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Why was Beattie returned so easily, asks Paul Williams

AS EXPECTED, the 9 September election for Queensland's fifty-second parliament delivered few surprises when it gave the Beattie government a fourth term and a third consecutive landslide. Despite Peter Beattie's ongoing claim of "underdog" status, opinion polls throughout the 26 day campaign indicated Labor would win easily. By the last week, however, some doubt had crept into Labor's camp. The Coalition had enjoyed an error-free launch replete with popular policies, while Labor appeared to flounder on two core issues, water and health. Yet, on election morning, a *Newspoll* pegged Labor at 48 per cent of the primary vote, with the Coalition at 38 per cent (21 per cent for the Liberals and 17 per cent for the Nationals). In Brisbane - home to almost half the parliament - Labor's primary support hovered around 55 per cent, compared to the Liberals' 26 per cent. Across Queensland, the projected two-party-preferred vote (2PPV) was 55 per cent for Labor and 45 per cent for the Coalition. This forecast a relatively unchanged result from the 2004 general election - a prognosis that proved largely correct.

Table 1: Parties' primary vote at the 2006 Queensland election and swing from 2004

Party	2006	2004	% change
ALP	47.04	47.01	+0.03
Liberal	20.17	18.50	+1.67
Nationals	17.64	16.96	+0.68
(Coalition)	(37.81)	(35.46)	(+2.35)
Greens	7.94	6.76	+1.18
One Nation	0.62	4.88	-4.26
Family First	1.90	-	-
Unaligned	4.68	5.83	-1.15

Source: Adapted from Electoral Commission of Queensland, 2006.

Table 1 shows that, in terms of first preference votes, Labor actually increased its support by a narrow margin despite its litany of political crises over the previous term. The Coalition also improved, by a slightly larger

margin, but one far too small to make any real impact. Despite the strong performance of leader Lawrence Springborg, the Nationals' tiny growth (of 0.68 per cent) was not unexpected. But the Liberals' failure to recapture voters, particularly in Brisbane's leafy inner suburbs, did draw enormous opprobrium. Since the 1980s, non-Labor voters have awaited Brisbane's "Great Liberal Revival" - a resurgence that promises to push the party's parliamentary numbers past the Nationals' and, therefore, into senior status within the Queensland Coalition. But, once again, this failed to occur. While the Liberals outpolled the Nationals (as they have done in every election since 1998) they won fewer than half the Nationals' tally of seats. The great paradox of Queensland conservative politics therefore continues: a senior coalition partner attracting fewer votes leading a more electorally attractive junior partner.

The Greens, meanwhile, increased their support (with only a marginally larger field of candidates) to almost eight percentage points - a level rapidly approaching that in southern states. Indeed, two seats recorded a Greens vote above 20 per cent. One Nation's primary vote, by contrast, collapsed to insignificance, having fielded only four candidates (or 47 fewer than in 2004).

Eyes were also focused on Family First, the newcomer to Australian politics. Family First representatives talked up the party's chances at its inaugural Queensland outing, even suggesting it could win a handful of electorates. Despite early promises of a field of 89 candidates, when nominations closed only 26 stood. Its state-wide total of less than 2 per cent, therefore, must have disappointed, although it did achieve up to four times that level in some rural districts west of Brisbane.

Table 2: Parties' representation following 2006 Queensland election, and change from 2004

Party	2006	2004	change
ALP	59	63	-4
Liberal	8	5	+3
National	17	15	+2
(Coalition)	(25)	(20)	(+5)
Greens	0	0	0
One Nation	1	1	0
Family First	0	-	-
Unaligned	4	5	-1

Source: Adapted from Electoral Commission of Queensland. 2006.

In terms of representation (apart from the twelve MPs who retired at this election), eight seats changed hands, with the ALP returned virtually unscathed with 59

seats in the 89 seat Legislative Assembly. Although Labor won 63 seats at the 2004 election, it entered this poll with just 60 seats. Labor had lost the safe Brisbane seats of Chatsworth and Redcliffe to the Liberals in August 2005, and its marginal Gold Coast seat of Gaven to the Nationals in April 2006, all largely due to the health crisis. Remarkably, Labor regained each of these by-election seats but, as expected, lost Bundaberg (a long-time Labor stronghold but recently the epicentre of the “Dr Death” saga). Labor also lost Clayfield (in inner Brisbane, Labor’s most marginal seat, held by a sacked minister), Kawana (on the Sunshine Coast, held by a minister who had been criticised as the “minister for nothing”), and Noosa (on the Sunshine Coast, held by a Labor-turned-independent MP who quit the party in protest over a proposed dam and, in contesting the poll, split Labor’s vote).

The Liberals picked up three seats (Kawana, Clayfield and Noosa) to give them a net gain of one. But the fact the Liberals did not win back Indooroopilly in Brisbane’s west, another once-safe Liberal district, suggests the party remains in dire straits. Indeed, the Liberals now boast just two islands in the Labor sea of greater metropolitan Brisbane. Equally problematic is the Liberals’ loss of the talented but short-time Chatsworth MP Michael Caltibiano, a former state party president and potential party leader.

The Nationals enjoyed a net gain of two seats. While they won Bundaberg, their narrow victory there suggests they will have trouble retaining the seat in future. The Nationals’ win in Gympie, by contrast, was convincing. Gympie was a “must-win” district for the party. A one-time Nationals stronghold, Gympie was lost in 2001 to One Nation’s Elisa Roberts, who then quickly resigned to sit as an independent. Peculiarly, Ms Roberts caused a stir during the campaign when she twice declared she did not want to win the seat and would run dead, only to change her mind and declare herself back in the race. The Nationals failed in their other “must-win” seat - Nanango - once held by long-time Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen and this year contested by his son, John. One-time One Nation turned independent MP Dorothy Pratt was easily returned. In total, four independents were returned (a net loss of one), while One Nation’s sole representative, Rosa Lee Long, held the far north Queensland seat of Tablelands. This appears to have been a personal endorsement of Ms Long and not for One Nation, a party that is now all but dead in Queensland.

So why was Beattie returned so easily despite his party’s failures? While unhappy with Labor’s management of health and water, electors undoubtedly saw the ALP as the more able party to repair those public policy holes. In short, this election was about twin issues: which leader, and which party unit, is best placed to deliver government and sound policy? An albeit very flawed Labor thus contrasted favourably with a wholly unattractive Coalition so obviously unprepared for office. In this sense, we might describe this campaign as the Clumsy versus the Clueless.

Buoyed by his party’s miraculous survival, one Labor minister dubbed Beattie “the Emperor of George Street” (home to Parliament House). For the next three years at least, few would dispute him. •

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