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# In uncharted waters

[Paul Williams](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

## **Is Peter Beattie grooming Anna Bligh as his successor or setting her up for a fall, asks Paul Williams**

ANNA BLIGH, Queensland's treasurer and deputy premier, is a woman on a political roll. Having enjoyed a high public profile since her election in 1995 as the member for South Brisbane, Bligh, a former senior policy adviser and member of the ALP's left faction, has gone from strength to political strength. In late 2000 Premier Peter Beattie publicly anointed her as his likely successor, an endorsement that raised eyebrows within the party's right, and nowhere more so than among those in Labor Unity, the power base of Beattie and his then newly appointed deputy, Terry Mackenroth.

Bligh became the state's first woman education minister in 2001 and last year reached number two in cabinet rank as Beattie's deputy and head of the short-lived super-ministry of Finance, State Development, Trade and Innovation. In early 2006 she was appointed Treasurer in her own right and, since the recent Queensland election, has acquired the new Infrastructure portfolio.

But despite her stellar rise, it's only recently that Beattie has provided his deputy with the room to flourish as a genuine leader-in-waiting. It was only this year, for example, that Bligh first served as acting premier, a role she has now assumed four times. More significantly, twice this year Beattie has permitted Bligh to chair cabinet, a task he had delegated to a colleague on only one previous occasion.

And in early April Bligh took on Beattie's usual role of heading a major trade mission to the U.S. and Canada during which, among other things, she attended a biotechnology conference - one of Beattie's pet projects.

And her participation has been ramped up even further in recent months. During the recent state election, for example, we saw Beattie for the first time allow a share of the campaign limelight to his deputy, with Bligh appearing on strategically positioned billboards that claimed her political partnership with Beattie brought strength and stability to Queensland. Most tellingly, Bligh recently deputised for Beattie on crucial missions to Gympie and Canberra. During the former, she was entrusted to assuage anti-dam protestors from Travseton Crossing while, on the latter, she confronted the prime minister at the national water summit.

Beattie's systematic devolution of responsibility is uncharted territory for the premier and runs contrary to his past leadership style. Indeed, there's plenty of evidence of Beattie previously seizing from more junior ministers politically sensitive issues such as Aboriginal native title and tree-clearing negotiations and placing these under his own office's careful watch.

Why, then, is Beattie now accommodating Bligh? There are three possible reasons.

First, such action could be Beattie's design for sound political leadership. Smart leaders not only plan for successors but also groom their heirs by nurturing their skills through controlled practice.

Second, Beattie is undoubtedly aware of voters' increasingly high regard for the "team" leadership model, one practised to enormous electoral success by John Howard and Peter Costello. In acknowledging that the day of the autocrat is over, the premier may well hope to construct an attractive duumvirate of leadership that is balanced on all levels, including gender.

But, unfortunately for Bligh, a third reason is just as likely. Beattie may be positioning his deputy as a potential fall-girl - a patsy - should public policy collapse as badly this term as it did in the last. After all, Bligh holds the infrastructure brief - a broad and potentiality thorny portfolio that will catch every difficult problem associated with an exploding state population, including water, energy and transport.

For the moment, Beattie is enjoying yet another electoral honeymoon, but it's only a matter of time before the next public policy storm breaks. How convenient it will be then to have a high profile infrastructure minister to blame, to discipline - perhaps even to sack - should the problem prove intractable.

But if this is Beattie's intention, his public promotion of Bligh might prove a double-edged sword. As long as Beattie reigns - in the words of his caucus colleagues - as the 'Emperor of George Street' his prominent positioning of Bligh will benefit each of them. But should Beattie's fortunes take a turn for the worse - and after Bligh has enjoyed her own significant time in the sun - the tables could just as easily be turned.

There's no question of Bligh's loyalty to Beattie and the Labor Party. But, if push comes to shove, who could blame a well-established high profile deputy for refusing to go quietly in any leadership showdown?

Beattie, then, must tread a fine line between promoting Bligh as an asset to stable government, and reserving her as a potential sacrificial lamb should infrastructure policy go askew.

Logic suggests that - while the electoral going is good - Bligh will capitalize on her high public profile and build her own cross-factional powerbase. In this way, she can fortify herself against any future attempt by Beattie to remove her against her will.

Ultimately, it's not impossible Beattie's promotion of Bligh could backfire if their relationship sours. Should Beattie again find himself on the slippery slide of public opinion, he may well be the one who leaves the playground in tears. •

*Dr Paul Williams is lecturer in politics and public policy at Griffith University. An earlier version of this article was published in the Courier-Mail.*

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