

## QUEENSLAND VOTERS DELIVER LABOR A MAJORITY, BUT LITTLE CHANGE TO THE STATUS QUO

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After a period of speculation from the middle of 2017, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk in late October called an early election for November 25, citing the resignation of Agriculture Minister and Rockhampton MP, Bill Byrne, and the dumping of Labor's Pumicestone MP, Rick Williams, as her reasons.<sup>1</sup> The four-week election campaign that followed saw the major party leaders criss-cross the state to spread their messages to apparently disaffected voters in 'at risk' marginal and regional electorates. Underlining the danger of rising anti-major party sentiment,<sup>2</sup> the Premier and Opposition Leader Tim Nicholls were seemingly tailed (after a delayed arrival) by Pauline Hanson and the One Nation 'Battlers' Bus',<sup>3</sup> looking to capitalise in particular on discontent in the regions fuelled by high local unemployment and other social ills.

This dynamic effectively characterised the entirety of the campaign, at least in terms of its media coverage, which warmed to the theme of One Nation 'gate-crashing' the election<sup>4</sup> much as it did in Queensland in 1998. In response, Palaszczuk and Nicholls campaigned energetically but, to several observers, delivered an uninspiring campaign with few attention-grabbing spending promises and, of more concern, little policy 'vision'.<sup>5</sup> With the major parties' release of policy costings very late in the campaign,<sup>6</sup> plans for the state's financial management (and debt reduction) didn't play much of a role, contrary to the previous two elections where 'debt and disaster' rhetoric featured prominently. When they did arise, 'bread and butter' issues such as cost of living pressures, transport and water infrastructure, and regional job programs lent the campaign more of a conventional air. Unsurprisingly, Queensland's ALP drew attention to a federal Coalition government on the nose electorally and depicted as 'chaotic' after the recent same-sex marriage survey and federal MPs' High Court citizenship dramas.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Vogler and Steven Wardill, 'Queensland election 2017: MP dramas trigger early poll', *Sunday Mail*, 29 October 2017, <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/state-election-2017/queensland-election-2017-mp-dramas-trigger-early-poll/news-story/83dd2dc932160d4cc94e90b42bef2150>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Salisbury, 'Palaszczuk must grapple with One Nation, and history, in unpredictable Queensland election', *The Conversation*, 29 October 2017, <https://theconversation.com/palaszczuk-must-grapple-with-one-nation-and-history-in-unpredictable-queensland-election-86389>.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Remeikis, 'Pauline Hanson's 'battler bus' hits the road for One Nation Queensland blitz', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/06/pauline-hansons-battler-bus-hits-the-road-for-one-nation-queensland-blitz>.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Wiggins, 'Queensland election: LNP and Labor at pains to pitch to potential One Nation supporters', *ABC News*, 20 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-20/queensland-election-one-nation-dominates-major-party-campaigns/9166568>.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Moore, 'Experts lament the lack of vision in Queensland election campaign', *Brisbane Times*, 17 November 2017, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland-election-2017/experts-lament-the-lack-of-campaign-vision-20171116-p4yx1r.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Josh Robertson, 'Queensland election: Labor's costings aim to hit wealthy to curb state debt, LNP promises cheaper power', *ABC News*, 23 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-23/queensland-election-costings-labor-costings-aim-curb-state-debt/9185480>.

<sup>7</sup> Michelle Grattan, 'Federal Coalition will be watching the Queensland election anxiously', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/federal-coalition-will-be-watching-the-queensland-election-anxiously-86523>.

Both Palaszczuk and Nicholls in effect made themselves small and mobile targets, with the major parties seeming to cancel out some of each other's initiatives with a handful of 'mirroring' announcements (around highway upgrades and skills training schemes, for instance).<sup>8</sup> Palaszczuk tried to avoid predictable pitfalls from being caught between regional support for, and vocal opposition elsewhere to, the Adani coal mine project.<sup>9</sup> For the second half of the campaign she mostly succeeded in quelling the disquiet which had threatened early to overrun her campaign, after an abrupt declaration to veto any federal NAIF loan – a move that some still saw as cynically opportunistic,<sup>10</sup> but seemed to work from a strategic standpoint.

For his part, Nicholls tried throughout the campaign to dodge the questions which had followed him for much of the year – whether the LNP would enter preference-swapping deals with One Nation, or possibly accept that party's help to form minority government. The media's pursuit of this line of questioning<sup>11</sup> built to a crescendo until Nicholls was forced to admit these as realistic possibilities, in the wake of a fumbling appearance at the Sky News/*Courier-Mail* 'People's Forum' debate.<sup>12</sup> This might have been a turning point in the campaign, further accentuated for Nicholls on election eve by his stumbling in a television appearance over recommending which party's candidates (LNP or One Nation) to vote for.<sup>13</sup>

