

WHY THE ALP SHOULD HAVE WON MORE DECISIVELY

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The LNP is engaging in the sort of soul-searching which follows an unanticipated defeat, driven by a committee which includes their only successful leadership team since 1990 – Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon. Their interviews for the oral history project ‘Queensland Speaks’¹ (Borbidge: <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/rob-borbidge>; Sheldon: <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/joan-sheldon> a few years back make interesting listening in this context.

The epilogue to our book-length monograph ‘Queensland 2014: Political Battleground’ (<http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/cms/page.asp?ID=988>) offers them plenty of food for thought. We provide a long list of reasons why the LNP should have won, as well as a conventional analysis of the behavioural and policy problems used to explain why they lost, especially the unexpected impact of issues associated with trust and accountability. But the most important part of our analysis asks not why the ALP won but why it did not do better.

Here is the relevant excerpt:

Former ALP Senator John Black, writing in *The Weekend Australian* (7 February 2015), offers a deep and highly significant warning to the ALP in which he had once been an influential power-broker. He warned that ‘Labor leaders should not get over-excited – the swing was far from uniform’ and that they should have won more easily and may find life much more difficult if the party faces a by-election ‘without the benefit of the toxic presence of Newman and Abbott on the other side’.

Black attributed this poor performance to the failure of the ALP leadership to develop policy alternatives which would convince swinging voters of the urban middle class to shift their support from the LNP. The ALP could easily offer inducements and generate fears about privatization among the less-engaged working class voters who had departed from their traditional electoral strongholds in 2012.

Labor conspicuously failed to win back the support lost since the global financial crisis in a wide range of seats which used to be marginal labor seats on the Gold Coast and had failed to target similar seats in the northern and western suburbs of Brisbane which it ought to have won. There were similar middle-class seats in inner Brisbane which the ALP won but with a much lower-than-average swing.

Black provided a graph which showed that ‘since the state election of 2006, Labor has been consolidating support in seats dominated by families in the bottom two income quartiles and losing support in seats containing its traditional base of upwardly mobile third quartile families’.

He displayed his statistical insight to demonstrate that the election was won for the ALP on the back of the visceral dislike of Newman, aided by Abbott’s unhelpful policies on health in particular

¹ ‘Queensland Speaks’ presents interviews with key politicians, senior public servants and others, providing insights into the personal and political world of decision making in Queensland from 1968-2008. <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au>

and the unequal impact of federal budget cuts. But many middle-class voters did not shift their allegiance to the LNP; he cited the case of former Treasurer Tim Nicholls whose performance was the best in the state in reducing the amount of swing against him.

Clearly Labor's campaign against privatization not only failed to impress middle-class and professional voters who delivered Labor Premier Beattie his landslide victories, but it also shored up its principal protagonist to an extraordinary degree.

Winning back the working class heartland is one (considerable) achievement but reaching out to those from the leafier suburbs who supported Beattie is something else – including Nicholls' seat of Clayfield, once held by an ALP Minister. The ALP needs to move on from turning the contest in each electorate into a vote of no confidence in the existing LNP government. In particular it needs to consolidate its credibility with voters with a 'greenish' tinge who were successfully mobilized in Mt Cootha and Ashgrove and either voted directly for the ALP or directed their Green preferences to them.

Treating with disdain the Greens Party and the issues it embraces will shut the ALP out of the middle-class suburbs they need to win to secure stable government. The bell-wether constituency last time around was Mount Ommaney, where the local Greens, for a variety of reasons, chose not to direct their preferences to the ALP. This decision made the difference between the ALP losing and winning that seat and thus achieving a parliamentary majority.