



RESEARCH REPORT 31: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LNP'S POST-ELECTION REVIEW¹

Dr Chris Salisbury, Research Associate

When political parties lose an election, especially unexpectedly, they invariably invite well-placed former politicians from their own side of politics to undertake a post mortem. Queensland's Liberal National Party (LNP) asked former party leaders, Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon, to conduct such a review following the party's shock defeat in the 2015 state election, including Premier Campbell Newman losing his own seat. The Borbidge-Sheldon election review and recommendations for party reform was released on May 29.² Thereupon, it was greeted by the media as critical, thorough and 'brutally honest' – but is it a case of simply being wise after the event? What did the review tell us, and what didn't it tell, about the Newman government?

The review's preamble states that its 'recommendations are forward-looking and do not seek to apportion blame'. The *report* that precedes those recommendations is a fairly plain-speaking look back at where the LNP government went wrong in its single term in office and during the 2015 election campaign. As pointed out on the ABC by Matt Wordsworth,³ and on the *Brisbane Times* by both Amy Remeikis⁴ and Madonna King,⁵ the report – based on more than 700 submissions to its authors – lays most responsibility for the LNP government's 'hubris' and the dramatic election loss at the feet of the party's leadership team (in and outside of parliament) and, in particular, an 'arrogant', 'unpopular' and 'unlikeable' Premier. The report maintains that, despite the LNP government's travails, it left Queensland a 'far better place' than it inherited from its Labor predecessor. The reviewers are not so 'brutal' as to neglect to thank Newman on his way out.

¹ With thanks to Professor Peter Spearritt from the University of Queensland's Centre for the Government of Queensland for providing comments during the drafting of this paper.

² Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon, 'Borbidge-Sheldon election review & report and recommendations', Liberal National Party, <https://lnp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Borbidge-Sheldon-Election-Review-.pdf>, 28 May 2015.

³ Matt Wordsworth, 'LNP review blames 'leadership' for surprise 2015 election loss', *ABC News*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-29/lnp-hands-down-report-into-newman-government-election-loss/6506820>, 29 May 2015.

⁴ Amy Remeikis, 'Hubris and an unpopular leader – what went wrong for the LNP', *Brisbane Times*, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/hubris-and-unpopular-leader--what-went-wrong-for-the-lnp-20150529-ghcexx.html>, 29 May 2015.

⁵ Madonna King, 'Gillard and Rudd were close friends and closer enemies', *Brisbane Times*, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/madonna-king-gillard-and-rudd-were-close-friends-and-closer-enemies-20150603-ghga52>, 4 June 2015.

The LNP's review is similar to other recent post-election examinations, where (usually defeated) parties have invited eminent insiders to review their campaign performances. William Bowe, known to many as the 'Poll Bludger', suggested to *Crikey* readers that such reviews are 'of greatest interest when the campaign didn't go according to plan'.⁶ He cited the 2010 federal election which resulted in Labor being reduced to minority government status, after which party 'luminaries' Steve Bracks, Bob Carr and John Faulkner reviewed the federal campaign showing. They offered criticisms of mostly unnamed central figures and recommendations for party reform that generally 'found their way into the too-hard basket'. Added to this could be state Labor's review after the 2012 election wipe-out in Queensland, which left only seven Labor MPs in parliament as a paltry opposition to the Newman government's overwhelming majority. The state Labor branch's post-election review then proffered a handful of party reforms as 'penitence' for its dismal election showing, but leading party figures went largely 'unchastened', to the dismay at the time of some Labor faithful, who wondered how the party would rebuild its core electoral base.⁷



So how close to the mark are the Borbidge-Sheldon review's findings? The report acknowledges that early contentious decisions, such as sacking thousands of public servants (interestingly citing the Goss government's experience as a precedent, when the Kennett Victorian government is a better example), and policy or political missteps (a series of MPs' scandals, arbitrary parliamentary committee changes, 'midnight' legislative amendments) 'unsettled' voters. A public perception of arrogance and 'non-transparency' was then allowed to quickly settle around the government and not be dispelled – these impressions were only rekindled when an early election was surprisingly called for late January 2015, when many Queenslanders were still in holiday mode.

In addition, the report asserts that the government appeared to focus its attention too often on corporate interests in the state's south-east corner at the expense of rural and regional areas. Sheldon and Borbidge point out that the government's oft-stated focus on four key industrial 'pillars' of the state's economy left other important industries, including new and emerging fields in the sciences, research, innovation, education, the arts and others, more or less sidelined and seemingly undervalued. While some of these fields were represented energetically by a few of the LNP's 'lesser lights', including Science Minister Ian Walker, their efforts were diminished in light of the overwhelming reliance upon and repetition of the 'four pillars' slogan. This only reinforced a perception of the government as uninterested in voices from economic interests outside of its 'core constituencies'.

