

CANADA'S LANDSLIDE AND QUEENSLAND

Commentary by Roger Scott

The Liberal Party's increase of 148 seats from the previous election was the largest-ever numerical increase by a party in a Canadian election. The Liberals' success came at the expense of 60 seats from the Conservative Party and 51 seats from the New Democratic Party, and was the largest total number of seats won by a single party since 1984. Prior to the election, the Liberals held only 36 seats—the fewest seats ever held at dissolution by any federal party that won the following election. The Liberals also became the first federal party in Canadian history to win an election without being either the Government or the Official Opposition in the previous Parliament.¹

I have commented previously on the startling trend of elections in highly democratic states ejecting leaders exhibiting authoritarian tendencies.²

At the federal level in Australia, the power-brokers and government MPs responded to this trend before it struck them down too, replacing Prime Minister Tony Abbott with Malcolm Turnbull (having rejected Turnbull earlier despite his increasingly obvious business nous and grasp of policy imperatives across a wide range of portfolios).

But Canada has followed the previous trend, with the defeat of Stephen Harper when he seemed indestructible after a decade in office. Coverage in the British and Australian media has sought to explain this result which seemed utterly unlikely - even in the middle stages of the campaign. The Liberal Party under Trudeau came from a distant third place to win a comfortable working majority in its own right.

The explanations offered for this all have relevance to Queensland. The first is the most obvious – an overbearing, authoritarian leader - in contrast to the unknown but generally affable alternatives.³ Canada has a viable third party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), loosely comparable to the Australian Labor Party, which had many more seats than Trudeau's Liberals in the outgoing parliament. But Thomas Mulcair, even when holding the official recognition of Leader of the Opposition, lacked the charm and charisma of a Trudeau able to remind Canadians of a perceived golden era under his father.

The second explanation relates more to the earlier defeat of Anna Bligh – the almost inevitable tendency for a party in office for a decade (in reality, two decades in Bligh's case) to seem boring and out of touch with contemporary attitudes. Bligh, Harper and Newman all misread the public mood in response to their scare campaign about public finances requiring austerity measures – in all cases involving privatization of politically sensitive public assets.

¹ The account of the Canadian election, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_federal_election,_2015, accessed on 21.10.15.

² 'The declining attraction of authoritarian leaders', <http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/cms/page.asp?ID=1364>

³ 'For Canada, the most noticeable change under Justin Trudeau could be tone', *New York Times*, 21.10.15) http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/world/americas/elections-canada.html?_r=0

The third relates to poor judgment on policy issues, in particular the issues of protecting the environment, and being insensitive to issues of multiculturalism. Harper had Canada pull out of the Kyoto climate change protocol and Harper took a hard line about Muslim women wearing traditional head covering and opposed accommodating Syrian refugees.

The fourth relates to broken promises, an issue which dogged Bligh and then Newman. One commentator calculated that Harper failed to keep more than half of his electoral pledges including increasing accountability: 'Along comes Trudeau and he promises some the measures Harper missed, like increasing public access to information, putting key appointments in the hands of an independent panel and changes to the electoral system'.⁴

The proposal to move from the Westminster first-past-the-post electoral counting system is the fifth, often unnoticed, parallel with Queensland – the mobilisation of dissidence to create strategic voting patterns. 'Put the LNP last' was advice given in the trade union campaigns which helped the ALP win the January 2015 election. The ALP itself could not adopt any public campaign strategy which recognized the strength of minority parties such as Palmer and the Greens, although preferences could be traded on how-to-vote cards once the campaign was almost over. This intervention went unrecognised both at the time and later in the LNP's own post-mortems by Borbidge/Sheldon and in Newman's biography.⁵

The same strategic voting seems to have operated even more strongly in the Canadian system, within the smaller parties and the regional groupings in Quebec swallowing any distaste for the Liberals to ensure that Harper was removed. This same phenomenon motivated the large number of voters who had previously supported the New Democratic Party. They deserted to the Liberals in droves from the urban centres like Toronto. The New Democratic Party, which had seemed so significant, is now a shadow of its former self in the national parliament. However, with Trudeau pledged to electoral reform involving Australian-like proportional and preferential alternatives, these parties will be able to revive rather than disappear, the fate which befell the Liberal Democrats in Britain.

What are the lessons for Queensland politics? As with the LNP and the ALP, Trudeau has carefully avoided offending business and industrial interests, many owned by non-Canadians, so oil sands and pipelines have not been disowned in pursuit of green credentials. The American equivalents of Adani can rest easily. However, Trudeau's to-do list does include pulling out of the Middle Eastern air war, running deficits for three years to pay for infrastructure spending, increasing taxes on the wealthy to provide income tax cuts for the middle classes and legalizing marijuana. Food for thought on all sides.⁶

⁴ Professor Duff Conacher, BBC News, 21.10.15: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34583753>

⁵ See Roger Scott, 'Mobilising Dissidence', http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Mobilising_dissidence.pdf

⁶ 'Liberals storm to a surprise majority in Canadian election', Aidan Beaumont, *The Conversation*, 10.10.15, <https://theconversation.com/liberals-storm-to-surprise-majority-in-canadian-election-4944>