

## ***CAN DO: CAMPBELL NEWMAN AND THE CHALLENGE OF REFORM<sup>1</sup>***

**Book review by Roger Scott  
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That's the last press conference I'll ever have to do... that's the last time I'll ever have to talk to that pack of bastards.<sup>2</sup>

### **1 Living with a Hostile Media**

As one of the pack of bastards who was at that last news conference, even if I am fairly confident that I'm not a bastard, and even if Mr Newman was thinking about some other bastards and not me, I am at least subconsciously inclined to reject his analysis of my craft. So perhaps journalists should stay out of the argument about journalists.

It may be naively purist to say, but reporters reporting on criticism of reporters makes them part of the story. It may be better for someone else to assess whether Mr Newman is right or wrong. That won't work of course. We need to be able to explain our actions as reporters and rebut - if necessary - accusations of bastardry. But it's difficult to remain disinterested in that particular to and fro.<sup>3</sup>

Chris O'Brien's response to the Newman biography by Gavin King has been typical of the reception given to the book. For many readers with a working knowledge of Queensland politics, this is the strongest 'take-away message' – the pathological hatred generated in Newman directed at the mass media, arising from the 2012 election campaign when he unseated Ann Bligh. This is to sell short a book which ranges widely over family history and Newman's extensive career before 2012.

This occupies the first half of the book and has a dispassionate tone of relative calmness. Like so many biographies, the record of events is not especially engaging for the readers outside the family circle, even a family with a significant national political pedigree. I was interested to note that Newman's father met Milton Friedman, though. (Friedman features again in a final chapter which sits very oddly with the narrative style of the rest of the book)

### **2. Lord Mayor – Outsider to King of the Castle**

Even when the story reaches chapter 4, 'Top Job for an Outsider', the job in question is being Lord Mayor of Brisbane and the personalities and conflicts in local government do not inflame the blood of political scientists. Much is already on the public record about the transition from the oddity of

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<sup>1</sup> Gavin King, *Can Do: Campbell Newman and the Challenge of Reform*, Connor Court Publishing, 2015, pp 332.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell Newman, cited in King, p.271.

<sup>3</sup> Chris O'Brien, ABC, *The Drum*, 8 October, 2015.

an electoral outcome which gave power to a directly-elected Liberal Lord Mayor and a Council with a clear ALP majority.

His victory in 2004, repeated in 2008, demonstrated his capacity to win elections. In 2004, he became, in the title of the chapter, 'King of a Divided Castle'. King records the history of that campaign, orchestrated by Ben Myers, when Newman seemed to be facing defeat against incumbent Tim Quinn.<sup>4</sup>

Using advice from Toby Ralph's findings, Ben Myers steered the campaign in this dramatically different direction. They threw the rule book out the window. ...

In a one-two punch combination, the team commissioned a series of attack ads featuring themes recommended by Ralph's research, painting Quinn as complacent, lazy and arrogant. (p.109)

(Perhaps Anna Bligh's campaign team later borrowed from the same play-book, but they targetted the whole family, the campaign hitting a new political low).

The next chapter, on the period when Newman had converted his popularity into a workable Liberal majority on council, is simply entitled 'Outcomes'.

There are a few hints here about the personality issues underlying this perception. Under a sub-head of 'I'm the boss', King reports:

Within a week of moving into City hall, Campbell took aim at existing political staffers, particularly those who had worked for the former Lord Mayor. In comments he later attributed to naivety in dealing with the media, a story in *The Courier Mail* ran under the headline, 'Work with me or face the sack – Newman demands loyalty of top staff'. (p.115)

Over the page, there is a record of Newman paying a visit to Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch and how they got along well. 'Murdoch was impressed by the new mayor's attitude to politics and his enthusiasm for economic development'.

The tension between Newman's expectations about support from the management of the key local newspaper and the performance of its staff was already evident. Throughout his local government career, quotations in the book show how he received unstinting support from the Murdoch press and obviously he anticipated this would continue.

