

## THE INTERSECTION OF STATE AND FEDERAL ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR: A LONGER VIEW

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Analysing the 2016 federal election, the prominent psephologist Peter Brent offered the view that, “[A]ll else being equal, state governments, particularly disliked ones, tend to suppress support for their federal counterpart party.”<sup>1</sup> He added that the obverse also applied, with unpopular federal governments harming their party’s state votes.

Brent was mostly concerned with electoral movements between 2013 and 2016, but some readers would have recalled relevant instances from the more distant past. This prompted the current writer to conduct a more detailed examination, covering a lengthier span, in the hope that such investigation might prove informative.

Given that Brent’s main point concerned the alleged suppression of Labor’s 2016 federal vote in Queensland by the Palaszczuk government (conceivably costing Bill Shorten government – although a more guarded interpretation might be that it saved Malcom Turnbull from minority government), Queensland must feature prominently in an examination of Brent’s argument and a useful starting point is the Bjelke-Petersen era.

Contrary to myth, the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 was a close-run thing.<sup>2</sup> A majority of nine was hardly a landslide, with three states recording (two-party preferred – 2PP) swings to Labor and three against. Of the latter, two (WA and SA) had state Labor governments and one (Queensland) did not. The (essentially accidental) WA Labor government (elected in 1971) certainly qualified as “disliked”, as evidenced by its decisive ejection from office in February 1974, but the same could not be said of the Dunstan Labor government in SA. The swing against federal Labor in that state (1.5 per cent) was considerably below the vote loss in WA (4.3 per cent) and might more usefully be attributed to a “readjustment” after Labor’s positive swing of 11.8 per cent in 1969, which had produced a 2PP of 54.2 per cent.

And thus to Queensland, where by December 1972, the Country/Liberal coalition had governed for fifteen years and its leader, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, for four – surely prime ingredients for the suppression of the vote for the decaying federal coalition government. Alas, the result saw a 0.4 per cent swing to the conservatives, although Labor did gain one additional seat (Lilley).

At this point, the absence of “all things being equal” is clearly important. After a rocky start as premier, Bjelke-Petersen had re-invented himself as a champion of law and order, exploiting the anti-Springbok protests of 1971 and successfully depicting opponents of his regime as dangerous Communist sympathisers who needed to be dealt with. At a time when National Party campaigns were less coordinated than now, an incompetent and lazy state ALP branch did Gough Whitlam no

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brent, “What is it about Queensland?”, *Inside Story*, 14 July 2016, <http://insidestory.org.au/what-is-it-about-queensland>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Rodan, “Gough Whitlam’s close-run thing”, *Inside Story*, 17 February 2012, <http://insidestory.org.au/gough-whitlams-close-run-thing>.

favours either. Indeed, one might invert Brent's thesis to the effect that popular state governments can enhance support for the federal party. As a corollary, it might be suggested that inadequate state oppositions can suppress support for their federal counterparts.

Once the Whitlam government was elected, Bjelke-Petersen commenced a non-stop campaign against it which would only end with its dismissal in November 1975. Once again, things were less than equal as there was no suppression of the federal coalition vote in the 1974 and 1975 elections: the total anti-ALP swing in Queensland in those two polls (9.7 per cent) was only topped by Tasmania (16.4 per cent) where specific grievances against the withdrawal of industry protection were at play. Tasmanian exceptionalism would be evident again in 1983 when (despite the presence of a conservative state government) it alone resisted the Bob Hawke landslide, with the ALP's environmental policy an electoral liability.

In 1984, the Hawke government suffered an unexpected swing against it of 1.5 per cent nationally, with WA (4.1 per cent) the worst for Labor, but this was hardly the impact of an "unpopular" state ALP government: it would go on to win two more elections. It is more probable that federal Labor initiatives in areas such as native title (reforms resisted by the Burke state Labor government) were critical in this loss of WA support for the Hawke government.

