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# Kitchen table politics puts the knife to state Labor

By Paul Williams

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One interpretation of the record breaking New South Wales election last Saturday is that the electorate didn't just speak; it roared. Another – based on anecdotal evidence of a lack of visible anger at polling booths – is that the execution instead came with a quiet sense of calm resolution. It might be that voters were angry months or even years ago, and it was then the gallows were assembled. By the time 26 March, 2011, had rolled around, prayers had been said and final absolution granted. All that was left was for voters to give a collective pull on the lever, and to let the corpse of NSW Labor swing gently in the breeze, perhaps as a warning to others.

The array of factors behind the fall of NSW Labor has been widely covered elsewhere, and will be time and again. After all, it's not every day we see a 13 per cent primary swing against a government (17 per cent after preferences), or see that party lose more than half its seats, including those held in the heartland for generations. And how often do we witness swings in the 36 per cent range, or see the Nationals attract 13 per cent of the vote? With NSW Labor support this year lower than that for Victorian Labor after the split in 1955, and with historians scurrying back to 1904 to find a worse result, this was truly a once-in-a-century phenomenon.

The 2011 election, then, will be remembered as the perfect storm. The factional elitism of an exhausted long-term incumbent, beset with angst over privatisation, sex and money scandals, cost of living issues and public policy failures, all coalesced at precisely the right time: the concomitant emergence of an untarnished, united opposition under the calming influence of an electorally amenable leader. Small target or not, Barry O'Farrell had fit the bill.

Australian journalists and political commentators are trained to identify patterns in voter behaviour, and to offer for consumers those lessons applicable to the Commonwealth and other states. The speculation with this election is even more intense. Even those largely disinterested in politics have been quick to proffer implications. And while the lessons for other jurisdictions are few, they are nonetheless critical.

The Commonwealth is the obvious place to begin. Predictably, the federal Coalition has trumpeted Labor's state rout as a referendum on the proposed carbon tax – one made especially unpopular given the Prime Minister's statements during the 2010 federal election, and by the working arrangement between federal Labor and the Greens since then.

Yet the impact of the carbon tax is impossible to measure with certainty. There is superficial evidence it played some role in deepening the resentment low income earners had come to feel toward Labor in an already sensitive cost-of-living environment. In car-dependent districts far from Sydney's CBD, the swings were, on average, higher. The same can be said of traditional Labor strongholds where heavy industry – including coal, steel and manufacturing (all potentially at risk in an economy interrupted by a carbon price) – underpin working class lifestyles. Seats in far western Sydney, and around the Hunter and Illawarra, are cases in point.

The fact the carbon tax has dented federal Labor support (as any proposed tax will – look at the Coalition's minority two party-preferred (2PP) vote in 1998 after the announcement of the GST) is not in dispute. The extent to which voters can discriminate between state and federal issues *is* under contention, however. But, on the balance of probabilities, the carbon tax almost certainly played only the smallest role in the decimation of the Keneally Government.

Evidence is found on two fronts. First, a *Newspoll* survey taken in November-December last year – two months before Gillard's announcement of a carbon price – pegged NSW Labor's primary vote at 24 per cent, or two points lower than last Saturday's result. On the logic that voters conflate state and federal issues, it could be argued with equal vigour that the carbon tax actually lifted Labor's vote.

The second front is Queensland. After the announcement of the carbon tax but before the ascension of popular Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman to the Liberal-National Party "leadership", *Newspoll* found Queensland Labor had enjoyed the largest public opinion recovery ever recorded by the agency. Before the carbon tax, Queensland Labor floundered on just 41 per cent of the 2PP; after Gillard's announcement, Labor's 2PP vote spiked at 52 per cent. The carbon tax, of course, played no role in Queensland Labor's recovery. I use it as an example of how confusing correlation with causation can produce spurious arguments.

It remains that voters are more adept at distinguishing state and federal issues than commentators often give them credit. The most recent *Newspoll* has found that Labor's *federal* primary vote in Queensland – a major coal producer – has collapsed to just 31 per cent: the lowest in the country.

Lessons for other states involve, first, the perils of long-term incumbency. If elections were held this weekend in Western Australia, Tasmania and Queensland (remembering that Campbell Newman, according to a weekend *Galaxy* poll, has reversed Labor's brief lead), we could expect another three governments to join the non-Labor family. The lesson is that voters, for the first time since the 1990s, are once again on the move. The reason then was largely economic reform weariness; today, it appears to be kitchen table economics and angst over making ends meet.

Second, support for minor players, give or take a few percentage points, appears to have plateaued. The Greens would be especially disappointed with its failure to hold the balance of power in the upper house, and with its inability to win Marrickville and Balmain in the lower. The fact voters departing Labor bypassed independents and minor parties and shifted directly to the Coalition augurs particularly poorly for nonaligned candidates, especially Independents Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott, whose federal seats overlap with state electorates where independent support collapsed. It might be the case that we have entered not only a new era of volatility, but also a return to major party hegemony. Only successive results can confirm this.

One last forecast: expect new discussion around reforming the voting system used to elect the NSW Legislative Council. With the balance of power now likely to coalesce around the Shooters and Fishers Party, the Christian Democrats and One Nation co-founder Pauline Hanson, there will surely be suggestions from the major players to transform NSW from a single electorate for Legislative Council polls, to four districts each electing five members – (to create a slightly reduced chamber of 40 – always popular with voters) or, conversely, five districts electing 4 members each, so that 20 MLCs are elected every four years on significantly raised quotas. With five districts, for example, the quota for election rises to 16.7 per cent; with four districts, it increases further still to 20 per cent.

The next Labor premier is not yet in the parliament. With Labor out of office probably until 2023, and maybe until 2027, she or he might still be at school or university, working on an assignment on this very election, compiling reasons why Labor failed. For the sake of good future governance, one hopes they study well.

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