

Queensland tsunami is heading for federal ALP



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Wayne Swan claims mining billionaires threaten our democracy. But the likes of Clive Palmer and Gina

Rinehart do not threaten him nearly as much as another, far more important, species – the Queensland voter. The Treasurer was elected to the seat of Lilley on Green preferences. He holds it by 3.2 per cent. On Saturday the Liberal-National Party swept all the state seats in his electorate. On those results Mr Swan will lose his seat at the next election.

He wouldn't be alone. Kevin Rudd is sitting on a margin of 8.5 per cent. In 2010 Rudd and Swan won first preference votes of 44 per cent and 41 per cent respectively. Labor's primary vote at the national level is now closer to 30 per cent. In the Queensland election it was 27 per cent. The result shows how a major party performs when its primary vote starts to limp around 30 per cent. It is not pretty.

Both Rudd and Swan have lost before – in 1996, when the Coalition was first elected under John Howard. Swan won it back in 1998 when Labor exploited the anti-GST campaign. Labor learned how a government which proposes major reform can be made to pay. And the lesson it took was that under no circumstances should a political party come clean before an election. The electorate should be told what is necessary – “There will be no carbon tax under a government I lead” – and the party should deal with the consequences later.

But the consequences catch up with this kind of politics. For Anna Bligh, who promised to retain a subsidy for fuel prices only to abolish it, they came on Saturday. The consequences for Julia Gillard are coming next year.

There comes a time in the life of a government where it faces the choice to either change course or march to oblivion. At present federal Labor is showing no sign of change. What Gillard should have done after the Queensland debacle was to convene

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the cabinet and announce that the carbon tax, fixed at \$23 a tonne, would be immediately cut and set at a level that applies in comparable countries – say \$10, as in Europe. She should have cancelled the monstrous spending on “clean energy” schemes throwing taxpayers' money after uneconomic proposals that will only ever increase costs for business and consumers. She should have announced reforms to help industry create jobs.

Instead she flew out of the country to a summit in Korea. The Queensland voters are entitled to conclude they will have to deliver the message a second time around.

The Queensland campaign was a harbinger of the next federal campaign. Showing no real achievements and no real vision for the state, Queensland Labor focused a personal attack on Campbell Newman and his family. It was unsuccessful. When Bligh was forced to concede there was no evidence behind it she looked shifty and desperate. Without a positive agenda you can expect Labor to mount the mother of all personal attacks on Tony Abbott next year. Already government ministers routinely begin and end their press conferences with attacks on his competence. Anti-Abbott hysteria may not be sweeping the electorate but it is sure sweeping the Labor Party.

Labor once saw its purpose as supporting skilled and unskilled workers to raise their living standards. But today its historic mission seems to be to stop Tony Abbott. On his first day as Senator, Bob Carr thought the most important statement to make to the press was a line he had rehearsed about Abbott as a “cheapskate hypnotist”. Carr may not understand about sanctions on PNG or the family situation of the recent Taser victim in NSW but he sure understands his main mission in Canberra! He urged his colleagues to “dwell a bit more on the horror of an Abbott-led government” and led off by claiming it would be “unpredictable”, “erratic” and “vicious”.

The government does not claim it is making life better for average Australians. It does not claim it is keeping down costs of living, improving services or cutting taxes. It claims it is in office to keep Abbott out. Sometimes there is an attack on a billionaire or two to spice things up but it's still not much of an electoral program.

Peter Costello is the former federal Liberal Treasurer.