The two chapters on Brisbane local government are much more substantial and longer than those on his Premiership and his three-page list of achievements in an Appendix suggests that he regarded this period as the pinnacle of his career.

### **3. Victory at a Cost**

The book comes alive halfway through, with the chapter 'The Cost of Victory' covering the 11 months identified as the election campaign period. Here Newman begins to identify the villains whom he believed caused him to lose the 2015 election but also made the winning in 2012 so damaging to his personality. The primary villains were identified as Jackie Trad and other lesser-known members of the 2012 ALP campaign team:

They knew Campbell's family was his weak point. He had a hard exterior. But contrary to the public perception Labor was busily crafting around him, Campbell was a soft touch when it came to his wife, children and extended family. Labor's sole purpose during the campaign was to keep digging and poking at that vulnerable spot until he cracked. (p.169)

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<sup>4</sup> 'Myers is one Campbell Newman's most trusted lieutenants, and in his role as director of strategy and communications is widely credited with helping Newman achieve his two Brisbane mayoral victories in 2004 and 2008. ... Myers helped manage the campaign that saw Newman take City Hall as an outside candidate who was not an elected councillor. 'Meet the Labor and LNP powerbrokers, *Courier-Mail*, 4.2.12.'

The secondary villains were more generalised:

Campbell's views on the media had reached new dimensions of loathing by the end of 2011. He was disgusted by the ethics of some journalists, who he believed had repeatedly failed to question and filter the dirt Labor was delivering. (p.172)

The book provides specific names:

Privately he described *The Australian* Queensland reporter Michael McKenna as 'the tool of the ALP during this campaign' and identified Condren (Channel 7), Jolly (Channel 9) and Wardill (*The Courier Mail*) as 'feeding off each other in the Brisbane media bubble'. ... 'This vicious and unyielding media cycle left little room for policy debate, and the same level of blood-thirsty scrutiny didn't seem to apply to the Labor Party. (p.172)

This theme continues throughout the rest of the book, seeking to give the lie to the bulk of academic commentators who have identified a consistently supportive line for conservatives in the print media owned by the Murdoch family. Wardill in particular gets a blast from Newman for 'swallowing the Labor Party lines without a second thought' (p.178) and in an interview with Ben Myers, Newman's 'long-term collaborator and future chief of staff', reproved Wardell for producing 'one fabricated, misinformed story in particular'. (p.177).

More favourable mentions are given to other journalists – Vogler, Bryant, Calcutt and Houghton 'developed a better understanding of the man who would be Premier' (p.182). But the attitude of suspicion, even fear and loathing, which emerged in the 2012 campaign was recognized by Newman himself as colouring his responses to the media, as well as to Jackie Trad, long after he had won that election.

In the final passage in this chapter, King suggests that the electoral victory came at a high cost and 'changed Campbell's outlook and persona' .... 'whenever he was prickly in Parliament or abrasive in front of the media pack, he was thinking of Labor and the journalists and what they had done during the campaign'. This was reinforced in interview by Newman – 'I was extremely angry and bitter and it came through. It came through in the chamber. The person who is the real victor, the one who deserves the credit for all this, is Jackie Trad'. (p.195)

This is the first part of the explanation offered by King as to why Newman lost the subsequent election. It perhaps underplays the significance of the overwhelming numerical dominance inside the parliament which encouraged a search for vengeance unconstrained by fear of short-term electoral retribution.

Nobody on either side of the House in 2012 could have visualized the possibility of a change of party regime within a single electoral cycle. The trouncing of Labor may have blinded Newman to the impact his policy decisions made on public perceptions. The hubris of success gave him the confidence to ignore the media's representations of public opinion and time seemed to be on his side.

Blaming the media and the personalized nature of the ALP campaign also underplays other reasons why Newman won in 2012. The ALP had been on a slow but apparently irresistible slide towards defeat after being in office most of the time since 1989. Its strongest ally in survival was the union movement which provided not only funds but personnel for electioneering and core commitment. This alliance was weakened by the Bligh government's decision on privatization and the alienation was reinforced when Newman courted the public service unions, appearing on a Together website video before the election and offering the reassuring comment that 'the public service had nothing to fear' from a government led by him.

