



## Role of the Opposition

*Includes information and commentary by Honorary Research Fellow Dr Paul Reynolds.*

### The Development of the Opposition as a Political Force

It is an axiom of democracies that future majorities are not bound. This means that there must always be the possibility that those out of power can come into power and that this transfer will be in an orderly way legitimised by a popularly supported process. In practice this will almost invariably be the result of an electoral victory, but may occasionally occur when a Government loses its majority on the floor of Parliament, as happened, in Queensland in 1996.

As Australia is essentially a two-party system, the political contest for Government occurs between the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Coalition of Liberal and National parties (in Queensland, the Liberal National Party), with the loser automatically becoming the Opposition. In Westminster systems, Government is invariably formed in the Lower House and it is here also that the bulk of the Opposition sit. Even in those jurisdictions with an Upper House, when a Government lacks a majority in that Chamber, it is still treated as the Government. In other words there cannot be two Governments, one in either House. In Queensland, as a unicameral Parliament, the roles of Government and Opposition are relatively clear cut.

With the advent of the party system in Queensland, relationships between the political forces became regularised through electoral contests and parliamentary procedures. When the non-Labor forces coalesced into a single party in Parliament, known because of its longevity, as the Continuous Ministry, the ALP was recognised as the Opposition. It was from this time (1890s) that the Government/Opposition division became a permanent feature of state politics.

### The Role of the Opposition

The Opposition enjoys privileges and duties well established by tradition. The floor of the House provides the Opposition with a key area in which to perform its role - that is, to scrutinise, appraise and criticise effectively the policies and administration of the Government. Such opportunities for example are provided in Question Time, the Address-in-Reply debate, Budget debates, legislative debates and No Confidence Motions.

The Opposition also utilises the media to reach the electorate with its views and to establish an identity as an alternative government.

### The Term "Leader of the Opposition"

The term "Leader of the Opposition" was first used in Britain in 1826 but was not given statutory recognition until 1937. In the Queensland Parliament, official recognition was given to the position in 1909 through the granting of a salary to the 'Leader of the Opposition', an amount of £10 per week.

### The Role of the Leader of the Opposition

The Leader of the Opposition:

- is elected by Members of Parliament in Opposition, as their leader and spokesperson;
- has a responsibility to make the Government accountable and present the views of an alternative government;
- plays a leading role for the Opposition in parliamentary and policy debate;
- chairs the meetings of Shadow Cabinet;
- ensures that the time spent in Opposition is used efficiently as a 'preparation for government' time;
- serves as an alternative Premier;
- utilises the expertise in the community as an information and advisory source due to the limitations of staffing and resources of an Opposition; and
- represents his/her electorate.

Although not constitutionally recognised, the Opposition Leader is provided with a special salary, entitlements and facilities.

### Shadow Cabinet

The Opposition appoints Shadow Ministers, who with the Leader of the Opposition collectively form a Shadow Cabinet. Their role is to follow closely the areas and responsibilities and activities of the Government Ministers. It is their duty to respond to Government policy initiatives and offer alternative policies to the electorate.

In March 2011, the LNP Opposition embarked on an experiment unique in Australian politics. The party replaced their then leader, Mr John Paul Langbroek (Surfers Paradise) with Mr Campbell Newman, then Lord Mayor of Brisbane and not a sitting Member of the Queensland Parliament, as per usual practice. As no sitting LNP member resigned his/her seat for Mr Newman, he had to nominate for an ALP electorate (Ashgrove). Under Queensland law he was obliged to resign the Lord Mayorly on becoming a parliamentary candidate. As the Opposition had to have a leader in Parliament, this role fell



to Mr Jeff Seeney (Callide). With an election due in the first half of 2012, this departure from tradition sparked considerable interest.

### Evaluation of the Position of the Opposition

Political parties exist to gain and to hold power. Major parties in Australia, and therefore Queensland, have enduring support bases with about four-fifths of their followers habitually voting for them whether they are in or out of power. If this were not the case these parties could not survive from one generation to another. A further issue is that, in Queensland since World War I, the norm has been for long periods of one-party rule as elections routinely returned the Government of the day. This was the case for Labor 1915-1929, 1932-1957, 1989-1996, 1998-; the Coalition 1957-1983 and the Nationals 1983-1989. The only two exceptions were the non-Labor Governments of 1929-1932 and 1996-1998.

When compared to the Government, the Opposition is inherently disadvantaged. Although far better provided for now than prior to 1989, Oppositions have to rely principally on their own resources to project a profile to the voting public. They have to develop policies which differentiate themselves from the Government while not appearing too extreme by comparison. They have to project a

collective image that shows them to be superior to the status quo and sell their leader as one who is a better and more competent political manager than the Premier. They must woo the uncommitted vote, satisfy the protest voter while not alienating their loyalists. They must convince community groups and stakeholders across the widest array of policy fields to gain their confidence and reassure them that a change of government will be of benefit to them. They have to play the negative game by showing that the Government is incompetent, while simultaneously playing the positive game of selling themselves as the superior alternative. All the while, it is the Government and the Premier who make the news because they have the power of decision making and initiating action. By comparison, Oppositions rarely, in and of themselves, make news. For these reasons it is not hard to see that Opposition can be a dispiriting experience, growing ever more so the longer the situation continues.

The one pre-requisite that will elevate an Opposition to the Treasury Benches is if, over time, and in the approach to an election, it can seize the political initiative, dominate the policy agenda, attack the Government on crucial public issues and reassure doubters that they will be in safe hands should there be a change of Government. Attractive policies and forceful tactics then have to come together to make for a successful combination. Going on to win when coming from behind is a very hard, but not impossible task. No wonder that in Queensland, as elsewhere, elections are more likely to confirm Governments in office than restore Oppositions to power.