

T J Ryan Research Associate Dr Paul Williams' analysis of the February 2014 by-election in Redcliffe (this article first appeared in the Courier-Mail).

SEVENTEEN per cent holds an irksome irony for Campbell Newman.

Not only is that figure the after-preference swing to Labor at the weekend Redcliffe by-election, it was also the primary swing Labor suffered at the now infamous Bass by-election, the contest that catapulted Campbell's father Kevin into federal parliament in 1975. So enormous was that movement that it became the prophet of doom for the weary Whitlam Government at the wipe-out election just six months later. So will Redcliffe become Queensland's Bass, a harbinger of LNP defeat? In short, no.

That's not to say the LNP won't get punished at next year's election. With this week's Reachtel poll indicating a 14 per cent swing in the safe LNP seat of Clayfield, the Government is sure to cop a bruising in southeast Queensland. But no matter how we slice it, Redcliffe is a shocking result. It's 10 times the size of the average Queensland by-election swing of 1.7 per cent, measured since the notorious Mundingburra re-election that brought the Goss Government to grief in 1996. At 17 per cent, the LNP would also lose 44 seats, and reduced to a humble opposition of 30.

But that's not going to happen.

By-elections are never truly accurate guides to later results. They're more like pressure valves voters feel comfortable releasing without changing governments. They are, as Campbell Newman observed on Saturday night, conduits for sending messages to governments that are ignored at leaders' peril.

A more accurate scenario for Newman lies in this month's Galaxy poll that pegged the coming swing to Labor at 10 per cent. But after a year in which the LNP can soften its image, and after an elaborate election campaign where the LNP will outspend Labor many times over, the real swing will probably be about seven or eight per cent. But that's still enough for the Government to lose 20 seats and, with them, enormous political pride.

Newman has been smart not to shrug off the Redcliffe result as all about former MP Scott Driscoll. While it's impossible to quantify factors motivating vote choice - there are 33,000 electors in Redcliffe, and potentially 33,000 reasons why the seat swung so violently - it's a no-brainer Driscoll and the Government's longer record must share blame.

On top of that is the natural correction that super-landslide results inevitably see at subsequent elections. Put simply, even without Driscoll, public service sackings, Vlad laws or school closures, Redcliffe would have swung anywhere between 4 and 8 per cent as Labor voters, who flirted with the LNP in 2012, loyally flocked home.

And that's the real worry for the LNP. No matter what the Government does from this point, there will be two overlapping constituencies who will not be voting LNP next year: the flirtatious Labor faithful returning to the fold, and a large proportion of swinging voters dismayed by what they anecdotally say is as an arrogant government happy to throw out the rule book despite promising to govern with "humility, grace and dignity".

The danger is that Redcliffe, while unique, is not unrepresentative of southeast Queensland. If voters on the peninsula are struggling with water, power and car rego bills, and unimpressed with an authoritarian leadership style, there's every reason to suspect other metropolitan voters feel the same way.

And, as we've seen in previous polls, plenty of those voters live in the Premier's own seat of Ashgrove. Over the next year, the LNP may well go from Redcliffe to red-faced.

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