from prickly corruption buster Tony Fitzgerald, it should be at least mildly embarrassed. ... But brown paper bags? ... However uncomfortable it might be for those involved, Queensland is best served by information being in the public domain. Secrecy should have no place in our democratic system.<sup>1</sup>

So the *Courier-Mail* is perhaps coming to terms with the expectations of a readership which now has multiple alternative source of information. Offering thinly disguised propaganda as 'true because I read it in the newspaper' won't work any more. This ambivalence was brought home most strongly in the edition of 21 January, ten days in advance of the election.

The second editorial dealt with the local police and the threat of terrorism, a subject which always resonates with conservative readers. And the first editorial appeared under the headline 'Inspiration absent as campaigns lack vision' which offered a tepid response to the ALP campaign launch. The editorial writer judged that 'the LNP's record on all fronts is actually strong' even

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<sup>1</sup> 'The brown paper bag survives in Queensland political iconography long after it disappeared from our shopping baskets', *Courier Mail*, 23/01/15.

though 'voters are unlikely to be swayed by any grand vision but rather a battle of negatives and personal (un)popularity ... if Queenslanders are going to be asked to throw out a competent, albeit at times confrontational Government, they need to given a genuine alternative.'

But on the same page, above a reasoned defence of proposed changes in tertiary entrance arrangements by the two authors of those changes, is a perceptive contribution from Lorann Downer. She reflects indirectly on the theme of broken promises which has become side-tracked by accusations of lying from traditional LNP stalwarts like Allan Jones and the Police Union.

Downer currently teaches Queensland politics at the University of Queensland after playing senior media roles under Bligh and Beattie. The headline 'Testing the Can-Do Brand' has the subscript: 'if politicians fail to live up to their brand promise, voters will being to look elsewhere'.

The article traces the evolution of the 'Can-Do' brand back through its evolution in the Brisbane City Council and the 'audacity' of the manoeuvre which placed him as LNP leader while still outside parliament. Downer then suggests that 'at the 2015 election, Newman is facing a few hard lessons in branding'.

The first lesson is the difficulty of maintaining a long-term image when actual choices made in government, such as public service cuts, asset sales and punitive approaches to law-and-order and anti-corruption tarnish the image with important section of the community. The activity of 'brand repair' required both cosmetic policy changes and cosmetic personality changes.

The second lesson flowed from this

Political consumers like commercial consumers, own brands. A brand is whatever the consumer believes it is. The brand's creator can use marketing, including publicity and advertising to try to shape what consumers believe. But actual experience after the consumer has 'purchased' the brand is a powerful incentive to change brands if the advertised promises have not been fulfilled.

Public servants were given explicit undertakings that they had nothing to fear from a change of government; within weeks, they experienced massive cuts and the cutting continued across the following two years; lawyers and doctors expected business as usual under the brand they conventionally have always purchased but found plenty of disappointments with their 'purchase'.

'Can-Do' is both a personal and a party brand – as Downer notes,

The final lesson is that when politicians behave like brands, they are treated like brands; if they do not live up to the brand promise, consumers will look elsewhere. This has implications not just for Newman but also the LNP because, in a co-branding strategy, the party brand is also at risk when the leader's brand goes bad.

Some Queensland voters have a serious case of post-purchase dissonance; that is, they didn't get what they thought they were buying with Campbell Newman.

But we'll find out on January 31 how many are prepared to make a repeat purchase of the Can-Do brand.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lorann Downer, *Courier-Mail*, 21.1.15.