

Political blackmail and inequality

Roger Scott

My earlier comments about morality and integrity came to the forefront on the Queensland scene at the weekend. Dr Paul Williams of Griffith University is the most widely quoted commentator on the Queensland scene – apart perhaps from Alan Jones (at least this week). Dr Williams has regular columns with the *Courier Mail* as well as opinion pieces and media commentary cited across a range of media outlets.

Yesterday he made the arresting observation that ‘the LNP’s conduct was unethical and it does reek of political blackmail.’¹ This related to the comments from Premier Newman and LNP candidates that campaign promises to particular electorates would only be delivered if the local LNP candidates was re-elected – in the Ipswich cases cited, respectively a cycle track for Raceview, shade covering in a park, and a women’s changing room at a rugby league club.

One of the local members was unapologetic: ‘campaigns have always been about this. I am part of the system and I have got to try and get as much as I can for my people’.

Williams suggested that voters can be forgiven for feeling angry. They feel their hands are being tied and their options being limited. He argued that ‘the whole point of representative democracy is that we are all equal in the eyes of the Crown and that there are no first, second or third class citizens’.

The concept of equality would have a hollow ring to those unfortunates who do not live in the Premier’s seat of Ashgrove, with its lavish per capita spending all directly attributed by the Premier himself to the fact that he is their local representative.² In other constituencies, the message is scaled down but equally specific: only if you re-elect my supporters will you receive community goodies as a lesser share of the magic pudding called ‘asset leases’.

Second class citizens are those in constituencies not regarded as winnable by the LNP or held by independents and minor parties. So, don’t get your hopes up if you live in Logan or Mt Isa. And if you happen to be an indigenous voter living in Inala? Stop complaining about not getting your share; it’s all your fault because you keep electing Palaczyzuku.

¹ <http://www.qt.com.au/news/lnp-promises-reek-of-political-blackmail/2517619/>

² New commitments in Ashgrove come on top of the more than \$100 million the state government has spent on the electorate since Mr Newman came to power. ‘It gives rise to LNP backbencher fears from [October](#), that Ashgrove would receive the bulk of the party’s promises, with their electorates to focus on the whole of state cost of living relief measures, and Strong Choices plans.’ (<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queensland-state-election-2015/queensland-election-ashgrove-plan-gets-18-million-20150111-12lylr.html>)

The harsh reality of inequality facing indigenous voters throughout Queensland is underlined by the statistics provided in *The Australian* last weekend (January 17-18). Patricia Karvelas reflected on the gap between promise and performance of the Abbott Government, while giving the government the benefit of the doubt – as you would expect in *The Australian*. However ‘the real test was whether the government could deliver the bigger changes to start transforming communities from centres of poverty to places of prosperity and hope. ... without a bigger emphasis on Aboriginal affairs, the poverty cycle will continue and Labor’s political charged taunts will be all the more potent’.

The article below this one was written by a psychiatrist and public health physician with two decades of experience in remote indigenous communities in north Queensland. Ernest Hunter provided damning statistics of the level of inequality and focused his remarks on Murray Street in Manoora, the suburban street in Cairns which was the scene of the horrifying events which briefly commanded the attention of the whole Australian community and its political leaders.

He noted that Abbott ‘has been conspicuously inconspicuous in the indigenous policy area. With breaking the bad news delegated down, there were few areas - if any - to which he can point as success stories for his government’. Campbell Newman, by contrast, has been able to tout successes in the general area of public health ‘but indigenous health is not a vote winner and as, with the Commonwealth, there is a dearth of good news for the Queensland government to sell in this area’.

Hunter quotes the words in Bishop Gabey’s address to the Cairns funeral, ‘nobody heard the cries of our youth’ despite the evidence provided by statistical reports such as on death rates contrasting indigenous and non-indigenous children in relation to accidents, violence and suicide. The same discrepancy occurs in relation to mental health, education, rates of incarceration and access to a wide range of services.

The whole world is now becoming concerned about inequality and the unfairness of systems of wealth distribution which are increasing rather than decreasing inequality. This is the theme of the single most important book written about the subject from an economic perspective, by Thomas Picketty.³ As one of the multitude of reviewers argued, “the book changed the discussion of inequality by focussing on wealth (the assets families own) rather than income (the money families earn).⁴

The rhetoric of the Queensland election campaign is full of references to the issue of selling or leasing public assets but precious little about social inequality relating to asset distribution across the constituencies.

However, as the election campaign progressed and the LNP sought to hold on to seats looking increasingly marginal, Campbell Newman was quite explicit in his threats.

³ Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, (English translation: Harvard University Press, 2014)

⁴ ‘Thomas Picketty Won 2014’ Jordan Weissmann, Money Box, Dec 29, 2014).
http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2014/12/thomas_piketety_s_capital_how_the_french_professor_changed_economics_conversation.2.html#lf_comment=253639221

Campbell Newman says he cannot guarantee the Liberal National Party's big spending promises, even those with bipartisan support, if the party wins government but not the seat a project is in.⁵

⁵ 'Campbell Newman will not guarantee projects if LNP members not elected' <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-24/no-guarantees-on-projects-if-electrates-snob-lnp-newman/604412>