The two reviewers found that the LNP government maintained an unhelpful policy 'fixation' on privatising state-owned assets, despite the electorate's obvious distaste for this proposal as displayed at the 2012 election. In that instance, Labor Premier Anna Bligh was punished severely by an electorate that felt 'betrayed' by her government's earlier public asset sales, in a program that was only announced after the previous election.⁸ While stating that the LNP's privatisation proposal by 2015 had both supporters and detractors, the report considered that such a platform was 'fraught with risk'. The

⁶ William Bowe, 'Poll Bludger: Why Baird hit pay dirt, and Newman hit plain dirt', *Crikey*, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2015/06/03/poll-bludger-why-baird-hit-pay-dirt-and-newman-hit-plain-dirt/>, 3 June 2015.

⁷ Mike Smith, 'Labor's Queensland election review – yes!', *Mike Smith Online*, <https://mikesmithonline.wordpress.com/2012/08/12/qld-election-review-yes/>, 12 August 2012.

⁸ John Quiggin, 'Asset sales, their part in Labor's downfall', *ABC News – The Drum*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-27/quiggin-/3913872>, 27 March 2012.

government's 'Strong Choices' program of asset leases (originally sales) and dividend reinvestment only succeeded in convincing 'solid' LNP voters, according to the report, and furthermore the unions' strident and 'misleading' anti-privatisation campaign drove most others to cast votes against the government. This view overplays, from what we now know from 'Vote Compass Queensland' data, both the impact of the asset privatisation issue in the overall election result and the influence of the unions' 'Not4Sale' campaign.

Respondents to the Vote Compass survey⁹ – well over 130,000 eligible voters completed the survey through the ABC website by the January 31 poll – were fairly evenly split along party and partisan lines on the issue, and presumably not overwhelmingly anti-Newman government as a result of the 'Not4Sale' campaign. State-wide, Vote Compass responses on the asset lease issue showed that 44 per cent of voters were against the privatisation proposal versus 41 per cent in favour of it. In party-identified terms, 70 per cent of Labor voters were against the proposal (and 16 per cent were for it), while 74 per cent of LNP voters were in favour of the plan (and only 13 per cent against it). In terms of the most important issues for voters going in to the election, more Vote Compass respondents nominated 'the economy' and 'cost of living' issues ahead of 'asset leases' by a ratio of over three to one. Over the past couple of years it has become clear to the electorate that the mining boom is winding down and interstate migration is no longer boosting south-east Queensland's real estate market, so economic concerns are quite understandable.

It can be reasonably surmised that Labor's anti-privatisation stand, as promoted by the unions, provided a convenient 'excuse' for much of the swinging, 'soft' LNP vote to come back to Labor and other non-LNP parties. But as the ABC's Antony Green, among many others, had argued – it was always expected that the election would see a sizeable 'correction' in any event, where many voters won over to the LNP in 2012 would revert the other way in 2015.¹⁰ In this light, the report looks to demonise the union campaign too readily, implying that voters had been 'hoodwinked' by union 'lies and smears'. While the 'Not4Sale' campaign resonated in several regional centres and certain industry-heavy communities, it doesn't appear that the campaign itself played the critical role in the state-wide election outcome that the report's authors assert. After all, practically the same union campaign in New South Wales shortly afterwards didn't end up costing the coalition government there, admittedly with a more mild-mannered and popular Premier at the helm.

The reviewers point out that there was an expectation – publicly and within the party – that the LNP government would be returned at the January election, albeit with a likely much reduced majority. This allowed a sense of complacency to dominate prior to and throughout the campaign. In turn, this fed in to the misguided and mishandled 'just vote 1' strategy, the futility of which was 'made worse when coupled with the expectation that the LNP would win', ultimately and crucially costing the party victory in a number of marginal seats decided on preferences. The report also acknowledges that party polling during the campaign showed just how unpopular the Premier had become – but this same complacency seems to have ruled out prompt action that might have mitigated Newman's negative standing. This inaction led some observers to conclude that the party was in fact comfortable with the prospect that Newman wouldn't be returned as Premier or member for Ashgrove, despite denying that there was a 'Plan B' for a successor to take his place.

⁹ 'Vote Compass – Queensland election 2015', ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/qld-election-2015/vote-compass/>, n.d. Accessed 28 June 2015.

¹⁰ Antony Green, '2015 Queensland election preview', ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-17/2015-qld-election-preview/5937752>, 24 January 2015.



