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Queenslanders still believe in "Bucket Beattie"

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It's been downhill all the way for the Queensland Coalition since the ill-fated merger talks, writes Paul Williams in this election report for APO

PETER BEATTIE's decision to call a "snap" general election for 9 September was the worst kept secret in the state. Although the poll was not due until February 2007, speculation had been rife since May when Nationals leader Lawrence Springborg and Liberal leader Bob Quinn announced an ill-conceived plan to amalgamate the two parties. Just days later, federal powerbrokers - including Prime Minister Howard - scuttled the merger plan, and urged the parties to stick to their original Coalition of Equal Partners agreement hammered out late last year. The Coalition's plan (devised by its leaders and kept secret even from the parties' deputies) smacked of desperation, and damaged the credibility of the non-Labor parties. Until May this year it had been assumed that the Coalition, while not in a position to defeat Beattie, would nonetheless seriously pare back his huge majority. But, three months after the failed merger, the Coalition looks as ill-equipped as ever, with Labor emerging as clearly the more solid party.

Despite the wide speculation about an early poll, the Coalition still appeared to have been caught unprepared. The two parties have been labelled a "policy-free zone," a problem compounded by less-than-scintillating leadership. Indeed, leadership has assumed centre-stage in this campaign, largely because the Liberals - just days before the poll - dumped their experienced but unexciting leader Bob Quinn for the more direct but very inexperienced Bruce Flegg, a GP who only entered parliament in 2004. Flegg's inexperience has been painfully obvious, and has hurt the Coalition's campaign severely. On day one of the campaign, for example, he could not answer the simple question of who would be Premier should the Coalition win on 9 September. Flegg's fumbles, including his admission the Coalition didn't write a health policy until after the election was called, multiplied.

Beattie is seeking his fourth term. He first won office narrowly in 1998 (after only two years as opposition leader) in the so-called "One Nation poll." He enjoyed his first landslide (66 seats out of 89) in 2001, and his second (63 seats) in 2004.

Public opinion polls suggest not only comfortable return for Beattie, but also an increased majority. At the beginning of the campaign, Newspoll tracked Labor support at 45 per cent of the primary vote, or 54 per cent after preferences. The Coalition, by contrast, attracted only 38 per cent primary support (Liberals 25 per cent, Nationals 13 per cent), or 46 per cent after preferences. Yet, even more remarkably, a mid-campaign Newspoll placed Labor on 52 per cent primary support, and 58 per cent after preferences. The Liberals' primary vote had shrunk to just 20 per cent, with the

Nationals rising to 16 per cent, giving the Coalition 36 per cent primary support.

The Coalition's task is made even more difficult by the fact that Labor (following three by-election losses, discussed below) must lose 16 seats in a 7.3 per cent two-party-preferred swing before it loses control of the Legislative Assembly, while the opposition needs 22 extra seats and an 8.7 per cent swing to form government. This is an impossible task.

Despite Labor's recent dominance, some felt in early 2006 the Coalition's time had come. Since immediately after the 2004 poll, a series of ministerial gaffes and major public policy failures have shaken Beattie's confidence and voters' faith in Labor. Some of the more memorable crises included the involvement of the Aboriginal affairs minister Liddy Clark in the so-called Winegate affair, in which a ministerial staffer took a bottle of wine onto a dry Aboriginal reserve. Clark was later sacked when she wasn't entirely candid about who had paid the airfare for an Aboriginal activist's attendance at a meeting following violent riots on Palm Island. Indeed, Palm Island almost claimed Beattie's own scalp when it was alleged he attempted to bribe the local council with promises to cancel debts in exchange for public support: the so-called Clap-for-Cash scandal.

Another damaging affair erupted when it was alleged that the Speaker, Ray Hollis, had misused expense accounts. Hollis was later cleared, but not before causing Beattie significant grief; he then resigned his seat. Further embarrassment arose when Gold Coast MP, Robert Poole, came under fire for his frequent trips to Thailand and his long absences from his electorate. Poole also resigned, forcing yet another by-election. But perhaps the most unwelcome resignation came when Beattie's long-serving deputy and treasurer, Terry Mackenroth, bowed out in 2005. Mackenroth, dubbed "the Fox" for his keen political acumen, was regarded as Beattie's ballast in cabinet: his departure was seen as a major political loss.

But major infrastructure problems were more profound. In late 2004, following a series of blackouts in south-east Queensland (and the suicide of the head of the electricity supplier, Energex) it was alleged the government had stripped assets from the utility, allowing services to run down. This drama tested Beattie's mettle more than any other. Yet, even as the energy issue waned, other policy embarrassments emerged, including poorly macadamised roads and asbestos in school roofs.

But these, too, were dwarfed by two looming infrastructure issues: health and water distribution. Health hijacked the headlines in early 2005 when it was revealed an overseas-trained surgeon - hired to meet rising medical staff shortages incurred by the state's exploding population (of up to 1500 new residents each week) - allegedly botched operations in the regional Bundaberg Hospital, leading to patient deaths. Two royal commissions and a departmental inquiry ensued, with the health minister, Gordon Nuttall, ultimately sacked for failing to tell the truth at a parliamentary committee hearing. The so-called Dr Death scandal was the most-discussed "water-cooler issue" of 2005, and the Coalition smelt victory on the strength of this issue alone.

But health was soon eclipsed by a problem plaguing much of Australia: water, or the lack of it. With some dams at 25 per cent capacity, south-east Queensland is currently on level three water restrictions, with level four looming in October. Once again, Queenslanders, angry at watching their gardens die, threatened to undo Labor, with

the opposition labelling the Premier "Buckets Beattie" for an alleged lack of foresight.

So heavily did these infrastructure issues bite that Labor lost three successive by-elections (two in Brisbane in August 2005, one on the Gold Coast in April 2006). Incredibly, the two Brisbane seats were safe Labor, with one recording a 13 per cent swing to the Liberals. These results were read as the long-awaited Brisbane Liberal revival. Today, such a revival appears as remote as ever.

Health and water remain central issues of this campaign, with both parties promising new hospitals, new dams and water grids. Remarkably, traditional state campaign fare such as law and order, schools and roads have barely rated a mention.

But eclipsing even these two issues are the issues of leadership and stability. Labor has painted itself as the only party that can deliver "stable" government, in contrast to the Liberals and Nationals' "on again, off again" relationship. Labor drives this point home in terms of Queensland's low unemployment and "sound economic management." The opposition, as might be expected, is confining its campaign to Labor's alleged negligence on health and water. Unfortunately for the Coalition, the message appears to be lost, possibly because of the disproportionate number of Labor television advertisements compared to the Coalition's. Concomitantly, Beattie has painted himself as the stronger leader. Importantly, while Beattie concedes - in his infamous *mea culpa* style - that he has made policy errors, he also argues he is the only candidate capable of fixing those errors. Labor has undoubtedly targeted its campaign cleverly. According to Newspoll, 81 per cent of voters still believe Beattie "has a vision for Queensland," with 80 per cent citing him as "decisive and strong." With one just a week until polling day, it seems most of Queensland still believes in him. •

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