

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

### **Stafford result swings LNP from centre to the margins**

If the Redcliffe by-election in February threw up questions about the Newman Government's future, Saturday's Stafford poll (19 July 2014) has just answered them.

We now know Labor's 17 per cent swing in Redcliffe was not just a result of former member Scott Driscoll's dramatic exit. Yes, there was anger peculiar to Stafford over the way the previous member Dr Chris Davis was forced out for opposing the Government's controversial reforms. But even the LNP's most loyal apologists have to concede the Newman brand is widely and seriously damaged. The LNP's really bad news is that the almost 19 per cent swing against it rests not on a single fixable problem but is instead steeped in a host of complex and probably irreparable causes.

First, Stafford and Redcliffe, each boasting a long Labor heritage, represent the inevitable correction back to an ALP that has very adroitly exploited the politics of disgruntlement. But the fact Labor candidate Dr Anthony Lynham won Stafford on primary votes alone, and 15 of the seat's 16 booths with swings significantly higher than those Davis attained in 2012, suggests something else is afoot.

We know, too, that much of the LNP's austere policy program – from public sector savings to law and order crackdowns – have been unpopular.

Just how asset sales will be sold as an attractive alternative next year is anyone's guess. But opinion polls also tell us perceptions of how Campbell Newman has governed are also problematic, and clashes with doctors, judges and emergency workers, among others, have resulted in voters branding him as "arrogant".

Senior Government members say they've heard the electorate's message and will listen more carefully. But we heard similar sounds of contrition after the equally disastrous Redcliffe result. Not only have we seen no softening of the Premier but, earlier this month, Newman made a point of saying he would not change his style after senior colleagues rebuked him for picking policy fights.

Adding that he was the man who saved Queenslanders from recent natural disasters – and that voters don't appreciate his efforts to get Queensland back on track – have only compounded a perception of arrogance that, right or wrongly, has dogged the Premier's public persona. Even hints of watering down contentious reforms such as the VLAD laws and appointments to the QCCC chair, will do little to repair damages that, after Stafford, now appear both enormous and permanent.

That's why I was just as surprised by the LNP's negative campaign in Stafford, underpinned by petty accusations – found to be untrue by the Electoral Commission which ordered campaign signs be removed – that Lynham does not live locally. Given the punishment voters meted out to Labor for its shabby treatment of the Newman family in 2012, I would have thought the LNP knew better than to play the ball and not the man.

In fact, I struggle to recall a single positive message from the LNP during the campaign, despite there being plenty of good news stories, such as jobs growth and hospital improvements, to tell.

If that wasn't enough, Newman and LNP candidate Bob Andersen had to wear the yoke of an unpopular federal Coalition, and a horror federal Budget still stuck in voters' craws like toxic glue. It's little wonder the LNP fell in a heap on Saturday.

A few questions remain. Would, for example, a Palmer United Party candidate have upset the result? Almost certainly not. Given Katter's party scored less than five per cent in Stafford in 2012, there is no reason PUP will do much better across metropolitan Brisbane. The regions, however, will be a different proposition.

But, even then, PUP may not split and exhaust the anti-Newman swing as much as many suspect. Saturday saw more than half of minor party voters pass on preferences to the majors – a trend that, if continued, will hurt the LNP more than Labor.

Voter turnout on Saturday was also satisfactory, suggesting folk weren't spooked by voter ID laws.

Stafford's 18.6 per cent swing, if repeated across Queensland, would see the LNP wiped out with the loss of about 40 seats. But swings are never uniform, and regional Queensland will be much harder for Labor to win back than the southeast.

So, can Labor take government next year just by winning Brisbane? Almost. If Labor resumes almost all of Greater Brisbane's 38 seats and holds on to its four regional outposts, it will need just a handful more in north Queensland to pull off the greatest electoral upset in Australian history.

22 July 2014