Given that the reviewers concluded that Newman had an 'alienating' leadership style that undermined the government's effectiveness, and the LNP's election campaign, why wasn't something done about it or him before becoming a terminal problem? What do the reviewers' recommendations suggest to help the LNP 'regroup' from its leadership woes now that it's in opposition? Not a lot, in specific terms at least, besides proposing 'improving' the working relationship between the parliamentary leadership and the rest of the party. As the report claims, importing Campbell Newman from the Lord Mayoralty in 2011 'carried inherent risks', though 'in the short term worked well' – but then what? Why did things go badly soon after? More to the point, why wasn't this eventuality guarded against? For many close to the LNP Cabinet, or to the Lord Mayor's office before that, it wasn't a great surprise that Newman's leadership style and political judgement could be problematic. Newman championed the Clem 7 tunnel, after all, which cost investors over four billion dollars, failing to attract even one-third of the toll customers that the original consortium sold it on.

The report admits that Newman's 'can do' image quickly and disappointingly translated into undue haste, inattention to political process and the government's ignoring or arrogantly dismissing external criticism. Even relatively mild criticism, such as drawing attention to the limited number of women in senior positions within LNP ranks, was typically met with hostile reaction, as pointed out by Stephen Keim and Alex McKean in their paper for the TJ Ryan Foundation.¹¹ 'Hubris' and 'inexperience' were held to cost the government support over the life of its term – but were these factors alone to blame for a 'reformist' government leadership that, ultimately, succeeded in alienating key stakeholders and institutions through sometimes ill-considered and seemingly ideological or retributive agendas? As William Bowe made clear, despite the review striving to avoid 'pointing the finger', 'it's not for no reason that media reportage has painted [the review] as an extended critique of Campbell Newman'.¹²

The report claims that a breakdown in relationship between the parliamentary and organisational wings of the party led to a 'lack of consultation on policy/political/campaign matters'; this was blamed on 'hubris' after the massive 2012 election win leading to an 'isolation' of the party leadership. But hubris is a 'top-down affliction' which stems from the leader and one or two senior others; if Newman couldn't reign in MPs' expectations or maintain strict party room discipline or even stamp some moral authority, then something should have been done by those in the party with enough clout to press this point upon the leadership within the 'crucial first two years' of government. Clamping the Premier's mouth shut as part of so-called 'Operation Boring' in the third year was hardly going to make for better or more effective government, or likely in the long run to be electorally beneficial. If Madonna King's account is true, that Newman's failings were all too obvious to his party colleagues – 'But none of them stood up to him. Not one of them dared call him out, at least until the election was lost'¹³ – then the LNP's organisational leadership and the most senior MPs in the parliamentary leadership (all of whom are still in place) must bear an equal share of the responsibility for their downfall. This point was made more than once

¹¹ Stephen Keim and Alex McKean, 'Newman's poisoned legacy', TJ Ryan Foundation, http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/_dbase_upl/Newmans_poisoned_legacy.pdf, 4 June 2015.

¹² Bowe, 'Poll Bludger: Why Baird hit pay dirt'.

¹³ King, 'Gillard and Rudd'.

by the new Premier, Anastacia Palaszczuk, and again after the LNP's election review was released.¹⁴



What else might have been in the report but wasn't? For all its 'brutal' honesty, there are some elements that could be considered to be missing from the Borbidge-Sheldon review. For one, it doesn't convincingly explain why the LNP government didn't or couldn't effectively claim credit for its legitimate policy successes, such as stamp duty concessions on family home purchases and the 'Great Start' grants for new dwelling constructions. Without expanding much on details, the report does recognise that one of the government's biggest failures was an inability to communicate its policy achievements successfully, especially in those policy areas outside the conservative parties' 'traditional' reserve ('law and order' issues and the like). The report also refers to an 'absence of emphasis' on the government's achievements and positive outcomes prior to and throughout the election campaign. Again, though, there is next to no detail of what these achievements were, save for mention of a handful of portfolio areas, let alone suggestions of how these might have been highlighted and legitimately claimed as policy successes and advances during the campaign.

Strikingly, as William Bowe alluded to, the report makes 'no effort' to compare events during the Queensland election campaign with the New South Wales election barely two months later, 'at which a government that was in many ways similarly placed to Newman's achieved an eminently satisfactory result'.¹⁵ It's telling that the report doesn't acknowledge that a similarly vocal union-led campaign against electricity privatisation in New South Wales didn't bring that state's coalition government undone, like the review's authors assert happened during the Queensland campaign. The report considers instead that the LNP's election campaign was not nearly vigorous enough in prosecuting the government's case for its re-election, including rebutting what the reviewers describe as the 'blatant lies' and 'deceitful untruths' propagated by Labor and the unions. This comes across, to borrow Bowe's phrase, as a 'sore-loser' swipe at the union movement.

