

'FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE': WILL FORTUNE FAVOUR LABOR IN QUEENSLAND?

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Labor's electoral chances have improved at state and federal level without the party having to do very much at all. While this improvement in fortune must come as a relief to hard pressed MPs and embattled party members, the party's long term future depends on more than coasting to an improved position on the declining popularity of state and federal LNP governments. Labor seems too willing to stand back and watch the Coalition come to grief rather than to seek power actively on its own terms. As Machiavelli advised, while *Fortuna* may be the arbiter of half our actions, it is up to us to shape the rest. In some respects bending fortune to its will is much harder for Queensland Labor to do than its federal counterpart because it was left with so few MPs after the 2012 election. Nevertheless Queensland Labor has some advantages because state government responsibilities for policy areas such as health and education play to the party's strengths.

The stars have aligned unexpectedly for state and federal Labor. Inequality and its causes are emerging issues in public debate, the federal Coalition government has introduced an extremely unpopular budget, and the state LNP government has alienated important community sectors. The sense that there are possibilities for Labor seems to have energised supporters previously dulled by defeat: the state branch of the party reportedly attracted 4000 new members in 2013. The huge 16.1% swing against the LNP in the Redcliffe by election in February and the prospect of a possible win in the forthcoming Stafford by-election in July have provided further boosts. Nevertheless, it would be an astonishing and improbable feat for Labor to become the party of government at the next election. It is most likely that the party will have around 30+ seats in the next parliament, with Premier Newman's seat of Ashgrove among them. Newman has indicated that if he loses Ashgrove, he will not seek an alternative seat, presumably leaving the premiership to his Deputy Tim Nicholls. An interesting question emerging from this scenario is whether controversial Attorney General Jarrod Bleijie would exert quite as much influence in a Nicholls government as he has in Newman's. An LNP government less prone to extremism may be harder for Labor to beat.

The current comparatively optimistic outlook for Labor can be contrasted with perceptions that the party was a spent force after its series of recent election losses at state and federal level. Critics pointed out that with the decline of the industrial working class and trade union strength as well as the increasing irrelevance of collectivist sentiment, there was no longer a significant space for Labor in contemporary Australian politics. Some of them urged the party to sever union ties, reform the party organisation, and seek to appeal to those voters whom former Labor leader Mark Latham labeled "aspirational". It is not clear, however, that it was union links or collectivist values that saw the Bligh government undone. The reasons for Bligh's loss were many and some of them could have afflicted a government of any political complexion.

There was an element of truth in the explanation that the Bligh government had reached its 'use-by date'. This reason was favoured by many Labor insiders, possibly because it largely relieved the Premier and her team of direct responsibility for Labor's loss. There was, however, substance in the argument to the extent that by 2012 Labor was showing the signs of wear and tear that come with longevity in office. Former Commissioner Tony Fitzgerald pointed out that incumbency had brought cronyism, patronage and the purchase of access. Bligh addressed these issues by introducing extensive integrity and accountability reforms although claims that the Committee of the Legislative Assembly was usurping the speaker's role proved a distraction from Bligh's other welcome measures. Unfortunately Queensland voters were unlikely to be overly interested in such reforms. They were more concerned with the perennially difficult area of Health. This Department was regularly in the news because of long waiting lists for surgery in public hospitals, a faulty payroll system that

seemed impervious to attempts to fix it, and assorted scandals. The issue that ensured the termination of Bligh's government, however, was the decision, not announced prior to the 2010 election, to sell government assets, including Queensland Motorways, the Port of Brisbane, Forestry Plantations Queensland, the state's rail freight network and the Abbott Point Coal Terminal. Gender may have been a factor too. AWU State Secretary Bill Ludwig concluded after the election that 'The blokes here just don't like women, especially women in charge'. The final blow to Bligh's premiership was an abysmal campaign.

Not all of these issues were obviously hallmarked *Labor problem* although it could be argued that making a mess of Health, a policy area usually strong for Labor, and privatising state assets in the face of union and public opposition were particularly damaging for Labor. The party's current position of opposing asset sales now looks lame and opportunistic, rather than representing a return to traditional values. Indeed issues of ideology appear as difficult for Labor to deal with as organisational reform, which invariably meets opposition from vested interests within the party. In fact, Queensland Labor has already introduced some of the democratic measures being urged on the federal party. Here, the parliamentary party, affiliated unions and party members each vote to elect the party leader and branch members now have a 50 per cent vote in electing Senate candidates, Brisbane Lord Mayoral candidate and the party's three vice-presidents.

The party has, however, shown little sign of developing a positive narrative. Like its federal counterpart, it is largely reactive and appears frightened of taking an ideologically strong position in case the public turns against it. This can be contrasted with the position of one of the party's heroes, Ben Chifley, who said in a speech cited in Troy Bramston's *For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches that Shaped History*.

The labour movement was not created with the objective of always thinking what is the most acceptable thing to do [sic] – whether this individual will win a seat or whether the movement will pander to some section of the community ... If, from time to time, the policy is not favoured by the majority of the people, there is no reason why the things we fight for should be put aside to curry favour with any section of the people.

The Labor Party has traditionally stood for social justice, even if practice has not always followed principle. Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty First Century* would not be such an unexpected best seller if it were not addressing an issue of importance to large numbers of people: the growing inequality between the rich and the poor. Fortunately for Labor, federal and state LNP governments have introduced budgets and a range of policies that reveal all too clearly that they are not attuned to "the vibe" of the moment and are dedicated to serving the interests of the big end of town. Even though the Australian and Queensland electorates are conservative, there is plenty of evidence that voters do not want to create a class of working poor with inadequate access to health, education and other services. Mark Latham has pointed out Labor should also campaign on the issue of climate change and it appears that public sentiment is shifting in favour of action.

Collectivist sentiment may not be as dead as Labor's critics have thought, but the ALP shows little sign of testing the waters. At the moment it appears to be relying for its advancement on a combination of some traditional supporters returning to the fold and a protest vote against the Newman and Abbott governments, a vote that Labor will undoubtedly share with the Palmer United Party. Although the small target strategy of doing nothing must be tempting, perhaps Labor would be better to heed Machiavelli's advice that fortune favours the brave.