

Grasping the audacity of risk

A tale of two problems

Paul D Williams

POLITICS, according to one definition, is about reconciling conflict. That necessarily includes decision-makers confronting risk as they chase socio-economic solutions as well as the primary political goal: winning and holding high office. The core political problem for voters is little different. They, too, are forced to reconcile interests as they chose whom they consider fit to govern. But political elites measure risk, and voters perceive it, as very different propositions.

It appears voters' desire for bold choices is almost always at odds with the parties' fear of audacity. In pre-television days of 'stump' political campaigning, blunders on the other side of the country could be contained, the parties chased votes and championed ideas with little fear of *faux pas*. But in today's media-saturated environment, where broadband competes with broadsheets and every candidate's statement is potentially catastrophic, parties face more potential political problems. Parliamentary politics once embraced risk, as each side put its ideas for a better world into the campaign marketplace. But the ideas market is now tilted to caution and politics is more about 'risk aversion' than risky solutions.

This is a tale of two political problems. The first was faced by a long-term Queensland Labor government as it war-gamed strategies to revive its dwindling electoral fortunes. By the close of 2010, with an election still fourteen months away, the Bligh Government languished with record low levels of support. According to Newspoll, Labor attracted 26 per cent of the primary vote, and just 24 per cent of Queenslanders were satisfied with Premier Anna Bligh's performance. Unusually in Queensland politics, an Opposition leader, the mild-mannered John-Paul Langbroek, had overtaken an incumbent as preferred premier. The Government's decline – one almost universally attributed to Labor's unpopular commitment to state asset sales (arguably a crisis of Labor faith) – was as rapid as it was steep. Just two years before, the relatively new Bligh Government had peaked at 60 per cent of the after-preference vote, with 64 per cent approving of Bligh's leadership.

By late 2010, Labor tacticians toyed with several potential approaches: to positively 'spin' the government's achievements; to undermine the resurgent Opposition with negative reproaches; and to hope external forces intervened. The first and second solutions are standard fare. Yet trumpeting the claimed benefits of privatisation, progress toward its creating 100,000 jobs, and an attack on the Opposition as a policy-free zone fell on deaf ears.

BY LATE DECEMBER, floodwaters were lapping central Queensland communities. By early January, much of the state had been ravaged and then Brisbane was inundated. With three-quarters of Queensland disaster-declared, and after thirty-five fatalities and damages of more than \$20 billion, this was the state's worst moment for thirty-six years.

It is often said the fires of crisis forge the most durable leadership mettle. Subsequent accusations of political opportunism aside, this was certainly the case in post-flood Queensland, with Anna Bligh and Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman enjoying a particular buoyancy.

For Bligh, a descendant of the maligned *Bounty* captain, the turnaround in personal stocks was unprecedented. As she delivered round-the-clock updates, Bligh relaxed before the camera and impressed audiences with her technical grasp. The performance climaxed on 13 January when the premier tearfully delivered a landmark address. 'As we weep for what we have lost, and as we grieve for family and friends and we confront the challenge that is before us, I want us to remember who we are...we are Queenslanders. We're the people that they breed tough, north of the border.'

Evocative and laced with just enough populism, the address humanised Bligh. There were detractors, of course, but Bligh's reputation was resurrected and, other Australians wanted to know the Bligh story. Ironically, the *Women's Weekly's* cover story on Bligh which addressed this interest, later eroded some of her goodwill in Queensland.

Newspoll had never recorded a more dramatic turnaround. By March, Bligh's approval had soared to 49 per cent, and she became preferred premier over Langbroek with a 27 per cent margin. Labor's primary vote also climbed twelve points, and the Government's after-preference support was now four points above the Opposition's. On the back of a calamity, Labor had broken through. Strategy three: external forces intervened.

