

Time of Transition: The Queensland Parliament and Electoral Volatility, 2008–09

Paul D. Williams*

Introduction

The second half of a shortened 52nd Parliament marked the beginning of a new and unfamiliar period for Queensland politics. Late 2007 saw the populist Peter Beattie retire after nine years as Premier, and the unanimous election of Anna Bligh to become Queensland's first woman Labor leader. Bligh inherited a mixed legacy: a parliamentary majority of 58 of the 89 Legislative Assembly seats, and a host of public policy headaches. After a long electoral honeymoon, the new Premier's fortunes began to reverse as a grimmer economic backdrop amid the global financial crisis saw unemployment spike. That year also saw the long-awaited birth of a merged Liberal-National Party (LNP) – a party that, after a difficult gestation, enjoyed a smooth infancy. By early 2009, despite Labor's easy return (with a considerably reduced majority) at an early election, the public regard for Bligh's administration was severely tested by questions of integrity in government-business relations, and by a contentious policy of government asset sales. The shift in public mood was unmistakable.

This article comprises a parliamentary chronicle documenting the key legislative and other political events of the period. Yet it also argues two theses: that the years 2008-09 produced the most dramatic shift in political fortunes to the conservatives in a decade, and that, paradoxically, any electoral traction the LNP gained outside the Parliament was unmatched by a tepid performance inside the House. Evidence is offered by way of a discussion of the key political events damaging to the Government, public opinion surveys and tables of parliamentary activity.

* School of Humanities Griffith University

2008

When Parliament resumed on 12 February, Bligh faced ‘recycled’ Opposition leader Lawrence Springborg. After the Government introduced its promised bill to fluoridate 95 per cent of Queensland water amid moderate protest, more trouble emerged when former Emergency Services Minister Pat Purcell, despite previous denials, admitted he had assaulted two senior public servants in 2007. Speaker Mike Reynolds also sparked furore when he banned network television cameras in the chamber and replaced them with authorised cameras whose images the Government could control. After complaints of political censorship, the Premier overruled the Speaker, but not before Independent Nicklin MP Peter Wellington noisily objected. It was a costly criticism: in June, the Ethics and Parliamentary Privileges Committee (EPPC) suspended Wellington from the House for 21 days.¹ Springborg later appealed for an end to the name-calling in Parliament, just as the Opposition leader labelled himself ‘The Borg’. Yet that failed to save Liberal leader Mark McArdle when it was revealed he remained a director of *First Mortgage Investment Services*, a company that had lost millions of dollars from pensioners’ investments (*Courier Mail* 28 February, 2008).

In late February, the House passed a motion to vote on a referendum on four year terms but by early March bipartisanship had dissolved when the Opposition attached new accountability demands. By mid month Health Minister Stephen Robertson faced bigger problems when the LNP argued he had ‘sanitised’ a tabled Departmental report that had earlier flagged the extreme danger of insecure nurses’ accommodation in North Queensland – a sensitive issue following the alleged rape of a nurse (*Courier Mail* 14 March, 2008). As part of her public accountability commitment amid rumblings over political integrity, Bligh announced a reduction to \$1,000 (down from \$1,500) in the threshold required for public disclosure of political donations. In an alleged bid to embarrass the LNP’s benefactors,² the Government in August further amended the Act to ensure sponsors giving — and parties receiving — more than \$100,000 on any one occasion had to disclose said contributions within 14 days (*Courier Mail* 26 August, 2008). Any reforms were overshadowed, however, by the so-called ‘Gravy Train’ fiasco: *Queensland Rail*’s hosting, at taxpayers’ expense, of a \$3,000 catered excursion for Labor party branch members (*Courier Mail* 14 May, 2008). Like the Bundaberg Hospital saga that debilitated the Beattie Government in 2005, this and similar stories of public service and ministerial excess marked a watershed in the way the media regarded the Bligh Government.

On 3 June, new Treasurer Andrew Fraser delivered an underlying budget surplus of \$809 million: the second highest in a decade thanks to vastly enhanced coal

¹ Only former One Nation MPs Dorothy Pratt (Nanango) and Shaun Nelson (Tablelands) had been given stiffer suspensions – 28 days each for pouring milk on the steps of the Parliament in 2000 in protest at a deregulated dairy industry.

² Mining billionaire Clive Palmer was said to be the LNP’s largest donor.

royalties. Fraser abolished stamp duty on all houses up to \$500,000, but with higher duties on homes above \$1.5 million. With the cost of the 2026 Southeast Queensland Infrastructure Plan now ballooning from \$55 billion to \$107 billion, Fraser announced a \$17 billion capital works program (the largest in Australia) supported by borrowings of \$41 billion. Economic growth was forecast at 4.25 per cent (compared to a national average of 2.75 per cent), with unemployment at a 34 year low of 3.75 per cent (*Courier Mail*, 4 June 2008). But it was the long-anticipated extradition of allegedly errant surgeon Dr Jayant Patel — facing 14 charges (including three of manslaughter) from the Bundaberg Hospital saga — that sparked most interest. Despite criticism for delays in securing Patel's extradition, Police Minister Judy Spence assured Parliament the US Justice Department was 'pleased with the timeliness of documents from Australia' (*Courier Mail* 4 June, 2008). The Opposition failed to capitalise on prevailing angst, instead finding itself embarrassed when Beaudesert LNP MP Kev Lingard missed sitting days to participate in a parliamentary rugby union tour in France. Yet even this was overshadowed when, in early October, Ronan Lee, Labor MP for Indooroopilly since 2001, defected to the Greens to sit as that party's first Queensland representative.

