

Claiming credit and apportioning blame: revisiting the trauma of 2011

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There have been two unpleasant reminders of the 2011 floods disaster this week. One was the Premier's claim that he had 'got us through the Brisbane floods'; the other the announcement that a class action was about to be lodged on behalf of flood victims against the operators of the Wivenhoe and Somerset dams.

On 7 July 2014 the media reported an interview with Campbell Newman in which he claimed:

I am the guy who got us through the Brisbane floods, the Gap storms in 2008, made sure that the people of Bundaberg were looked after and particularly got those people off those roof tops.

This must rank as one of the most ill-judged comments that Campbell Newman has made to date. It was the Queensland community, government agencies such as police and emergency services, and a huge body of volunteers who 'got us through' the Brisbane floods. It was also former Premier Anna Bligh who is most memorable for her outstanding leadership throughout the emergency.



View over Gailey Road from Prospect Terrace, St Lucia
13.1.11
(photograph: Ann Scott)

The 2011 floods forced the evacuation of thousands of people from towns and cities. At least 70 towns and over 200,000 people were affected, and the impact was felt over three-quarters of Queensland and led to 300 road closures. The cost of the damage was first estimated at around \$1 billion, then raised to \$2.38 billion. When the current LNP government shouts about a debt crisis caused by the 'incompetence' of their predecessors, have they ever acknowledged the financial impact of the 2011 floods?

Do we remember Campbell Newman as our saviour during those momentous events? We probably remember Premier Anna Bligh's nightly status reports, in which she not only conveyed her deep distress as the extent of the disaster and the loss of life unfolded, but also demonstrated her formidable capacity to explain the complex and important issues everyone had to face - and her masterly command of the briefings she had received from the emergency services about what was happening across the State.

On 14 January 2011, as the water levels started to drop, Campbell Newman went into the 'blame game' mode. Crikey correspondent, Amber Jamieson, wrote:

The water hasn't finished receding and the clean-up has barely begun, but the blame game has already started. Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman is calling for an "open and transparent inquiry", run by the state, into the floods. ... The premier's office ... supported a "formal evaluation" of the floods once the crisis phase is over.

The current governments in Queensland and in Canberra are most notable for keeping the community in the dark over issues that are a concern to us all, and blaming their ALP predecessors for a multitude of alleged sins, as well as spending millions of dollars on inquiries and audits designed to expose alleged 'incompetence'.

However it was Anna Bligh who established Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry to try find out what lessons could be learned and how the government might do better in future. A deeply traumatised community looked for someone or somewhere to place the blame.

On 16 March 2012, the Inquiry delivered its final report. It found that Wivenhoe Dam had been operated in breach of the manual that governs its operation and that the dam operators had failed to use rainfall forecasts in making decisions about dam operating strategies. It was largely about the manual: whether it was adequate and how well it was followed. The evidence of three dam engineers was referred to the then Crime and Misconduct Commission to examine whether they lied under oath and covered their tracks about which strategies they had adopted. The CMC found there was no evidence the engineers colluded to mislead the inquiry about how Wivenhoe was managed before the floods inundated Brisbane and Ipswich.

But it was in the midst of the search for someone to blame that the Queensland community went to the polls. Whatever faults the previous Queensland ALP governments may have had, looking back we can respect how open and accountable they tried to be - particularly in contrast to the conservatives now in power at both State and Commonwealth level, governments which are exhibiting almost obsessive secrecy. We can respect the suite of reforms the ALP put in place after the Fitzgerald Inquiry, often leading to their own members' discomfort - though credit is also due to National Party Deputy Premier, Bill

Gunn, for establishing the Inquiry (in Bjelke-Petersen's absence), and to Michael Ahern, who succeeded Bjelke-Petersen in 1987, and who promised to implement the Fitzgerald recommendations 'lock, stock and barrel'. A few of us still remember the corrupt Bjelke-Petersen era and assumed that after the Fitzgerald Inquiry Queenslanders would never have to witness such systemic corruption again, and therefore worry when governments become secretive.

Many more of us remember the recent Queensland floods and cyclones. We remember extraordinary acts of individual heroism, and the community spirit that was demonstrated when neighbours and strangers stepped in to help one another.

Given Campbell Newman's claim about seeing Brisbane through the floods, it is interesting to recall a 2011 speech analysis of the presentation styles of Bligh and Campbell. On April 16 2011, the Courier-Mail carried a report by Steve Wardell who had asked a speech analyst, Dean Frenkel, to provide an assessment of various Queensland politicians' communication skills, including Anna Bligh and Campbell Newman. Frenkel wrote:

Anna Bligh

Bligh is among the finest and most nuanced political speakers in the country. She is a league ahead of the other state premiers. Her speaking manner suggests the following qualities: she is very human, appears genuine, matter of fact, no nonsense, competent. She has presence, credibility, a sense of reasonableness and wisdom. Clearly she is within her depth. There has been something Churchillian about her since the floods. ...

She has a good emotional range - able to adjust her tone to communicate effectively across a range of circumstances. She can show a fine mix of strength and poise under pressure yet can still show pain.

Campbell Newman

He has an archetypal personality - comes across as a modern day Australian character - macho hardman with bits of Crocodile Dundee, John Wayne and Popeye the sailor man. He is lucky that all his speech faults do not present any disadvantage to him - his imperfections will actually be embraced by many. He comes across as a black and white figure - those who like him will love him, and those that don't will quickly get sick of him. ...

Appears to be such a 'can do' man that he'd want to do something even when it doesn't need to be done. He would be great in a military conflict, but there may be an issue as to whether his style will always suit civilian life.