

THE GETTING OF WISDOM - FROM MURDOCH?

Roger Scott

The Murdoch newspapers – particularly the *Courier Mail* – have been consistently supportive of the LNP. At first this was premised on the preference of the business community to get access to publicly-owned assets and to benefit from the infrastructure spending for electoral purposes which flowed from privatization. Even after this was rejected by the LNP itself, the *Courier Mail* editorial continued the line that the LNP was the right way to go.

But as the formal introspection process got underway, the LNP was confronted in *The Weekend Australian* (7 February 2015) with useful contributions. These were proffered in the context of the hysteria at national level over the motion to spill Tony Abbott from his position as Prime Minister, and the more somnolent process of replacing Campbell Newman at local level.

‘Crisis in Leadership’

Under a banner heading of ‘Crisis in Leadership’, six out of eight items on page 6 were devoted to Abbott in recognition of the geographical location of the newspaper’s main readership. But two of these had echoes of Newman, just as so many of Abbott’s current speeches have carried echoes of Newman.

One headline (and the only picture) reported that ‘Hockey keeps dangling privatization carrot’. But the NSW political correspondent noted that the five billion dollar carrot was one of the justifications for Newman going to an election early, to get to the top of the carrot-buying queue. Hockey suggested that the electoral result in Queensland meant more for everyone else, and more competition from buyers as fewer assets were on the table. This ignored the clear message that ‘privatisation’, however packaged, had toxic electoral implications.

The second echo came from the headline asking the question, ‘Who is strong enough to reverse our economic decline?’ Adjectives like ‘strong’ and ‘stronger’ have been so over-used in Queensland by all the Newman ministers to be now utterly risible. Clearly Abbott doesn’t have enough sense of humour to see the joke.

‘Poll rout was down to Newman’

The two items specific to Queensland embraced the conventional explanation, aimed at maintaining enthusiasm among LNP voters. As the headline says, ‘Poll rout was down to Newman’. The new pieces of information in support of conventional LNP ‘wisdom’ derived from access to internal LNP polling which reported on the internal hostility from the old National Party supporters towards Newman. This was partly explained on personality grounds and partly on a perception that, notwithstanding his grain industry experience, he did not understand issues outside Brisbane. Tempering his aggressiveness and hiding his equally aggressive Attorney-General – ‘Operation Boring’ - had been working well in the lead-up to the campaign itself but his after a promising start, his performance deteriorated during the campaign, reinforcing earlier images.

[Two points made here and not elsewhere:

First: LNP voters linked the issue of asset sales to the sale of land to foreigners, particularly Chinese investors, touching the xenophobia deeply rooted in the Queensland conservative psyche – and reflected in the surprising strength of support for Hanson.

Second: ‘Despite a high-profile campaign by Sydney radio broadcaster Alan Jones, Liberal polling shows Jones had a low recognition rate in Queensland combined with a strongly negative view among those who did recognise him. ... Liberal strategists said Jones was reflecting views already held in regional Queensland and had a ‘band-wagon’ effect of reinforcing antipathy to Newman.’ It is not clear, then, why the pollsters did not advise Newman to avoid giving Jones the extra publicity of a defamation action.]

The final item on the page related to the Queensland LNP leadership ballot - not so much a ‘spill’ as cleaning up after spilt milk, which was occurring after the newspaper had been published. This reported the widely-expected outcome of a victory for Lawrence Springborg, given that the Katter duo would resist any alternative leadership team linked to past policies and a record of personal aggressiveness towards them (in the days when the LNP held a huge majority). Springborg had initially said he would only run if this enhanced the chance of the LNP returning to government and him thus becoming Premier at the fourth attempt. By Saturday morning (7 February), this qualification had been removed. However journalist Michael McKenna added to the mix the information the fact that many MPs were upset that it was the party machine which had unilaterally decided to commission Springborg to conduct negotiations with ‘the Katter boys’, a symptom of the lack of consultation which dogged both Newman and Abbott.

Professor John Wanna

Further on, in the ‘Inquirer’ section, John Wanna, based at the ANU but a longtime resident and commentator on Queensland politics, puts the swiftness of the parliamentary membership change into perspective. He points out that the peculiar social demography of many constituencies means relatively small changes of opinion can shift large numbers of seats: ‘in the Sunshine State, the winds of electoral change can hit with cyclonic force.’ He provides significant historical evidence for this exceptionality and reports on numerous explanations for this phenomenon. However, ‘whatever the causes, the ballot-box outcomes are truly bizarre and will result in making the state hard to govern going forward, and not just in the immediate minority government phase.’

Former ALP Senator John Black

In the same section of the newspaper, John Black offers a deep and highly significant warning to the ALP which he once represented as a Senator and an influential power-broker. He warns that ‘Labor leaders should not get over-excited – the swing was far from uniform’ and that they should have won more easily and the ALP may find life much more difficult if it faces a by-election opponent later in the year without the benefit of the toxic presence of Newman and Abbott on the other side.

Black attributes this poor performance to the failure of the ALP leadership to develop policy alternatives which would convince swinging voters of the urban middle class to shift their support from the LNP. The ALP could easily offer inducements and generate fears about privatisation among the less-engaged working class voters who had departed from their traditional electoral strongholds in 2012.

Labor conspicuously failed to win back the support lost since the global financial crisis in a wide range of seats which used to be marginal labor seats on the Gold Coast’ and failed to target similar seats in the northern and western suburbs of Brisbane which it ought to have won. There were similar middle-class seats in inner Brisbane which the ALP won but with a much lower-than-average swing. He provided a graph which showed that ‘since the state election of 2006, Labor has been consolidating support in seats dominated by families in the bottom two income quartile and losing support in seats containing its traditional base of upwardly mobile third-income quartile families.

Black displayed his statistical insight to demonstrate that the election was won for the ALP on the back of the visceral dislike of Newman, aided by Abbott's unhelpful policies on health in particular and the unequal impact of federal budget cuts. But many middle-class voters did not shift their allegiance to the ALP and cited the case of Tim Nicholls whose performance was the best in the state in reducing the amount of swing against him.

Clearly Labor's campaign against privatization not only failed to impress middle-class and professional voters who delivered Labor Premier Beattie his landslide victories, but it also shored up its principal protagonist to an extraordinary degree.

Black published his analysis a few hours before the LNP had selected its new leaders. Nicholls and the central policy he had imposed on the party were subject to vituperative abandonment, alongside Newman and Seeney. So while Nicholls with his support from the Santoro faction prospered against the swing in Clayfield, the rest of his party wanted him to be somewhere else.