In October, and for only the third time since 1860, the Parliament met outside Brisbane.³ This Cairns sitting attracted the usual public censure over the \$600,000 cost for temporary relocation — criticisms sharpened by the poor public attendances compared to previous regional sittings. Indeed, the 89 MPs usually far outnumbered the public gallery.⁴ The session also saw new laws banning shale oil mining around the Whitsunday Islands, and Speaker Reynolds's labelling of Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson as 'culturally incompetent' for holding a bravery award ceremony for Palm Island officers following the 2004 death in police custody of local man Mulrunji Doomadgee (*Courier Mail* 31 October, 2008). Police Minister Spence also claimed police resources were adequate in combating crime; hours later, her Mt Gravatt electorate office was robbed. The Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC)'s annual report was later tabled in the House, with Chair Robert Needham 'scaling back' official investigations — instead referring them to internal investigative units — because the public service had reached a new 'level of maturity' (*Courier Mail* 12 November, 2008). But attention soon turned to 'Fetta-gate' — an incident where LNP MPs Ray Stevens and Ray Hopper allegedly argued publicly over a restaurant bill, forcing a waiter to chase after them over an unpaid account. Bligh, too, was soon embarrassed when the EPPC admonished her for failing to declare in the Pecuniary Interests Register a holiday she enjoyed at no cost at the Sydney mansion of friend and Theiss board member Ros Kelly. Labor needed all the points it could muster, especially when Treasurer Fraser's 9 December mini-budget raised taxes by \$450 million, and yielded a reduced surplus

³ The House assembled in Townsville in 2002 and in Rockhampton in 2005.

⁴ Official figures showed a total of 5,271 attendees, of whom more than one third were school children. One evening Question Time, however, drew 755 public attendees. See *Courier Mail* 31 October, 2008.

of just \$54 million. In the space of a few months, the GFC had robbed state revenue of \$4.3 billion (*Courier Mail* 4 December; 10 December, 2008).

Yet, once again, the Opposition failed to properly exploit Labor's woes. Springborg avowed an LNP government would not drop Queensland into deficit but refused to explain how that might be achieved. His comments instead referred to 'front-ending' public service jobs and abolishing those found 'de-necessary'. Bligh soon referred to Springborg as the 'Ralph Wiggum' and 'George Dubya' of Queensland politics, while Springborg responded by labelling Bligh 'Pinocchio' (*Courier Mail* 4 December; 5 December; 6 December, 2008). Importantly, the nascent picture drawn by Labor of an Opposition leader struggling with economic realities would ultimately prove the LNP's undoing, but for now the Government struggled. The Opposition, for example, successfully⁵ mocked *The Good Mental Health Rocks* kit, one circulated among teachers that advised, among other things, to eschew 'aggressive' red pen when marking so as to protect students' self-esteem. A keener insight into government thinking was found when the Opposition tabled a leaked *Education Queensland* 'risk matrix' policy report that ranked 'sustained adverse publicity' as the worst possible outcome, even more dire than a client's 'loss of life or permanent injury' (*Courier Mail* 4 December, 2008). The parliamentary year closed historically when both Government and Opposition supported a motion, in French, calling on the Government of the Congo to 'release all children still serving in the (Congolese Armed Forces)...'. It was the first time debate was entered into *Hansard* in a language other than English.

The events of the last half of 2008, despite the Opposition's luke-warm performance inside the House, re-aligned political fortunes, with a November *Galaxy* opinion poll finding support for Labor and the LNP locked at 41 per cent primary vote (*Courier Mail* 6 December, 2008). Rumours of an early election soon abounded. Some key Government bills introduced during 2008 included: the *Water Fluoridation Bill* (passed 13 March 2008); the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Amendment Bill* (passed 13 May 2008); the *Clean Energy Bill* (passed 14 May 2008); the *Public Service Bill* (passed 14 May 2008); and the *Electoral Amendment Bill* (passed 9 September 2008). Some notable Opposition bills included: the *Carers' (Recognition) Bill* which, unusually for a private member's bill, passed (on 26 November 2008); the *Criminal Code (Assaults against Police and Others) Amendment Bill* (failed 27 February 2008); the *Freedom of Information (Open Government – Disclosure of Contracts) Amendment Bill* (failed 4 June 2008); and the *Criminal Code (Truth in Parliament) Amendment Bill* (failed 3 December 2008). The only two cross-bench bills in 2008 were Green MP Ronan Lee's: the *Mineral Resources Amendment Bills* (both adjourned on 26 November 2008, then lapsed on dissolution of Parliament). The Legislative Assembly's Standing Orders were amended on 12 February the Standing Orders Committee