King mentions this comment in passing but gives no analysis of its significance for Newman except to note that 'it was a comment he would later regret ever making'. The nature of the regret is not specified. Did he regret saying something which was patently untrue in the light of austerity plans already made and described in the book? Or did he regret the consequences in 2015 electoral terms for the contradictory actions he took immediately after the 2012 election?

#### 4. Newman in Government 2012-13

King then devotes two chapters to discussing Newman in government, dismissing the first year in office in 22 pages after spending 30 pages on the campaign. There are more substantial treatments elsewhere<sup>5</sup>, but the retrospective perception adds to our sum of knowledge.

We learn that the appointment of Peter Costello to head the Commission of Audit was taken by the new Treasurer Tim Nicholls. 'Campbell endorsed the appointment of Costello but later wished he hadn't' (p.197), regretting that this allowed the whole exercise to be painted as a purely political exercise.

We also learn that Newman lamented the lack of women in Cabinet – but did not acknowledge that the most potent woman politician available had been relegated to the Speakership.

He also regretted allowing 'sound policy to trump smart politics' by axing the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. This discussion was framed around the belief that 'the Left had lost perspective on the value of public dollars'.

The *Courier Mail* reporter Matthew Condon typified the Left's response as though the Premier himself had driven a fascist-branded stake through Condon's delicate literary heart. (p.200)

The language is presumably as much King's as Newman's:

But the ideological battle-lines had now been drawn. The inner-city chattering class across the nation, together with their fellow travellers in the media, had a totemic cause to latch on to. They were all very upset. (p.201)

This world-view merging the Left and the 'chattering classes' appears as a recurrent analytical theme from here on, to the end of the book. By contrast, there is surprisingly little attention paid to the working-classes being aligned with 'the Left'.

The final regret related to his approach to leadership inside and outside parliament. King suggests that:

Campbell's jaded outlook toward his opponents merged with the tough decisions his Government was making. It didn't help that he shouldered virtually all the blame for the Government's austerity drive since the election win. ( p.213).

Newman formed a leadership triumvirate with former National leader and Deputy Premier Jeff Seeney and former Liberal deputy leader Tim Nicholls. Careful writing implies that neither added much benefit to Newman's personal standing. Specifically, 'Nicholls was making the tough calls behind the scenes but did not do enough in a supporting role when the cameras were switched on'. (p.214)

There is passive reporting by King that:

Some political pundits, LNP MP's and Campbell loyalists believed Nicholls was in some way engineering the Premier's demise from the start, with a view to taking over the top job when Campbell lost the seat of Ashgrove at the next election. ... Campbell heard the talk but never gave it much thought. He was too focused on what needed to be done. (p 214)

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<sup>5</sup> Roger and Ann Scott, (1) *Parliament Under Newman 2012-13*, 2013: [http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase\\_upl/Queensland\\_Parliament\\_under\\_Newman.pdf](http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Queensland_Parliament_under_Newman.pdf); and  
(2) *Queensland 2014: Political Battleground*, January 2015, [http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase\\_upl/Qld\\_2014\\_Political\\_Battleground\\_with\\_Epilogue.pdf](http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Qld_2014_Political_Battleground_with_Epilogue.pdf)

## 5 Newman in Government 2014

The chapter on Newman's second year of office, 'Policy Versus Politics - Part Two', is more substantial, but uneven. It initially dismisses the strong sense of activism being displayed by its public service opponents in a single sentence:

Despite the sensible, disciplined set of accounts contained in the 2013 budget, the union's relentless and well-funded campaign against public service cuts was crowding out nearly all the other reforms and achievements. (p.223)

There is more evidence of preoccupation with the media. King asserts that during its first 12 months in government, few critics were as harsh as the *Courier Mail* editorial director, David Fagan. King mentions that Fagan's partner, radio broadcaster Madonna King, also wrote a Saturday column in the *Courier-Mail*. There is extensive description of a meeting with Murdoch in April 2013 which led to Fagan's removal<sup>6</sup> the following June. Newman and his wife are also noted as Murdoch's guests of honour at a media awards evening towards the end of the year.