Brent is on a clear winner in the 1990 federal election. Labor sustained a 0.9 per cent national swing against it, with its worst states (Victoria 4.8 per cent; WA 3.8 per cent) in the hands of unpopular long-term ALP governments clearly in their death throes. The same trend would be evident in Labor's loss of federal government in 1996, where NSW (now governed by the ALP for nearly a year) suffered a 6.9 per cent drop against the national figure of 5.1 per cent. Queensland went further with 8.7 per cent, but with a conservative state government: no suppression of the coalition vote there. The electorate's enduring hostility to federal Labor is probably of more relevance (see below).

The first decade of this century featured such an abundance of state Labor governments that comparative assessments become problematic. These were long term governments and the vagaries of support for federal Labor constituted no useful guide to that longevity. In Rudd's election in 2007, Queensland provided the biggest swing (7.5 per cent), presumably assisted by the home state factor for the Labor leader. WA saw the lowest swing on the mainland (2.1 per cent) which presaged the defeat of state Labor the following year. In Tasmania, the swing was even lower (2.0 per cent), but the ALP state government in question would go on to win the next state election. However, its status on electoral death row would be confirmed in Labor's 2013 federal loss when the state led the anti-Labor swing with 9.4 per cent – way ahead of the next biggest swing of 5.5 per cent in SA, where the voters had tried to evict the state government, only to be twice thwarted by Labor's now routine ability to secure a majority of seats with a minority 2PP vote.

The 2010 federal election is something of the fly in the psephological ointment. Three of the five Labor states recorded swings to the Gillard government: South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria, the last-mentioned being a state where government would be lost three months later (with nearly 7 per cent less of the 2PP than federal Labor had secured – an astonishing difference). Clearly, the Victorian voters were distinguishing between federal and state elections.

One point where all things are rarely equal concerns the enduring poor levels of support for federal Labor in Queensland and Western Australia, a phenomenon which appears to owe little to the political complexion of state governments at any particular time. The figures are brutal in their clarity: in the twenty-seven federal elections from 1949 onwards, the ALP has secured a majority of the two-party preferred vote in Queensland on a mere three occasions; in WA, the tally is four (with three of those in the elections of 1983/84/87 – the home town factor for Bob Hawke?). Labor has won a majority of lower house seats in Queensland in six of the twenty-seven elections; in five in WA.

No other state tells such a one-sided story in federal elections. Federal Labor has a tough gig in the “frontier” states: mining taxes go down a lot better in Victoria than in states whose economies are defined by mining. But, the ALP’s capacity to win state elections in Queensland and WA also suggests the existence of voters prepared to support state Labor, but who will not vote for the party federally.

As a related point, in as much as states’ rights continue as an issue, federal Labor’s vulnerability is most acute in Queensland and WA. The glory days of Joh Bjelke-Petersen and Charles Court may be over, but their conservative successors are still capable of crafting an anti-Canberra, anti-centralist message for the consumption of parochial locals. Poring through the data, it is difficult to identify a federal election in which a conservative state government in Queensland or WA suppressed support for the federal coalition in those states. Campbell Newman must be filed under “might have” had his government made it to 2016.

It is also the case that some movements between elections are the result of a readjustment after a previous landslide, as the temporarily disenchanted drift back (see SA in 1972, above). This may take more than one election, and it is, of course, conceivable that the unpopularity of a given state government may hasten the return of prodigals to their party of prior allegiance.

Among the variety of possible explanations for state voting patterns in federal elections, Brent can certainly mount a case for the link between the popularity (or lack thereof) of state and federal parties. However, for this writer, the more enduring theme of federal ALP weakness in Queensland and WA stands out, a distinction not shared by any other state, and one which can almost be factored in before any election campaign starts. The big mining states are fickle lovers indeed: rare bursts of infatuation with federal Labor are quickly followed by rejection and buyer’s remorse. This challenge for the party remains formidable, regardless of who holds the reins in those state houses.