⁵ This 3 December 2008 story attracted 799 readers' comments on *The Courier Mail's* website. See <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,24745075-952,00.html>

resolved to combine the Parliament's *Record of Debate* and *Votes and Proceedings* into a single *Hansard* document: the *Record of Proceedings*.⁶

2009

Parliament resumed on 10 February with debate over Labor's 'budget honesty' legislation. Around the same time, Bligh — stung by yet more questions of integrity — announced a crackdown on lobbyists. It was therefore not a good time for the Government to see the CMC investigate Michael Dart, former Chief of Staff to retiring minister Rod Welford, over allegations Dart awarded a \$131,000 sports grant to Mitchelton Football Club in return for pre-selection support (*Courier Mail* 16 February, 2009).

The 2009 State Election

A flurry of MP retirements,⁷ and two weeks of Labor television advertisements mocking Springborg's alleged poor grasp of the GFC, suggested an election was just around the corner. Speculation only increased after Treasurer Fraser handed down a mini-budget that cast the state into a \$1.6 billion deficit, and after *Standard and Poors* reduced Queensland's AAA credit rating to AA⁺ for the first time. As expected, Bligh on 23 February visited Governor Penny Wensley to request an election on 21 March, then delivered a media conference where the Premier justified the seven-month-early election on two grounds: her Government required a fresh mandate to steer the state through the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression; and 144 media reports speculating on an early election had forced her hand. The LNP required a 7.6 per cent uniform two-party-preferred (2PP) swing to deliver the 20 seats needed to form government, or 23 seats if three LNP districts — Clayfield [0.2%], Burdekin [0.9%] and Mirani [1.2%] — made notionally Labor by the 2008 redistribution are included.

Labor's strategy was to avoid its record and instead play on fears of lost jobs and reduced services under an inexperienced LNP. The Opposition — in hindsight erroneously — focused on Bligh's record as a member of Beattie's cabinet, and not on the legacy of Peter Beattie himself. Ultimately, the poll resembled a 'zombie' election where each party hoped voters would sleep walk to the polls. The four week campaign saw some remarkable developments, including a cyclone, with Labor suffering its worst week and the LNP its best at the start of the campaign. By the fourth week, fortunes had reversed: Labor picked up momentum via Bligh's

⁶See Queensland Parliamentary website

<http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/documents/procedures/StandingRules&Orders.pdf>

⁷A record 10 MPs — nine Labor and one LNP — retired at the 2009 election, including the Speaker and two ministers. They were: Chris Bombalos (Chatsworth); Gary Fenlon (Greenslopes); Ken Hayward (Kallangur); Linda Lavarch (Pine Rivers); Jim Pearce (Broadsound); Pat Purcell (Bulimba); Mike Reynolds (Townsville); Warren Pitt (Mulgrave); and Rod Welford (Everton). The sole LNP MP was Kev Lingard (Beaudesert).

barnstorm of 30 seats in the campaign's last three days, and the LNP's fizzled for want of economic credibility. Yet, surprisingly, opinion polls hardly moved. In the first week, a *Galaxy* poll saw Labor's primary vote trail the LNP's 42 to 43 per cent, with the 2PP vote split evenly at 50 per cent. By the last week, the primary vote had remained unchanged, but the LNP now enjoyed a narrow 51 per cent 2PP lead. On election eve, a hung parliament if not an outright LNP win looked likely. Bligh, however, still led as preferred premier, 50 to 34 per cent (*Courier Mail* 20 March, 2009). It seemed the polls — taken mid week — failed to detect a very late swing back to the Government. Labor later defended its low-key campaign as a deliberate 'rope-a-dope' strategy⁸ designed to ensnare Springborg (*Sunday Mail* 22 March, 2009).

Results

Despite a healthy anti-government swing of more than four per cent now making a third of Labor's remaining 51 seats marginal, the Opposition fell well short of predictions and Springborg conceded defeat early on election night. Labor won no new seats and lost Indooroopilly (where the Greens' Lee unexpectedly ran third on 25.93 per cent), Aspley (where the Children's Hospital saga cost Bonnie Barry her seat), Cleveland, Gaven, Glass House, Redlands and Hervey Bay, where Environment Minister Andrew McNamara lost. The LNP also picked up the new seat of Dalrymple in a contest with the last sitting One Nation MP, Rosa Lee Long. All four independents were returned, with Dolly Pratt easily seeing off John Bjelke-Petersen in Nanango. Despite an early surge on the night, Pauline Hanson was also easily beaten in Beaudesert. The new DS4SEQ also scored far lower than anticipated. Importantly, the swing appears to have been driven more by a rejection of Labor than any favourable embrace of the LNP. A late campaign *Galaxy* poll, for example, revealed only 37 per cent and 36 per cent of respondents believed Labor and the LNP respectively 'deserved to win', while 57 per cent declared neither party worthy of victory (*Courier Mail* 20 March, 2009).