A discussion of Clive Palmer also returns to the media's unfairness in discussing issues of corruption.

As an enemy of their enemy, (Palmer) also became a fair-weather friend of the Left. Reporters and the Labor Opposition lapped up his outrageous comments. By this point, the media had completely lost perspective on the reasons behind Palmer's outlandish attacks. (p.231)

Newman also adds to his list of *mea culpa*: about his poor political judgment in meeting Palmer, in declining to take legal action against Palmer because he didn't want to use taxpayers money; in agreeing to an unproductive meeting with Alan Jones; and in similarly declining to pursue a defamation action.

More substantively,

When Dr Levy was accused of misleading the PCMC over the circumstances of publishing an opinion piece (in the *Courier Mail*) Campbell and his Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie had had enough. The Government wanted to recalibrate the membership of the CMC and start afresh. ...

The Government did it for the right reasons but handled it in a 'ham-fisted' way. Yet again, the pattern of taking action for the right reason had overlooked the perception and political fall-out of that decision. The PCMC matter encapsulated the Government's image problem. The sacking of the Committee fed into the negative narrative of Campbell and his government as arrogant, corrupt, combative and drunk on the power of a massive majority. (p.247)

The discussion of the Carmody appointment as Chief Justice occupies one of the longest sections in the chapter. It included detail of those involved in the decision-making and the divisions of opinion between them, later making a reference to the Premier's initial reservations. The discussion was framed in the context of divisions among the legal profession over the VLAD laws and Carmody's intervention as Chief Magistrate concerning bail hearings: 'The first salvo in an almighty judicial showdown between Carmody and a mob of legal elites had been fired'. (p.252)

Newman's support for Carmody included a scathing attack on judges as part of those occupying 'the comfortable enclaves enjoyed by the inner-city chattering classes' whereas 'Carmody was a man who reflected the community he was expected to serve'. However, King reports that 'for a range of reasons, Carmody's appointment became the decision Campbell regretted more than any other in his 13-year political career'. (p 262) A long paragraph in his interview detailing reasons

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<sup>6</sup> 'News Limited announces changes in senior Queensland ranks', ABC, 12.6.13. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-06-12/news-limited-announces-changes-in-senior-qld-ranks/4749704>

why he was so upset includes the startling assertion that 'in Queensland, the Left now controls the legislature, the executive and the judiciary'.

Throughout the book and especially in the later chapters about the 2015 election and in the epilogue, 'the Left' is a malevolent descriptor less obviously related to ideology as to social class and applicable to non-Labor critics who perceived the Newman policies as endangering the environment, civil liberties and free speech. Only occasionally does he identify it with 'the big-spending and relentlessly militant approach of the unions'. (p.269)

Yet it can be argued that it was the union movement which 'did him in', just as it had 'done in' Anna Bligh in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Belatedly, King noted that 'the media wasn't interested in policy debate and the union's negative campaign against the Strong Choices asset sales program was working, particularly in regional areas'. This fails to distinguish between the various unions engaged in different campaigns, as well as the Queensland Council of Unions. John Battams, retiring as General Secretary of the QCU advanced a similar claim to electoral impact but is reported as saying that he has not read the book to see if he was mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

Newman would have approached the holiday season emboldened to call an election by the comprehensive endorsement of the *Courier-Mail* just before Christmas.

Despite being tarnished by the ongoing clumsiness of their federal colleagues, Mr Newman has overseen a remarkably bold yet deliberate government that has achieved what it has said it would, unafraid of a scrap along the way. By any measure, that's an A-grade result for Queenslanders.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. An epilogue after January 2015

The second last chapter 'A New Journey' is a 13-page overview of the 2015 election campaign which barely addresses the issue of trade union influence. And, in keeping with the whole book, there is no recognition that voters might be concerned about the environment and be prepared to respond to urging to 'put Newman last' on this basis.