THE TALE'S SECOND political problem remained: what could a now-marginalised opposition do to counter a resurgent government? Again, the LNP faced three options: laud itself as an alternative government; harshly judge the

Government's post-flood reconstruction; or find a solution outside the political square. Again, the first and second options were routinely engaged. Each was risk-averse. Some LNP stakeholders felt that the status-quo that had endorsed a tepid leader and his 'small target' strategy threatened a sixth election loss. For the organisational wing – traditionally docile (at least among Liberals) in its relationship with MPs – defeat was not an option; the time for risk had arrived.

The potential hazard of unorthodoxy in a conservative state cannot be overstated. If it failed, not only would individual careers end, the entire future of an amalgamated LNP would be in doubt. Crash through or crash politics are not uncommon in state politics but, even by those standards, interstate observers remarked that these events could only occur in Queensland – a place where we do our politics differently.

The caravan moved quickly. In late March, leaked internal LNP polling suggested John-Paul Langbroek would lose an election against Anna Bligh; the same poll insisted Campbell Newman would win comprehensively. After a succession of mediocre leaders, the Lord Mayor's move to state politics had previously been mooted, but always ruled out; Newman was interested in serving only the people of Brisbane. This time the usual denial was not issued. Instead, a few days later, Newman convened a media conference to affirm that he would, in succession, contest LNP pre-selection for the inner Brisbane (and fairly safe Labor) seat of Ashgrove, resign as Lord Mayor, and assume the LNP leadership – all before his election.

Newman, heavily backed by LNP President Bruce McIver, was now painted as not only the LNP's saviour but also state's. In his characteristically populist style, 'Can Do' Campbell Newman brushed aside Westminster conventions of an opposition 'leader' not holding a seat in the lower house of parliament, erroneously comparing this to his 2004 Lord Mayoral campaign, which he fought as a private citizen.

Brisbane lord mayoral ballots are quasi-presidential contests, conducted by popular election. But the speciousness of the argument, and commentators' criticism of the plan, was lost in the community's embrace of a popular alternative premier. Langbroek stepped down as opposition leader, and former Nationals leader and Callide MP Jeff Seeney assumed – despite some party disquiet – the role of LNP parliamentary leader. The inherent paradox of the plan – a party boasting two chiefs, one inside the parliament and one on the hustings – confounded commentators.

For most Queenslanders, though, the unorthodoxy was welcome. A late March Galaxy poll found that Newman was now the clearly preferred Premier with 51 per cent to Bligh's 38 per cent. The poll suggested that government would fall to a Newman-led LNP, as Labor trailed the Opposition by sixteen points after preferences. Despite occasional inconsistencies between Newman and Seeney, over frontbench and deputy leader appointments, the electorate embraced the risk.

AN ELECTION IS still up to ten months away, and it remains to be seen how the LNP will mitigate that risk. There is still the question of LNP unity as old Liberals and old Nationals parade tribal loyalties and vent petty jealousies. There is also the question of whether Newman can defeat popular cabinet minister Kate Jones in Ashgrove, which she holds with a 7 per cent margin. And there is the even more capricious variables: a state-wide Labor resurgence, LNP or Newman stumbles.

A key lesson of these tales is that risk is often the only catalyst sufficiently powerful to break entrenched cycles. Occasionally, in politics as elsewhere, protagonists must think outside the square.

Another lesson is that risk, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For many commentators, eschewing of political convention seemed foolish – a risk of the highest order for the LNP. For the electorate, at least according to early opinion polls, the risk is largely illusory.

Sometimes the experts get it wrong. We have less than a year to see if 2011 was one of those occasions.

19 April 2011

Dr Paul Williams lectures in politics and journalism at Griffith University's School of Humanities on the Gold Coast. He is a weekly columnist with Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* newspaper, and is a frequent media commentator on Australian federal and Queensland state politics. He has published widely in Australian scholarly journals, and is co-editor, with John Wanna, of *Yes Premier: Labor Leadership in Australia's States and Territories* (UNSW Press 2005).