In summary, Labor's easier than expected return appeared due to: Bligh's high approval rating as premier (especially among women voters);⁹ a still lacklustre — though somewhat improved — performance by Springborg (now a three time election loser); the Opposition's lack of economic credibility; and, perhaps most significantly, fear over lost jobs and services under an untried LNP whose leader — as Labor's powerful advertisements suggested — appeared unable to grasp the complexities of the GFC. But the still substantial swing to the LNP must be at least partially attributable to the successful merger in 2008 of the Liberal and National parties. The final results are tabled below.

⁸ 'Rope-a-dope' is Muhammad Ali's reference to how he defeated, by tiring out, an ostensibly superior boxer, George Foreman, in 1974.

⁹ See S. Wardill. 2009. 'Poll fight turns into battle of the sexes', *Courier Mail*, 9 March.

Table One
Queensland Election, 21 March 2009, Primary Vote (%) and Seats Won, 2006–09

Party	2009 Primary vote %	2006 Primary vote %	% change	2009 Seats won	2006 Seats won	No. change
Labor*	42.25	46.92	-4.67	51	59*	-8*
LNP#	41.60	37.92	+3.68	34	25	+9
Green*	8.37	7.99	+0.38	0	0*	0*
DS4SEQ	0.93	-	+0.93	0	0	0
Family First	0.82	1.89	-1.07	0	0	0
One Nation	0.38	0.60	-0.22	0	1	-1
Other	5.65	4.68	+0.97	4	4	0

Note: *Labor won the inner western Brisbane seat of Indooroopilly in 2006 but, in October 2008, MP Ronan Lee defected to the Greens to give the minor party its first Queensland state representation. Labor therefore went into the 2009 election with just 58 seats, and saw the loss of seven, and not eight, districts.

The Liberal and National parties in 2009 saw their first election as a merged party, having officially amalgamated in mid 2008. The 2006 totals are thus based on joint Coalition results.

Source: Electoral Commission of Queensland.

<http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2009/results/summary.html#13>;

Paul D. Williams. 2007. 'Defying the Odds: Peter Beattie and the 2006 Queensland Election'.

Australasian Parliamentary Review. Vol. 22, No. 2, Spring, pp. 212-20.

Table Two
Queensland Election, 21 March 2009, 2PP Vote (%), 2006–09

Party	2009 2PP Vote %	2006 2PP Vote %	Change %
Labor	50.9	54.9	-4.0
LNP	49.1	45.1	+4.0

Source: Electoral Commission of Queensland.

<http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2009/results/summary.html#13>;

Paul D. Williams. 2007. 'Defying the Odds: Peter Beattie and the 2006 Queensland Election'.

Australasian Parliamentary Review. Vol. 22, No. 2, Spring, pp. 212–20.

Bligh kept her pledge and dramatically reconfigured cabinet with some surprise announcements. Spence (Labor Unity) was ousted (later appointed Leader of the House) in what many assumed was the settling of an eight year dispute following Spence's departure from the Left in 2000. Margaret Keech (Left), Lindy Nelson-Carr (Left) and John Mickel (Labor Forum, later to be elected Speaker) also exited. New and more youthful ministers included: Annastacia Palaszczuk (Labor Forum) in Disability Services and Multicultural Affairs; Kate Jones (Labor Unity) in Climate Change and Sustainability; Rachel Nolan (Labor Unity) in Transport;

Karen Struthers (Left) in Community Services; Phil Reeves (Left) in Sport, and the newly elected MP Cameron Dick (Labor Forum) as Attorney General and Industrial Relations Minister. Bligh continued with her reform pledge when she also announced the 23 existing line departments would be folded into just 13 mega-departments: Premier & Cabinet; Infrastructure & Planning; Transport & Main Roads; Employment & Economic Development; Communities; Education and Training; Health; Environment and Resource Management; Justice & Attorney-General; Police; Community Safety; and Public Works.

The LNP elected Surfers Paradise MP John-Paul Langbroek Opposition leader in a three-way battle between Brisbane-based Tim Nicholls (a factional Liberal rival) and Maroochydore MP Fiona Simpson (a former Nationals deputy leader). More, however, were surprised by the nomination – and victory over Rob Messenger and former leader Jeff Seeney (Callide) — of Springborg as LNP deputy. The reason was ostensibly to offer the ballast of experience, but some suspected Springborg longed to remain close to the centre should the opportunity arise for a leadership spill. In any event, Langbroek's reliance on Springborg for advice in the Parliament would see the Surfers Paradise MP labelled the 'Dicky Knee of Queensland politics' (*Courier Mail* 4 June, 2009).