By election time, King paints Newman as wholly defeatist, having tried on two occasions to resign and being rebuffed by those who would have expected him to lose his Ashgrove seat but for the LNP to retain government with a reduced majority.

The book again blames the bias and laziness of the media, for example its failure to examine in detail what it considered the 'Fitzgerald's hyperbolic comments' and Newman's slip-up in response. According to Gavin King:

He was prepped to say the line 'I have the greatest respect for Tony Fitzgerald. Whether by design or default, Campbell added the word 'had' when the reporters asked for his response to Fitzgerald's claims: 'I have had the greatest respect for him in the past'. (p. 273).

After being seen to be 'clearly ahead' during the first two weeks of the campaign, two diversions occurred. Fielding questions during the final stage of an event in front of a group of 100 so-called 'undecided' voters, Newman claimed that 'bikie gangs were funding the unions, who in turn passed on their ill-gotten gains to the Labor party'. Attendees and the television viewers perceived

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Scott, *Mobilising Dissidence: The Relationship Between Labor, Labour and the wider community in the 2015 Queensland State election* [http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase/upl/Mobilising\\_dissidence.pdf](http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase/upl/Mobilising_dissidence.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> 'Newman Out: Battams' work here is done', *Brisbane Times*, 22.10.15 <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/newman-out-battams-work-here-is-done-20151022-gkg7ol.html>.

<sup>9</sup> 'Newman's A-grade result for Queensland', editorial in the *Courier-Mail*, 15.11.14. [http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase/upl/CM\\_assessment\\_of\\_Newman\\_Dec\\_2014.pdf](http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase/upl/CM_assessment_of_Newman_Dec_2014.pdf)

this as a deliberate ploy, given that no follow-up could be pursued because of time. I recall interpreting the telling shrug of his opponent, Anastacia Palaszczuk, as comment enough on the desperation of this move.

King though reports that Newman's response to calls for supporting evidence – 'Google it' - was ridiculed by the media - 'they were taken aback at the suggestion they they should do some research and fact-checking of their own'. (p.276)

Then, two days later, Newman was equally unhelpful in response to what he perceived as a hostile media and refused to comment on thirty repeated questions about the politics of campaigning. He was also coping with the universal embarrassment generated by his federal counterpart giving a knighthood to the Queen's husband.

King comments:

His performance in response to the questions was always going to generate the type of wrath and condemnation it received from reporters. Taking on the groupthink approach of a media pack trapped in its own bubble was nigh on impossible at the best of times, let alone in the heat of an election campaign. (p.277)

King belatedly noted that;

In the final week of the campaign, the unions ramped up their asset sales propaganda and no-one in the LNP countered it. Tim Nicholls was missing in action. Worse still, a planned all-out negative advertising assault against Labor, due to be co-ordinated out of LNP headquarters, never eventuated. .... This proved to be a catastrophic error for LNP campaign director Brad Henderson and his team. (p.278)

Nevertheless even the much-reviled Leftist media and the strongly supportive editorial writers all expected the LNP to be re-elected when reviewing the campaign on election eve.

King quotes the contrary view of Toby Ralph, (a Liberal Party campaign guru cited frequently in the book) :

The LNP's poor handling of the asset leasing program and the failure to manage the expectation of Queenslanders which had put the LNP in a losing position from the start of the campaign.... It was campaign failure rather than community mood that delivered the loss. (p.283)

Students of published opinion polls suggest something different, with the LNP in a winning position for several months before the campaign started, predicted to lose many seats but not their hold on government. But Ralph's analysis supports the LNP's post-election narrative that the Queensland electorate accidentally installed a nonentity to replace Newman.

The book concludes with an extended 'Epilogue', the second-longest chapter in the book. This is nearly all from the author and not much from the subject.