The report suggests that the LNP's election campaign was too focused on the party leadership at the expense of local campaign initiatives and other 'worthy' candidates. But at the same time, in what Bowe called 'the report's most striking omission',¹⁶ there's no mention of the leadership looking 'lost at sea' (to juxtapose a metaphor from its campaign advertising) when trying to avoid conjecture about who would become Premier in the event that Newman lost his seat of Ashgrove. Similarly, there's no mention of the impact of Tony Abbott's knighthood for Prince Philip during the final week of the campaign, nor of Newman's inability to sidestep around that 'captain's pick'. Likewise, there's no mention of the disturbing utterances by the Premier and other senior MPs that sounded to many observers like the pork-barrelling and electorate 'blackmail' of the Bjelke-Petersen era. Nor is there reference to the issues of 'trust' and 'accountability' that were raised during the campaign by external voices (such as Tony Fitzgerald, former LNP MP, Dr Chris Davis, and the normally pro-Liberal broadcaster Alan Jones) and not refuted other than through threat of court action, later halted. Arguably, these latter questions over the Premier's

¹⁴ Steven Wardill, 'Anastacia Palaszczuk defends Campbell Newman in election blame game', *Courier-Mail*, <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/annastacia-palaszczuk-defends-campbell-newman-in-election-blame-game/story-fnn8dlfs-1227377212371>, 1 June 2015.

¹⁵ Bowe, 'Poll Bludger: Why Baird hit pay dirt'.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

judgement and trustworthiness, and that of some of his senior Ministers, had as much if not more effect upon the voting intentions of electors who might otherwise vote LNP than the asset leasing issue.¹⁷

The report contains no admission or suggestion that the 'Newman experiment' failed when the 'can-do Campbell' tag came unstuck and didn't (or couldn't ever) survive the transition from the Lord Mayoralty to the Premier's office. Instead, the reviewers curiously devote most of their final page of observations to the conclusion that the LNP organisation needs to listen more to its grass-roots members and supporters for 'connection' and relevant policy development. Ironically, there is little recognition that the party and its leaders suffered while in government, owing in part to a failure to listen to or even seek out expert advice and informed consultation with key stakeholders and key institutions, including the judiciary, the medical profession, the universities and most professional bodies, none of whom could be accused of harbouring other than mainstream, if not conservative, values.

In its fervour to adopt the 'can do' approach to government, the party failed to demonstrate that it was governing for more than just its 'core constituencies', creating a worrying impression that it wilfully or maliciously disregarded or denigrated the advice and experience of key people and organisations with which it disagreed.¹⁸ According to informed accounts, this approach to leadership and policy implementation was not dissimilar to Newman's time as Lord Mayor of Brisbane, so it should not come as too big a surprise that he tried – but predictably failed – to replicate that approach as head of the state government. Yet this again calls into question the judgement of the LNP organisation to embark upon the 'Newman experiment' in the first place, as well as the credibility of senior LNP MPs who fell into line behind the then-Premier and allowed the 'rot' to set in unchallenged.

There is little in the review's recommendations that directly addresses these matters, either through identifying which party office-holders or MPs bear responsibility for the election debacle, or even commenting on the desirability or otherwise of 'drafting in' a party leader from outside the party's parliamentary wing. Instead, recommendations include general comments about 'improving the relationship between the parliamentary and organisational wings of the party'; reminding (as if it were necessary) that party MPs should respect the 'institutions of state' and not break promises to the electorate; and the need to provide 'meaningful communications' between the party and its members. These, one would think, are relatively simple creeds applying to any administration as it comes into office. As much as it lamented the 2015 election outcome, the *Courier-Mail* made a reasonable point when it observed that the Borbidge-Sheldon review's 'fair and frank' assessment of the LNP government's performance 'should remind both sides of politics that no matter the margin, they are only one election away from victory or defeat'.¹⁹

¹⁷ Amy Remeikis, 'Queensland Election: Alan Jones, Chris Davis hitting harder than Labor', *Brisbane Times*, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queensland-state-election-2015/queensland-election-alan-jones-chris-davis-hitting-harder-than-labor-20150121-12uh30.html>, 21 January 2015.

¹⁸ Keim and McKean, 'Newman's poisoned legacy'.

¹⁹ 'Editorial: LNP election review by Joan Sheldon and Rob Borbidge identifies what went wrong, which has a lesson for Labor as well', *Courier-Mail*, <http://m.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/editorial-lnp-election-review-by-joan-sheldon-and-rob-borbidge-identifies-what-went-wrong-which-has-a-lesson-for-labor-as-well/story-fnihsr9v-1227377212193>, 31 May 2015.