

THE DECLINING ATTRACTION OF AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS?

Commentary by

Roger Scott

There has been a remarkable turnaround in the political attractiveness of ‘strong’ leaders.

Once upon a time, the conventional wisdom was that ‘strong’ leaders were a considerable asset to the political parties they led. This was seen to explain the longevity of regimes in Queensland of both political persuasions and the failure of alternatives who projected a ‘weaker’ image. The same appeared to be true in other states and at national level, as well as in many overseas countries, even those operating democratic electoral systems based on the Westminster model.

However, this assumption has been called into question, starting perhaps with the defeat of Geoff Kennett in Victoria in 1999. On the national scene, the chaotic internal leadership struggles of the ALP appeared to reinforce this, with the undermining of the self-proclaimed strong leadership of Kevin Rudd and then, in turn, his undermining of his successor Julia Gillard. Tony Abbott was able to build his appeal to the core supporters of the Liberal Party by contrasting his ‘strong’ persona with those of his predecessors within his own party, Brendan Nelson and Malcolm Turnbull.

Queensland Liberals pursued the same strategy, replacing the apparently amiable John Paul Langbroek with the assertive Campbell Newman. In the end, it can be argued that it was this very characteristic of strength and independence from collective control - ‘assertiveness’ – which fatally weakened the appeal of the Liberal National Party, to the point of losing control of a Parliament that the party expected to dominate for a decade on the back of winning a record majority of seats.¹

Now, at national level, the personality of Abbott – his aggressiveness and his relish for a pugilistic persona – has become a major problem for the Liberal Party and thus of the Coalition’s future electoral prospects. Opinion polls consistently rate his personal support well below that of the party he leads and the Coalition government he heads. The parallel with Queensland is compelling – the difference being in the timing of the evidence. Campbell Newman survived because he called on an election before he could reasonably be replaced, before the evidence of his low standing became common knowledge and generated a snowball which could build into an avalanche. In retrospect, it is clear that the gamble of dumping Langbroek was an over-reaction to a temporary lift in the standing of ALP Premier Anna Bligh. Any Coalition leader, however ‘weak’, would have won in 2012 and, spared the excesses of the Newman ‘strong government’, would have gone on to hold office in 2015. The problem was the strong leader and the people that the leader chose to empower as an instrument of his control. There are striking similarities with the national scene, with Tony Abbott’s style and his ‘captain’s picks’ - choosing to back people like Speaker Bronwyn Bishop and the Chair of the Trade Union Royal Commission, Dyson Heydon.

¹ For an analysis of Campbell Newman’s style and leadership see Roger Scott and Ann Scott, see TJRyan Foundation Research Report No 14: ‘Queensland 2014: Political Battleground’ http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Qld_2014_Political_Battleground_with_Epilogue.pdf. For an analysis of the Right in the Borbidge-Sheldon era see Roger Scott and John Ford i-book. Queensland Parties: The Right in Turmoil 1987-2007 <https://itunes.apple.com/au/book/queensland-parties/id823471481?mt=11>

The dilemma for the Liberal strategists is the same as in Queensland in 2014. What is the likely cost-benefit of a leadership change before the next election? What price will be paid by tolerating an unpopular but 'strong' leader?

Canadian comparison

The article below, by Jonathan Malloy, '[A three-way contest: Can D=Stephen Harper defy the odds?](#)' describes the same dilemma facing the conservative forces in Canada. After an extended period in office, in a government led by Stephen Harper, the party faces a stiff electoral challenge:

The dominating election issue is Harper himself, who heads perhaps the most polarising government in Canadian history. The divide is less about policies and more about the style and approach of the prime minister – a style that infuriates many but gratifies others, particularly those who feel the country has been governed too long by the urban elites of central Canada. For Harper's many supporters, the election is about keeping their champion in power; for his opponents, it is about getting rid of him.²

There are myriad differences with Australia. Canada has three rather than two major party groupings, a first-past-the-post counting system, non-compulsory voting and a weaker upper house, plus more complex institutionalized social divisions linked to Quebec and French Canadian nationalism.

But there are also echoes in the policy issues which are directly attributed to the 'strong' leadership of Harper:

The Conservatives have steered a centre-right path. They are 'tough on crime', strong supporters of the energy pipelines and the oilsands development, deeply uninterested in environmental policy, and confrontational with unions. But they have also overseen steep increases in government spending, have been selective and cautious in granting tax cuts, and have generally tried to avoid engagement on divisive social conservative issues such as abortion or gay and lesbian rights. Ideologically, they are hard to pin down.

Yet none of these issues spark debates as intense as those about Harper himself:

The government style is unmistakable. They have governed aggressively, gripping power tightly and operating within a cone of silence at every level. Government MPs and cabinet ministers are discouraged from speaking to the press; even senior ministers can't give press interviews without clearance from the prime minister's office. Public servants find themselves under similar tight control in every sphere; government scientists in particular have complained about restrictions on even the most innocuous communications. Harper himself gives few press conferences and they are tightly controlled. With the government bending unwritten rules and conventions, the parliamentary agenda has been equally aggressive. ...

Harper is uniformly unapologetic. He makes clear he is in charge and that Canadians have the final verdict – re-electing him twice so far, including in 2011 following the contempt-of-parliament charge. He is hardly the first prime minister to be accused of parliamentary rule-bending and politicising government. And he can and will argue that petty insider detail is not of interest to anyone but urban and intellectual elites.

That sounds like vintage Abbott. Malloy warns those inside the LNP and inside the ALP that Harper has a real chance of prevailing and thus enhancing the image of a strong leader:

For all their aggressiveness and controlling ways, the Conservatives have been remarkably deft in steering the country and retaining the political support they need to continue.

The ghost of Campbell Newman may yet be laid by the reality of a national electorate which responds more to the politics of fear and economic self-interest than to questions of personal style.

² Excerpts are taken from Jonathan Malloy, 'In a three-way contest, can Stephen Harper defy the odds?', 4 September 2015: <http://insidestory.org.au/in-a-three-way-contest-can-stephen-harper-defy-the-odds>

And Tony Abbott has shown a willingness to deliver on both these policy areas, reinforcing rather than softening his image as a powerful and uncompromising leader.