Election eve polls by Galaxy and Newspoll put Labor comfortably ahead 52-48, but might have overstated the extent of Labor and Greens support,<sup>14</sup> Labor's highest support seemed (accurately, as it turned out) concentrated in the southeast corner.<sup>15</sup> In the end the ALP's losses and primary vote decline outside southeast Queensland were covered by gains in and around the capital. This reinforced the impression from the campaign that there were 'two (or more) Queenslands' in play.<sup>16</sup> With no clear outcome on election night, and minor parties jockeying to place themselves in strong negotiating positions with either of the major parties, more than one hopeful candidate on election night described the likely make-up of the parliament as a "dog's breakfast".<sup>17</sup>

On election night the ABC's Antony Green described this as one of the most 'complex' elections to determine.<sup>18</sup> His opinion reflected a record field of 453 candidates (15 more than the previous highest number, coincidentally in 1998 when One Nation last featured prominently) in an expanded number of electorates, increased to 93 from 89, many with recently redrawn boundaries. Adding to

<sup>8</sup> Nick Wiggins and Gail Burke, 'Queensland election: Breaking down the big promises from Labor and the LNP', *ABC News*, 22 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-16/qld-election-breaking-down-big-promises-from-labor-lnp/9143542>.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Williams, 'Queensland election: Adani coal mine tops priority issue list in Facebook poll', *ABC News*, 2 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-02/queensland-election-adani-environment-top-priority-issue-list/9107730>.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Clun, 'Labor changes its tune on reason for blocking Adani loan', *Brisbane Times*, 9 November 2017, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland-election-2017/labor-changes-its-tune-on-reason-for-blocking-adani-loan-20171109-p4ywx8.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Barry, 'LNP won't reveal its preference deals in Queensland election', *North West Star*, 11 November 2017, <http://www.northweststar.com.au/story/5049583/lnp-wont-reveal-its-preference-deals-in-queensland-election/>.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Remeikis, 'Queensland election: One Nation question dogs LNP in leaders' debate', *The Guardian*, 17 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/17/queensland-election-one-nation-question-dogs-lnp-in-leaders-debate>.

<sup>13</sup> Liz Burke, 'Queensland wannabe premier's embarrassing Sunrise slip-up', *News.com*, 24 November 2017, <http://www.news.com.au/finance/work/leaders/tim-nicholls-asked-repeatedly-whether-lnp-will-take-one-nation-preferences/news-story/4d860581a96d93a7b76135e440d32b66>.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Beaumont, 'Final Queensland polls show Labor likely to win', *The Conversation*, 25 November 2017, <https://theconversation.com/final-queensland-polls-show-labor-likely-to-win-87766>.

<sup>15</sup> Gail Burke, 'Queensland election: Stronger south-east support will return ALP to government, poll finds', *ABC News*, 24 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-24/queensland-election-galaxy-poll-predicts-alp-victory/9187392>.

<sup>16</sup> Liz Burke, 'State election makes the case for North Queensland to split', *News.com*, 27 November 2017, <http://www.news.com.au/finance/work/leaders/state-election-makes-the-case-for-north-queensland-to-split/news-story/75d6659f1263e09961ca2e332169c784>.

<sup>17</sup> Staff writers, 'Queensland Election results 2017: Live seat results, news and analysis', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 November 2017, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/national/queensland-election-results-2017-live-seat-results-news-and-analysis/news-story/ad9c4902c6119dadb8b8d3894c8c456f>.

<sup>18</sup> Matt Eaton, 'Queensland election result likely to remain unknown for days', *ABC News*, 26 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-26/queensland-election-results-to-remain-in-balance-for-some-time/9193774>.

the complexity – and the unpredictability of electorate results – was the reintroduction after 25 years of compulsory preferential voting at Queensland elections.<sup>19</sup> While swings to or against Labor and the LNP were nowhere near as dramatic as at the last two state elections, overall figures showed a highly fragmented statewide vote. A decline in primary vote support for the major parties – the lowest in decades – saw almost one-third of voters gave first preferences to minor parties and independents,<sup>20</sup> similar to what happened at the 1998 election when One Nation made such an impact. This, however, is largely where the similarities with that election end.

The performance of the major parties this time around continues a significant recent decline in their primary vote support. Combined with compulsory preferencing, several electorate contests duly developed into three- or even four-horse races. This kept more candidates in the running to at least finish high enough to make distributing preferences to leading candidates a complicated, time-consuming and ultimately deciding matter; a higher percentage than normal of the vote needed to be counted before final positions became clearer in many seats.<sup>21</sup> Nicholls resisted pressure for several days to concede the result, apparently in the slim hope of forming a ragtag minority government if some close seat results belatedly fell in the LNP's favour.<sup>22</sup>

Queensland's 2015 state election – resembling the 2016 federal election – produced a similarly close and protracted outcome, forcing Palaszczuk to wait two weeks until forming her minority government. If the major parties' primary vote share continues to fall or even remain at current levels, and minor parties such as the Greens, One Nation, and Katter's Australian Party (KAP) maintain reasonable levels of support, this may herald a long-term shift in traditional voting patterns and behaviour.<sup>23</sup> Voters here and around the nation may need to accustom themselves to a new 'electoral norm' of tight, drawn-out contests, where leaders' election night speeches are potentially a thing of the past.