The 53rd Parliament

The issue of four year terms was back on the agenda on the opening of the new Parliament on 21 April, with the Opposition now pledging 'cautious support' (*Courier Mail* 21 April, 2009). While the now more evenly balanced House promised to improve LNP fortunes, old patterns of Labor dominance soon returned. The Premier continued her reform program with the announcement of a new register of lobbyists, and her acceptance of 177 of the 210 recommendations handed down in the Weller-Webbe report into public administration – including the abolition, merging or sale of 218 of the more than 450 Queensland statutory authorities (*Courier Mail* 1 April, 2009). Reform also extended to the Parliament itself where a major shake-up of committees now saw 10 standing committees, including the four 'super' committees of Economic Development; Environment and Resources; Social Development; and Law, Justice and Safety Committee (formerly the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee). The *Travelsafe* Standing Committee was also abolished.

May began with 4,000 teachers marching on State Parliament over salary issues, but attention soon turned to a mouse plague in a western Queensland nursing home which saw an elderly man bitten. Health Minister Paul Lucas blamed his staff for not informing him of the issue before media reports. Crackdowns on youth crime and the slow rate of removing school asbestos also featured. But nothing could distract attention from Queensland's continuing economic woes, especially as a second agency, *Moody's*, also downgraded the state's credit rating. What promised to be Labor's greatest public policy challenge emerged mid year when the

Government announced the sale of a number of government-owned corporations, including the coal freight arm of *Queensland Railways* (QR) in a bid to boost the budget bottom line by \$15 billion. But the fact the sell-off's announcement arrived so soon after the state election smacked of deception: as recently as 21 May, Transport Minister Rachel Nolan had told the House that QR was 'not for sale' (*Courier Mail* 3 June, 2009). While Labor's State Conference narrowly backed the move after many Left delegates abstained, ongoing warfare with trade unions was inevitable. With the bill passing the House on 20 June, the asset sales – and the manner in which the policy was 'sold' to the electorate — appeared to contribute more than any other factor to Labor's sharp collapse in public support. A June *Galaxy* poll found, for example, that 84 per cent were opposed to asset sales. More damagingly, 72 per cent felt the Premier had deceived them prior to the election — about half of whom were Labor voters. Labor's primary vote was now just 36 per cent – a collapse of 6.2 per cent in just three months. The LNP's vote now stood at 47 per cent (up 5.4 per cent), with the Government's 2PP share now at 45 points to the Opposition's 55 per cent (*Courier Mail* 20 June, 2009). The fact this legislation was rushed through the House in a single sitting — and at a time of rapidly increasing electricity costs and the abolition of the state's 8.3 cents per litre fuel subsidy — only further insulted the Labor faithful. At least some were pleased when the long-touted Right to Information Bill¹⁰ finally passed the House on 2 June.

After the Budget Estimates Committee hearings from 14 to 23 July, both Government and Opposition weathered criticism from former Royal Commissioner Tony Fitzgerald — on the 20th anniversary of his submission of his original blueprint for accountability reform — who alleged both sides of politics still encouraged a culture of secrecy while maintaining unhealthy close relationships with business (*Australian* 29 July 2009). Perceptions of a return to the 'bad old days' were only enhanced when the CMC released its report, *Dangerous Liaisons*, that revealed incidents of significant police misconduct (*Courier Mail* 23 July, 2009). Coming so soon after the asset sale announcement, this development saw Government morale collapse. Bligh also resisted allegations of cronyism, and moved quickly to improve transparency. After establishing a register of lobbyists in March, by August the Premier had: banned her MPs from attending party fundraising dinners; forbidden former Labor figures from becoming lobbyists for at least two years after separation from public life; banned lobbyists from holding membership of any quasi-government authority; outlawed the 'success fees' firms paid lobbyists; and launched a parliamentary green paper on further accountability

¹⁰ The Right to Information Act (2009) replaces the Freedom of Information Act (1992). The process began soon after Bligh's accession to the Premiership when – in a move to distinguish herself from her predecessor – the new Premier appointed Dr David Solomon to inquire into freedom of information reform. Solomon made 141 recommendations in 2008, of which the Government adopted 139 in full or in part. Reforms included banning the practice of attaching politically sensitive material to cabinet documents, and reducing the length of time before cabinet documents can be released.

reforms — overseen by an ‘accountability roundtable’¹¹ — with a widely publicised call for public input (*Courier Mail* 7 August 2009).

August saw the first hiccup for Langbroek when the new LNP leader was lambasted for spending \$81,000 of taxpayers’ money to launch billboards promoting his image (*Courier Mail* 7 August, 2009). Lawrence Springborg was then forced to rule out a party room challenge. Yet Labor, too, was embarrassed when it was exposed in Parliament for receiving donations from mining figure Ken Talbot, now charged with making secret commissions to Gordon Nuttall. It was in this climate the LNP introduced a private members’ bill to criminalise MPs’ lying to the House. It was a clever tactic: much political capital could be earned on the bill’s inevitably defeat. The month also saw the Premier narrowly avoid a moral quagmire when her Government — after a 19 year old Cairns woman (the first in 50 years) was charged mid year with procuring an abortion — retrospectively amended the Criminal Code to offer doctors immunity from prosecution for drug-induced terminations. Bligh conceded her ‘frustration’ at her inability to legislate for decriminalisation, and no conscience voted was offered in the bipartisan move that saw only Independent Liz Cunningham (Gladstone) vote against the bill.

