**Any underperforming government should be afraid**

The size of the Labor loss in the Queensland election took almost everyone by surprise. Yes, it was predicted by public opinion research, but there were only a few commentators who believed that there would be a swing against Labor of 16% and that Labor would in fact finish with as few as 6 seats in the new Parliament.

This massive swing against the Bligh Government was blamed on Labor breaking electoral promises about the privatisation of assets and on Labor being in office for too long. We are being told that that the election outcome is the result of a unique set of specific circumstances which, like the floods, are only a one-in-one-hundred-year-occurrence. There is also a chorus of voices saying that the scope of the Queensland swing is unlikely to be repeated federally.

These explanations are not convincing. They simply reflect a kind of wishful thinking that neglects to take into account what has really occurred across Australia in recent years. Taken together with the result of the 2011 NSW election, the Queensland result suggests a more systemic change in the nature of the Australian electorate.

When I undertook some electoral research with Dr Graeme Starr in the late 1970s, it was clear that our electorate contained around 8-10% of voters who could be termed “swinging voters” and that it was these swinging voters who were determining the outcomes of elections.   It was also clear that the Labor Party voters would describe themselves more often as strong supporters while the Liberal and National Party voters tended to describe themselves more often as weak supporters. In other words, Labor voters were more inclined to follow their traditional allegiances and less likely to swing. We also found, surprisingly, that age was of relatively little relevance in terms of voting behaviour.

This situation has clearly changed in 2012. It seems that due to the changing nature of the Australian workforce (more educated with fewer blue collar workers), the percentage of swinging voters has grown to something like 16-20% and quite possibly more. It also seems that this change has become a permanent feature of the Australian political scene as more Australians are willing to change their vote because they feel less inclined to provide lifelong ideological loyalty to one party.

The change has certainly had something to do with the growing impact of generations X and Y entering the electoral cycle. Gen-Xers, born roughly between 1963 -1980, are often labelled the "slacker" generation, uncommitted and unfocused and open to frequent career changes. Unlike their parents’ generation, they are more interested in their own well-being rather the in changing the world in the name of such abstractions as rights and justice.

The Gen-Yers, born between 1981 and 1994, are also voting now. They are said to be programmed for instant gratification, “internet-addicted" and with unrealistic career aspirations.

Both groups are now estimated to be about half of the electorate and are unlikely to have their votes influenced by great issues or to vote in line with their parents’ political traditions. They have their own interests in mind and look for governments who might deliver on their expectations.

And let’s not forget the Baby Boomers (aged roughly 47-65). They constitute the bulk of voters, but their voting behaviour is changing, too. They experienced the prosperous post-war era, benefited from free tertiary education and relatively low housing costs and enjoyed changing the world. As retirement beckons, they are no longer as self assured and idealistic. They worry about massive increases in costs of living and the impact of economic difficulties on their superannuation savings. Baby Boomers feel the pinch of one of the biggest falls in the household wealth on record. The Baby Boomers have become grumpy, usually with good reason, and they have no patience with parties and governments that let them down.

What all these groups do have in common is a search for economically effective government able to meet their needs. They have no time for policies dictated by ideologically pure zealots in the name of greater good. To many of them the carbon tax is just another ideological move that is more likely to undermine their living standards rather than to contribute to the real reduction of carbon emissions. . The old parties have not been able to attract their on-going commitment, as old ideologies are irrelevant and they see no reason why to simply vote the same way they did last time. In particular they are willing punish underperforming governments that breech electoral promises.

It seems that this attitude will have a greater impact on Labor governments because in the past Labor has relied on a larger number of ideologically committed supporters. An article by Peter Van Onselen published in the Australian of 22 March well illustrates this point. The total number of state and federal seats held by Labor since the Rudd’s election in 2007 has declined from 351 (out of 591) to 223 in March 2012; or in percentages of all seats from 59.4 percent to 37.6 percent.

And make no mistake. We may be dealing with some kind of seismic shift in our electoral landscape. This will impact on all political forces and is likely to introduce a much higher level of accountability to the electorate. This means that such swings could also occur against underperforming or untrustworthy Coalition governments.

Thus also any non-Labour government should not rest on any belief that they have nothing to fear from their “rusted-on” voters. There are no longer as many such voters. The parties have lost them.

Another issue is that not only has the makeup of the electorate changed, so have the parties. It was the Labor party selling state assets not the Libs. There is little to distinguish them meaning that the cost of changing your vote is not as high.

The governments that prosper will be those that are most adaptable to the new political landscape. We already see this in Newman being elected from outside Parliament in Qld; and in Labor changing pre-selection process in City of Sydney.

 **Dr Sev Ozdowski**