The five topic areas for debate include the media, federal-state relations, the public service, the psyche of inner-city voters and the nature of political leadership. (p.285)

From a starting point with Milton Friedman concerned about the tyranny of the status quo and iron triangles, King moves to his own reformulations of Friedman, the views of John Howard, Paul Kelly, Nick Cater, Lindsay Tanner, Peter Osborne and Anne Williams. Newman himself enters the lists with extended quotations from interviews with King on both federal-state relations (alongside John Hirst) and the public service (alongside Peter Shergold); Toby Ralph and then Ross Fitzgerald get to speculate about the short-termism of the mindset of voters.

Cater's 'self-appointed ruling class of sophisticates' are seen to 'have an undue influence on political discourse because they dominate so many of the nation's key positions in media, the

public service, the arts, law and universities'. If true, one can only wonder how conservative governments ever get elected or how mining and commercial interests survive and prosper.

Somewhat paradoxically, King's final analysis includes a recognition of the importance of a candidate's personality appealing to an electorate without acknowledging that the media may reflect rather than shape that appeal.

The protection of patronage and risk aversion, muddled visions and poor communication with the electorate, as well as party political warfare are all valid explanations for today's lack of political leadership. But, as the Newman government demonstrated so vividly, political leadership and vision is only part of the equation. Without a likeable personality or the skills of soft politics, reform is fraught with electoral danger. (p.319)

Newman himself gets the last words, with an extended excerpt from an interview, without being able to confront any of the big questions asked in this wide-ranging, rather sprawling analysis or the point made above. All he can call for is leadership courage and attitudinal change, confident that 'Australia has a proud history of making difficult decisions that reap benefits over the long term'. (p.322)

## **6. Pot-boiler or Serious Scholarship?**

Did the University of Queensland Press err in declining to support this enterprise? Would the book meet their scholarly standards? As a some-time reviewer of manuscripts for publication as well as examining theses, I would have offered UQP the following criticisms:

The Epilogue represents an unfocussed series of observations which stand separate from, and feel different from, all that has preceded it. The linkage with the Queensland theme – about the difficulty of reform based on austerity - sometimes seems tenuous. A less indulgent publisher would have wanted a stronger connection with what had gone before, so the chapter did not appear to be pandering to the vanity of the author and the damaged ego of its subject.

King writes lucid and unvarnished prose, drawing on long quotations from interviews, not all of which are footnoted as the source is often clear from the context. Sometimes it is not clear when he has shifted from his own text to direct citation of interviews.

At times, guided by legal advice on defamation, he is careful to insert information that people he criticizes all refused invitations to participate in interviews. And, in a section devoted exclusively to Jackie Trad, after reproducing a press story about the Criminal Justice Commission which identifies 'a woman and two other Queensland Left faction members', King piously notes that 'there is certainly no suggestion at all that Trad was one of the Labor identities mentioned in the above article'.

He has not researched in any depth – only a handful of sources beyond newspaper files in the first nine chapters. In the somewhat pretentious 'Epilogue', he seeks endorsement for authors making the standard conservative's complaints about 'impediments for reform', from a standard range of sources reaching as far back as Milton Friedman.

He also offers a three-page Appendix listing Newman's key achievements in public office as Lord Mayor and then Premier. But strangely no Index. If one existed, it would show up the absence of significant discussion on some of the key political themes, especially the role of the Queensland Greens party and the environmental issues which made it so difficult for him to hold his own seat.

His choice of words is not always razor sharp, so we see 'adverse' when he means 'averse', 'honing in' when he means 'homing in', 'exalted' when he means 'exultant', 'reticent' when he means 'reluctant', 'no compulsion' when he means 'no compunction' – but such things only bother pedantic people at more academically-inclined publishers.



Overall, scholars interested in Queensland politics will not be able to avoid reading the book, and students of leadership will also find it interesting, even instructive, as will students of media management.

More depth and balance can be found in the LNP's own analysis by Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon, and in articles by Paul Williams from Griffith University who publishes regularly in the *Courier Mail* and in more scholarly journals. Students can also find value in the extensive analyses of the Newman era and the two most recent State elections which are located as Research Studies on the TJRyan Foundation web-site. But I would say that, wouldn't I?