

LEADERSHIP FROM AN 'ACCIDENTAL PREMIER'?

Roger Scott

The ALP has been much better served by its state leaders than those at national level in the recent past, certainly in terms of stability. Paul Williams, one of the Ryan Research Associates, deals with the national scene in measured terms in an article in *The Conversation*, broadening his focus from the Queensland scene which he regularly covers for the *Courier-Mail*.¹

What follows are my preliminary thoughts while preparing the same detailed annual evaluation of state politics as I provided for 2014. The 2014 volume grew like topsy during a tumultuous period culminating in the unexpected election campaign.² I was reassured when Jackie Trad seemed to rule out a repeat of this massive diversion.

The key issue again is the nature of political leadership, just as the key policies again relate to economic management. The main emotion surrounding the Palaszczuk premiership is surprise. ALP survivors from the electoral tsunami of 2012 came from hard-core seats often 'owned' by personal and union dynasties; their occupants often had not been forced to campaign hard in the past or to build intra-party networks with an eye to leadership advancement in the short term. Palaszczuk might not have been ranked in the top quartile of leadership contenders in the previous Bligh parliament but was an uncontroversial choice from among those left in the severely depleted ranks. In this sense, she was truly an 'accidental Premier'.

She was also 'accidental' in the sense that the apparent hopelessness of their electoral cause allowed the ALP to claim a sympathy/protest vote from a range of voters wanting to express distaste for the LNP Newman government. This was captured on several occasions by Sean Leahy cartoons in the *Courier-Mail*. After the result was known, the LNP also made much of polling which supported the idea that many voters had voted against their candidates in the expectation that the next Premier would be suitably chastened but come from the LNP. Palaszczuk was an accidental by-product of the reaction against Newman.

Once Newman was removed, the opposition asserted that she lacked any legitimate claim on the Premiership. This questioning of her legitimacy was reinforced by the uncertainty of the outcome, especially when a challenge initially loomed in one constituency, and then there were protracted negotiations with the key Independent and the two Katter's Australian Party members. There was also the facile suggestion that total percentages of votes for the parties could be used as a basis for questioning the authoritativeness of the result.

Howard Elcock, a leading authority on political leadership in democratic systems, has written in several places about what he calls in one paper 'the leadership puzzle'. Early on, he deals with the question of 'accidentality' which he contrasts with advancement within business or public service organisations:

¹ Williams P, 'Albanese offers Labor a counter to Turnbull's polished charms', *The Conversation*, 3.12.15: <https://theconversation.com/albanese-offers-labor-a-counter-to-turnbulls-polished-charms-51571>

² Scott R & A, 'Queensland 2014: Political battleground': http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Qld_2014_Political_Battleground_with_Epilogue.pdf

Studying and training political leaders is difficult because they arrive in their leadership positions through complicated series of events and accidents - indeed, many of the most successful political leaders achieve their posts unexpectedly.³

Getting there by accident does not mean that leaders are by definition unprepared, even though they may be inexperienced. My book review of the life story of Palaszczuk's two predecessors⁴ contrasts the 'accidental' elevation of Newman to the Premiership and the price the LNP paid for his parliamentary limitations as an 'amateur' with the succession planning which went into Bligh's ultimate elevation after a career in student politics, then service as a local member and then in a set of key Ministries. Bligh was a 'professional' in the same sense that Palaszczuk can claim to be a professional, even though both can be derided by the LNP and the wider community as pursuing careers lacking in 'real-world' experience. (Newman's successor as LNP leader, Lawrence Springborg, is equally 'professional', have been a Member of Parliament all his adult life, inheriting his constituency in much the same way as Palaszczuk inherited hers.)

One of Palaszczuk's key strengths was her lack of pretension, making her more attractive to uncommitted voters than Newman with his often-stated willingness to take hard decisions and exert his authority. People who did not know her might regard her as amateurish - and tolerate her for that reason - whereas Newman exuded a confidence which might have been mistaken for intolerance of alternative views. His successor in the LNP leadership has struggled to create a persona which does not echo past failures and current frustrations.

Nearly a year down the track, Palaszczuk has trodden a cautious path on a whole range of issues, harvesting the 'low-hanging fruit' among the range of electoral manifesto promises and honouring multiple commitments to holding enquiries to develop an evidence base for the remainder. This inertia has played well with the electorate, even though it might have frustrated some of the activist-inclined members of the parliamentary party.

Now, at long last, she has responded to one of the nagging recalcitrants from her thinly-spread team when in opposition by edging the accident-prone Police Minister to resign from Cabinet. In the New Year, she still has to cope with the problem created by the expulsion from the ALP of the Member for Cook, Billy Gordon, which in turn strengthened the bargaining power of the two members of the Katter's Australian Party. But one major threat has been removed consensually because Palaszczuk showed restraint and did not take stronger action against the Member for Bundamba earlier, when hastier action might have led to a raging bull in an Ipswich china shop.

An increase in the size of Cabinet was welcomed on all sides, validating the LNP criticism of the original populist gesture in the election campaign. Sharing workloads among a wider range of key Ministers will allow opportunities to confront hard questions and remove excuses for inactivity, especially in resolving the tension between sponsoring the expansion of mining and facing up to the threat of climate change.

³ Elcock H, 'Leading People : Some Issues if Local Government Leadership in Britain and America', *Local Government Studies*, vol 21, no 4, Winter 1995, p.3.

⁴ Anna Bligh: http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Bligh_and_ONeill_reviews.pdf;
Campbell Newman: http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Scott_review_Newman_book.pdf