

Kezia Griffin, 'Maintaining a Relationship: The Queensland Coalition'
Centre for the Government of Queensland Summer Scholar Journal, 1, 2010-11

The official merger of the Queensland National and Liberal parties occurred in 2008 and saw the creation of the Liberal National Party (LNP). Since the amalgamation many have doubted the long term success and practicality of maintaining such a close partnership, and given inter and intra party conflict which has been a feature of coalition politics in the past, these critics are not without credibility.

The fundamental argument against the amalgamation of the Liberal and National parties is that they are essentially two separate entities with different constituents and policy agendas. Though united by opposition to the Labor movement, the Liberals predominantly represent 'business interests and conservative urban voters' while the National Party has always aimed to be a 'voice for rural interests'¹. With this in mind it is difficult to envision how a cooperative coalition and now united party can be maintained while their greatest shared value is their opposition to Labor.

History itself provides few answers to this question with the Liberal and National parties in Queensland butting heads over countless issues in regard to their varying social agendas. Amongst other issues, matters of economic management and trade hold major stumbling blocks for the cooperation of the two anti-Labor parties. This was evident in the debate in federal parliament in 1997 in which the Howard government, in true Liberal style, announced plans to remove the import tariff on overseas sugar thus increasing competition within Australia. Queensland members Bob Katter from the seat of Kennedy and De-Anne Kelly from the seat of Dawson, two electorates with a high number of sugar cane farmers, were two of many National Party back-benchers who passionately challenged this proposal in order to protect their rural constituents who could face the risk of losing business at the hands of cheaper imported sugar.² Events such as these demonstrate how differences between the Liberal and National parties pose major implications for the long-term success of such a partnership.

There is a long history of disagreements and splits within the Queensland Coalition. One of the most significant events in the recent history of the Coalition occurred in the Bjelke-Petersen era. In 1983

¹ Ian Ward and Randal Stewart, *Politics one*, South Yarra, 2006: 135

² David McKenzie, 'Nats Fight Sugar Tariff Cut', *The Australian*, 1 March 1997: 141

Liberal minister Terry White crossed the floor to vote against the government in favour of establishing a Parliamentary Accounts Committee³ and was subsequently sacked by Liberal Party leader, Sir Llewellyn Edwards. In August that year White successfully contested the Liberal Party leadership, ousting Edwards and taking the title of deputy leader of the Coalition. Despite White's appointment to the position, Bjelke-Petersen refused to support him on the grounds of his previous record of disloyalty to the Bjelke-Petersen government.⁴ An early election was called in October 1983 during which tensions between the partners continued to simmer. Uncertainty was then added to the political stew with no party gaining a majority of votes until late October when Bjelke-Petersen, who was just short of the majority, was able to persuade former Liberal health and transport ministers Brian Austin and Don Lane to defect to the National Party. This gave Bjelke-Petersen the power to govern in his own right thus deepening the rift in the then former Coalition.⁵

Like any other party, the Queensland Liberals and Nationals each have to deal with their internal factions and by banding together, the number of factions is potentially increased two-fold bringing an additional threat to the new party's stability. Though the smaller player in the Queensland coalition, the Liberal Party – particularly in recent times – has had its fair share of factional infighting. The tone of Liberal factions is less about ideology than it is 'personality and ambition'⁶. The two major factions within the Liberal Party are based loosely on former leaders Bob Carroll and Bob Tucker whose supporters are significantly more powerful in the party organisation, and parliamentary party respectively.⁷ This brand of factional politics differs from the Labor Party where factions are formally recognised and although personalities hold a strong influence, factions are given proportionality and influence. In the Liberal Party, both in Queensland and the federal sphere, the factions function under a highly competitive, winner-takes-all culture.⁸

One of the most renowned and damaging cases of this began in February 2000 with Liberal front-bencher Bruce Davidson publicly criticising David Watson's leadership of the party. Liberal factions began questioning Watson's leadership after the Liberals received a 5% swing against it in the Woodridge by-election, and a swing of only 2% swing in its favour in a simultaneous election in

³ Wayne Goss, 'Parliamentary Committees in Queensland', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 16(2), 2001: 74

⁴ Michael Thompson-Noel, 'Queensland Coalition Rift' *Financial Times*, 10 August 1983: 4

⁵ *The Times* 1983: 6.

⁶ Ward and Wear 2001: 186.

⁷ Ward and Wear 2001: 186.

⁸ Ward and Wear 2001: 186.