September saw Bligh appear on television’s *Celebrity Masterchef*. It appeared a doomed stunt: a *Galaxy* poll found only 27 per cent approved of the Premier’s appearance (*Courier Mail* 6 September, 2009). New ways to ingratiate herself with the public were undoubtedly at the forefront of the Premier’s thinking when she launched a genuine innovation in Australian party politics. On 2 and 7 September, Bligh hosted the first online ‘People’s Question Time’ in Australia where the public emailed questions to the Premier, a minister and a panel of experts who then answered, live, the unseen inquiries.¹² Despite modest numbers logging on, the event was deemed a success and spawned a new series in 2010. Labor fulfilled a key environmental election promise in October when it introduced regrowth vegetation laws protecting 2.3 million hectares. But any points won were soon muddied by calls by retired Justice Geoff Davies — after allegations former Attorney-General Kerry Shine gave judicial appointments to friends — for an independent panel to advise on the selection of judges (*Courier Mail* 10 October, 2009). Davies’s call for increased transparency was echoed by Ombudsman David Bevan, CMC Chair Robert Needham, and Auditor-General Glen Poole¹³ who each accused the Government of obfuscation by shifting more GOCs, via ‘commercial-in-confidence’ clauses, outside the scope of public, parliamentary and CMC scrutiny. Clerk of the Parliament Neil Laurie also criticised the executive in his submission to the accountability green paper. Yet even those with little interest in

¹¹ The ‘Accountability Roundtable’ comprised CMC Chair Robert Needham, new Integrity Commissioner Dr David Solomon and former Electoral Commissioner David Longland. See S. Wardill, ‘Corruption’s taint to be written out’, *Courier Mail*, 7 August, 2009.

¹² See www.premiers.qld.gov.au/forum. The first forum, held at QUT’s Gardens Point campus, was chaired by the author.

¹³ This was Poole’s third public rebuke of the Bligh Government in five months. In June, the Auditor-General, on two separate occasions, reported poor planning processes in health and, later, roads.

government integrity found reason to mistrust the Bligh administration after the long-touted Gold Coast A1GP motor race was cancelled after the withdrawal of key international stakeholders. The positions of Sports Minister Phil Reeves and Board member Terry Mackenroth were now in doubt, especially since Reeves had assured Queenslanders as late as September that the race was viable despite the withdrawal of a major sponsor. Some therefore argued that Bligh's announced law and order crackdown on bikies was a populist distraction – especially since similar laws had been struck down by the South Australian Supreme Court. At least Speaker John Mickel could assume new powers to 'sin bin' wayward MPs for one hour instead of the previous minimum of a day.

November saw Bligh return to some left populism. After the Government, in late 2008, had successfully banned private accommodation 'rent auctions', Bligh would now strike a new blow for the needy by insulating single aged pensioners from public housing rent hikes. The Government also healed its long-running dispute with the Queensland Teachers' Union; the QTU would now accept the offer of a 12.5 per cent wage increase over three years (*Courier Mail* 8 November, 2009). The Government responded to public submissions to its accountability green paper by ruling out any return of an upper house, and by requiring all MPs and public servants to declare any gift valued at more than \$150. But Government morale hardly improved as Simon Tutt, a former advisor to Police Minister Judy Spence, faced a CMC inquiry into allegations he unduly pressured public servants to secure a \$4.2 million grant to rugby union organisations to which he was affiliated. The Government also received mixed messages on environmental matters. Around the time the Parliament hastily approved controversial legislation requiring all house vendors to detail how dwellings met environmental standards, federal Minister Environment Minister Peter Garrett over-ruled on ecological grounds Queensland's unpopular Traveston Dam.

Public Opinion Analysis

Few periods see such volatility in voting intention. In less than two years, Labor fell from dizzying heights to dismal lows, and closed with improving ratings. Similarly, the unpopularity of the old Coalition soon became acceptance of a newly united LNP, an approval that would see the Opposition threaten the Government with oblivion, and later to more reasonable levels. Data compiled from *Newspoll* and *Galaxy* public opinion surveys indicating 2PP voting intention, 2007–09, are tabled below.

Several points can be drawn from Table Three. First, it is clear Peter Beattie bequeathed his successor a generous inheritance of strong public approval for Labor, a legacy that saw Bligh's electoral honeymoon extend until mid 2008. Second, on the heels of the global financial crisis, a reduced credit rating and aspersions cast on the Government's integrity, by early 2009 support for Labor had fallen behind the LNP for the first time — a trend reflected in *Galaxy's* election

campaign surveys. Yet Labor's most dramatic slide did not occur until Bligh's announcement of public asset sales in mid 2009; just a few months after the election, Labor would have been decimated in any fresh contest. Labor's position later improved, and levelled off by the close of 2009 to a position that would still have seen the Government defeated. Bligh's personal approval ratings fared worse still, with a low of just 30 per cent satisfaction with Bligh's leadership. Alarming for Labor, where 51 per cent of women voters had approved of Bligh during the election campaign, that figure by year's end had plummeted to just 32 per cent — the lowest rating of any Premier since the Nationals' Russell Cooper in 1989.¹⁴