Yet, despite all the sound and fury of the four-week election campaign, followed by the protracted process of counting postal and pre-poll votes, Queenslanders ultimately opted to return the Labor government with a slim majority.<sup>24</sup> Palaszczuk saw off both the LNP opposition and a supposed 'groundswell' challenge from One Nation to win, and in doing so becomes the first female leader at state or federal level to be re-elected after a prior win (after becoming the first to win office from opposition). But the process to get there took a fortnight after the polls had closed, as it did in 2015 and as it had in the past (the 1998 election, for instance),<sup>25</sup> leaving many wondering in the interim if the state was headed again for the supposed 'instability' of a hung parliament.

As it turned out, Antony Green's seemingly premature declaration the morning after the election that the ALP would win a bare majority proved to be prescient.<sup>26</sup> After this year's electoral boundary

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<sup>19</sup> Doug Hunt, 'With One Nation on the march, a change to compulsory voting might backfire on Labor', *The Conversation*, 13 November 2017, <https://theconversation.com/with-one-nation-on-the-march-a-change-to-compulsory-voting-might-backfire-on-labor-86923>.

<sup>20</sup> Kristian Silva, 'Queensland election: Results still unclear because voters turned on the major parties', *ABC News*, 26 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-26/queensland-election-result-unclear-voters-turn-on-major-parties/9193946>.

<sup>21</sup> Felicity Caldwell, 'Why doesn't Queensland have a new government yet?', *Brisbane Times*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland-election-2017/why-doesn-t-queensland-have-a-new-government-yet-20171205-p4yxeg.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Amy Remeikis, 'LNP leader Tim Nicholls refuses to concede Queensland election', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/28/liberal-national-party-leader-tim-nicholls-refuses-to-concede-queensland-election>.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Pearson, 'Get used to delayed election results, academic says', *Nine News*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/2017/11/28/13/06/get-used-to-long-election-waits-says-expert>.

<sup>24</sup> Chris Salisbury, 'Queensland finally has a government, but the path ahead for both major parties looks rocky', *The Conversation*, 8 December 2017, <https://theconversation.com/queensland-finally-has-a-government-but-the-path-ahead-for-both-major-parties-looks-rocky-87847>.

<sup>25</sup> Jenny Menzies, 'Long transitions and hung parliaments', *The Machinery of Government*, 20 November 2017, <https://medium.com/the-machinery-of-government/long-transitions-and-hung-parliaments-6d94ed44ae4a>.

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Ford and Nick Wiggins, 'Queensland election: Labor to form majority government, Antony Green predicts', *ABC News*, 27 November 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-26/qld-election-labor-to-form-majority-government-green-predicts/9194624>.

redistribution, Labor had gone into the election with a nominal 48 seats, and came out the other side with exactly that number, indicating (at least on the strength of numbers) little change to the government's status. Probably the most significant outcome is the apparent geographical divide in terms of party support in various parts of the state.<sup>27</sup> Labor cemented its stranglehold on seats in and around the capital, holding all but seven of 42, but now will be wary of the challenge from the Greens in inner-Brisbane seats after that party's unprecedented win in the leafy seat of Maiwar.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the LNP now licks its wounds after a second consecutive disappointing election loss, which saw One Nation – while winning only a single central Queensland seat<sup>29</sup> – and, to a lesser extent, KAP, strip primary votes mainly from the LNP in the regions. With the LNP now holding only two state seats north of Gladstone, this 'assault' from minor parties on the right will cause ongoing concern for federal Coalition MPs through this term of the Turnbull government.<sup>30</sup> In Queensland, meanwhile, the state now settles in to a first fixed term of parliament until October 31, 2020, after which voters can look forward to four-yearly elections thereafter.

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<sup>27</sup> Conal Hanna, 'Queensland vote reveals a state split in eight', *Brisbane Times*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland-election-2017/queensland-vote-reveals-a-state-split-in-eight-20171128-p4yx9j.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Annie Guest, 'Greens claim first seat win at a Queensland election citing nationwide swing', *ABC News*, 7 December 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-07/greens-claim-first-queensland-seat-in-wealthy-brisbane-suburbs/9234442>.

<sup>29</sup> Adrian Beaumont, 'With result still in the balance, Labor likely to win Queensland and One Nation likely to take just one seat', *The Conversation*, 26 November 2017, <https://theconversation.com/with-result-still-in-the-balance-labor-likely-to-win-queensland-and-one-nation-likely-to-take-just-one-seat-87755>.

<sup>30</sup> Michelle Grattan, 'Queensland result, while decided on state issues, adds to Turnbull's burdens', *The Conversation*, 26 November 2017, <https://theconversation.com/queensland-result-while-decided-on-state-issues-adds-to-turnbulls-burdens-88135>.