Bundamba. Davidson was promptly sacked for his comments, but they paved the way for Liberal power-broker Santo Santoro to garner the support of factions to take on Watson.⁹

In February 2000 Santoro had reportedly discussed with factional colleagues his ambitions for the Liberal leadership, only being restrained by his lack of supporting numbers.¹⁰ Tension between Santoro and Watson continued throughout the year and culminated in Santoro's resignation in June after a war of words between the two.¹¹ This incident provides one public example of the divisions within the party. Divisions largely based on party leadership are prevalent in every party but intra party factional conflicts such as these have proven particularly damaging for the Liberal Party. As to be expected, this factional warfare in the Liberal Party spread throughout the Coalition and plagued both the Liberals and Nationals into the election year of 2001. In the election lead-up the growing sense of disunity resulted in parties voting to hold three-cornered contests in a number of state seats including Glasshouse, Cunningham, Nicklin, and Springwood.¹²

The National Party also contributed to the Coalition rifts. During the 2001 election the parties had to decide how they would place preferences. In the centre of this debate was the issue of where to place the emerging One Nation Party with its deeply conservative and rural-based populist ideology. The difficulty lay in the shared constituents within the National and One Nation parties in contrast to the values of Liberal Party voters.¹³ January saw the Liberals making an executive decision to place One Nation as their last preference. By placing One Nation higher than Labor in preferences the Liberals risked a voter backlash by seeming favourable to One Nation policies such as anti-immigration, as it did in the 1998 poll.¹⁴ Rob Borbidge, the then-leader of the National Party, followed suit by declaring his official intention to not give the Nationals' second preference to the minor party while leaving the ultimate decision to a seat-by-seat basis.¹⁵ Despite his firm words, he faced disputes from within his own party with Naomi Wilson for the seat of Cairns, and Barry Moyle for the seat of Mulgrave being among many who expressed their intentions to give One Nation their second preference.¹⁶

⁹ Australian. 2000: 6.

¹⁰ Sommerfeld et al 2000: 1.

¹¹ Australian Associated Press. 2000.

¹² Emerson 2001: 4, *Townsville Bulletin* 2001: 8.

¹³ Kelley 2001: 85

¹⁴ Franklin 2001: 8.

¹⁵ Wear 2001:5540.

¹⁶ Wear 2001 :554, Lappeman and Stolz 2001: 1.

The splits within the National Party called into question Borbidge's credibility and authority. The intra party conflict in the Nationals and the lack of cooperation between the Liberals and Nationals in campaigning were enough to return Peter Beattie as premier with a substantial majority.

The Queensland Coalition has had a turbulent history. Since the 2008 merger, there have been a number of defections including Rob Messenger, Aidan McLindon, and Andrea Johanson who cite a loss of faith in the Coalition since the merger.¹⁷ Despite this, the Liberal National Party has avoided any major divisions since its amalgamation. The long term maintenance of their political stability rides on the compromise between each party's social and political identities and values, their management of factional issues, and whether they can demonstrate that their unity in opposition to Labor is strong enough to provide the capacity to work together in government.

© Centre for the Government of Queensland, The University of Queensland, 2011. All opinions expressed in this article, other than those quoted from other sources, are the responsibility of the author of the article.

Further Reading

The Australian, 'Lame duck in a flap as Libs soil their own nest', 17 February 2000: 6.

Australian Associated Press, 'Qld: LNP splits as Labor cracks in Queensland', 5 May 2010.

Australian Associated Press, 'Santoro Quits Liberal Front Bench', 8 June 2000.

Rosanne Barrett, 'LNP candidate defects to newly formed party', *The Australian*, 16 June 2010: 5.

Scott Emerson, 'Three-way fights create rifts', *The Australian*, 3 January 2001: 4.

Matthew Franklin, 'Voters Confused by Party Dealing', *Courier Mail*, 24 January 2001: 8.

Wayne Goss, 'Parliamentary Committees in Queensland', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 16(2), 2001: 73-9.

Suzanne Lappeman and Greg Stolz, 'Don't Defy Me – Borbidge Faces Party Revolt', *Gold Coast Bulletin*, 1 February 2001: 1.

David McKenzie, 'Nats Fight Sugar Tariff Cut', *The Australian*, 1 March 1997: 141

Ian Ward and Rae Wear, 'Queensland', in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *The Centenary Election*, St Lucia: UQP, 2001.

¹⁷ Barrett 2010: 5, Australian Associated Press 2010.

Jeff Sommerfeld, Martin Thomas and Brendan O'Malley, 'Libs leader-in-waiting says he has everything but the numbers', *Courier Mail*, 17 February 2000: 1.

The Times, 'The demoralised Queensland branch of the Australian Liberal Party has been dealt another bad blow', 26 October 1983: 6.

Michael Thompson-Noel, 'Queensland Coalition Rift' *Financial Times*, 10 August 1983: 4

Townsville Bulletin, 'Just Who is in Control?', 3 February 2001: 8.

Rae Wear, 'Political Chronicles, Commonwealth of Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 47(4): 2001, 531-3.