Table 3
State Voting Intention, per cent 2PP, Queensland, 2007–09

<i>Survey Date</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>LNP^c</i>
Election, 9 September 2006 ^a	54.9	45.1
April – June 2007 ^b	61	39
July – September 2007 ^c	59	41
October – December 2007	59	41
January – March 2008	60	40
April – June 2008	55	45
August – September 2008	51	49
October – December 2008	57	43
January – March 2009	49	51
Election, 21 March 2009 ^d	50.9	49.1
June 2009 ^e	45	55
August 2009	41	59
September 2009	46	54
October 2009	45	55

- N.B.** a. Actual election result. See ECQ.
<http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2009/results/summary.html#13>
 b. Data from April-June 2008 to January-March 2009 (last available) derived from *Newspoll*. See http://www.newspoll.com.au/image_uploads/0302%20QLD%2010-03-09.pdf
 c. From July 2008, the Liberal and National parties' coalition became a single amalgamated party.
 d. Actual election result. See ECQ.
<http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/state2009/results/summary.html#13>
 e. Data from June to October 2009 derived from *Galaxy*. See *The Courier Mail*, 20 June, 2 August, 1 November 2009.

¹⁴ See D. Passmore. 2009. 'Now it's Ms 30% – How low can she go?' *The Sunday Mail*. 1 November.

Public opinion aside, 2009 remained a hive of legislative activity, with notable Government bills including: the *Charter of Budget Honesty* bill (adjourned second reading 22 April); the *Parliament of Queensland Amendment* bill (passed 2 June); the *Right to Information* bill (passed 2 May); the *Fuel Subsidy Repeal and Revenue and Other Legislation Amendment* bill (passed 6 August); and the *Integrity* bill (passed 25 November). Key Opposition legislation included: the *Criminal Code (Honesty and Integrity in Parliament) Amendment* bill (failed 2nd reading 28 October); and the *Commissions of Inquiry (Corruption, Cronyism, and Unethical Behaviour) Amendment* bill (failed 2nd reading 25 November). Independent Peter Wellington also introduced the *Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Amendment* bill (failed 2nd reading 16 September). New Sessional and Standing Orders, including the Members' Register of Interests, were also adopted on 22 April, 28 October and 26 November, and the Parliament's 2005 Code of Ethics was tightened on 9 February and 11 May.¹⁵ In October, a new 30 day limit was also introduced for government responses to petitions. Sitting days and other data are tabled below.

Table Four
Sitting Days and Bills Actioned in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 2008–09

	2008* (52 nd Parliament — part only)	2009 (53 rd Parliament)
Sitting Days [#]	43	44
Bills Actioned [§]	124*	67

NB: * Includes 16 Bills introduced in 2007 and actioned in 2008; 104 Bills introduced and actioned in 2008; and four Bills introduced and actioned during the three remaining sitting days of the 52nd Parliament, 10–12 February, 2009.

[#] Includes Budget Estimates sittings.

[§] 'Actioned' defined as passed, adjourned on Second Reading debate, failed to pass Second Reading debate, and lapsed due to dissolution of parliament.

Source: Author's synthesis of data retrieved from Parliament of Queensland, Table Office, at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/legislation/BILLSUP.pdf>, <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202009.pdf>, and <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202008.pdf>.

¹⁵ See <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/documents/procedures/SessionalOrders.pdf>; and <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/committees/documents/MEPPC/other/ethicalStandards/CodeOfEthicalStandards.pdf>

Table Five
Fate of All Bills Introduced to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 2008-09

	2008* (52 nd Parliament – part only)	% of all 2008* Bills N = 124	2009 (53 rd Parliament)	% of all 2009 Bills N = 67
Total Introduced	124	100	67	100
Total Passed	80	64.5	48	71.6
Total Adjourned	17	13.7	15	22.4
Total Failed	11	8.9	4	6.0
Total Lapsed	16	12.9	n/a	n/a

NB: *Includes 16 Bills introduced in 2007 and actioned in 2008; 104 Bills introduced and actioned in 2008; and four Bills introduced and actioned during the three remaining sitting days of the 52nd Parliament, 10-12 February, 2009.

Source: Author's synthesis of data retrieved from Parliament of Queensland, Table Office, at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/legislation/BILLSUP.pdf>, <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202009.pdf>, and <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202008.pdf>.

Table Six
Fate of Government Bills Introduced to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 2008–09

	2008* (52 nd Parliament – part only)	% of all 2008* Bills N = 124	2009 (53 rd Parliament)	% of all 2009 Bills N = 67
No. of Gov't Bills	106	85.5	59	88.1
Passed	79	63.7	48	71.6
Adjourned	14	11.3	10	16.9
Failed	0	0	0	0
Lapsed	13	10.5	n/a	n/a

NB: * Includes 16 Bills introduced in 2007 and actioned in 2008; 104 Bills introduced and actioned in 2008; and four Bills introduced and actioned during the three remaining sitting days of the 52nd Parliament, 10-12 February, 2009.

Source: Author's compilation of data retrieved from Parliament of Queensland, Table Office, at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/legislation/BILLSUP.pdf>, <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202009.pdf>, and <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202008.pdf>.

Table Seven
Fate of Opposition Bills Introduced to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 2008–09

	2008* (52 nd Parliament – part only)	% of all 2008* Bills N= 124	2009 (53 rd Parliament)	% of all 2009 Bills N= 67
Total Opp. Bills	14	11.3	7	10.4
Passed	1	0.8	0	0
Adjourned	1	0.8	4	6.0
Failed	11	8.9	3	2.4
Lapsed	1	0.8	n/a	n/a

NB: *Includes 16 Bills introduced in 2007 and actioned in 2008; 104 Bills introduced and actioned in 2008; and four Bills introduced and actioned during the three remaining sitting days of the 52nd Parliament, 10–12 February, 2009.

Source: Author's compilation of data retrieved from Parliament of Queensland, Table Office, at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/legislation/BILLSUP.pdf>, <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202009.pdf>, and <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202008.pdf>.

Table Eight
Fate of Cross Bench Bills Introduced to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 2008–09

	2008* (52 nd Parliament – part only)	% of all 2008* Bills N= 124	2009 (53 rd Parliament)	% of all 2009 Bills N= 67
Total Cross-Bench Bills	4 [#]	3.2	2 [±]	3.0
Passed	0	0	0	0
Adjourned	2	1.6	1	1.5
Failed	0	0	1	1.5
Lapsed	2	1.6	n/a	n/a

NB: * Includes 16 Bills introduced in 2007 and actioned in 2008; 104 Bills introduced and actioned in 2008; and four Bills introduced and actioned during the three remaining sitting days of the 52nd Parliament, 10–12 February, 2009.

[#] Former Labor-turned-Greens MP Ronan Lee (Indooroopilly)

[±] Independent MP Peter Wellington (Nicklin)

Source: Author's compilation of data retrieved from Parliament of Queensland, Table Office, at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/legislation/BILLSUP.pdf>, <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202009.pdf>, and <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/legislativeAssembly/tableOffice/documents/historical/bills/BILLS%20REGISTER%202008.pdf>.

Conclusion

The last sittings of the 52nd Queensland Parliament and the first of the 53rd saw all parties enter new and unfamiliar territory. For Labor, the initially smooth transition from Peter Beattie to Anna Bligh soon segued into a major collapse in public support. While initially sufficiently contained to where the Government could be returned at an early election — albeit with a significantly reduced majority — support for both Labor and Bligh quickly collapsed to a near-record nadir. Conversely, the period saw the greatest lift in conservative fortunes since the coming to office in 1996 of the Borbidge–Sheldon National–Liberal Coalition. This article has explored the major events, embarrassments, legislation and opinion polls from 2008–09 to explain this remarkable phenomenon.

It can be concluded that the factors behind Labor's decline are many and varied, with most derived from the party's own activity. The Government's long incumbency (11 years by 2009), for example, cannot be discounted as a driver of the public perception of a tired, 'out-of-touch' administration. Yet long tenure alone must not be over-stated: the Beattie Government in 2007 could similarly be charged with exhaustion, yet its public approval remained comparably high. It appears instead that specific events rather than generic perceptions eroded Labor's support. Primary among these were accusations of compromised integrity, budget deficits and reduced coal royalties resulting in the loss of the state's AAA credit rating, increased cost of living expenses from massive hikes in electricity and fuel, frequent ministerial gaffes and — undoubtedly the most damaging — the controversial intention to sell some government assets: an unpopular policy made more so by the allegedly deceptive manner in which it was delivered to the electorate — arguably without mandate — just weeks after the state election.

It is also apparent that the non-Labor forces played — via their successful amalgamation into a single merged conservative party — a significant role in their own improved stocks. But, like Labor's long incumbency, caution must be used to ensure the merger is not accorded disproportionate significance as a factor driving conservative recovery. It is self-evident, for example, that the new LNP, while presenting a fresh image of relative unity, failed during the period to fully capitalise upon Labor's policy shortcomings, or to construct a wholly credible narrative thread as an alternate government in the news media. Indeed, much of the traditional role of opposition critique was instead played by the Fourth Estate itself. As suggested by opinion polls, it appears support for the LNP during and after the 2009 Queensland election campaign remained 'soft', with any electoral shift attributable more to a rejection of an increasingly disliked Labor Government rather than to any embrace of an LNP which, for some former Liberals, still resembled a bucolic conservative party.¹⁶ The old adage of elections not being won by oppositions but rather lost by governments is frequently wrong. But, in Queensland's case during 2008–09, the maxim appears to hold true. ▲

¹⁶ See Paul Williams. 'Fundamental differences are unsettling the LNP'. *The Courier Mail*, 17 November.