

The Queensland poll will test Clive Palmer's chutzpah

Written by The Conversation

When Tony Abbott was asked on Friday whether he'd consider stepping aside for Julie Bishop or Malcolm Turnbull – both of whom are more popular than he is – the Prime Minister defaulted to chutzpah.

Abbott was thrilled to have such strong colleagues, he said, adding that “one of the reasons why so many members of the team are able to perform so well is because they have got a very good captain”.

Not a very diplomatic remark in the circumstances perhaps, when his backbenchers are looking for a touch of humility.

It sounded more like the sort of thing Clive Palmer might say.

Like Abbott, at the start of 2015 Palmer is looking at a potentially difficult year. If Saturday night in Queensland is set to bring bad news for the Liberals, it's unlikely to be a bunch of laughs for the Palmer United Party either.

Queensland is Palmer's base; the state election was hoped to be a high point for his Palmer United Party (PUP). In July, ReachTEL had PUP on more than 15%, but on January 20 it was down to 5.2%.

ABC election analyst Antony Green describes PUP as “largely a fizzer in this election. Late last year you would have given them a reasonable chance of reaching double figures with their vote. But they will be lucky to get half of that now, and will get no seats.”

PUP's statewide vote will of course be reduced by the fact it is contesting only some 50 of the 89 seats.

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It's been seen as an unimpressive PUP campaign. Palmer himself missed its launch due to illness. The party's state leader, John Bjelke-Petersen (son of Joh), is new to the job and was on holidays when the snap election was called. Many of the candidates have some personal connection to Palmer (the wife of PUP senator Glenn Lazarus is running), inviting criticism that he's rounded up friends and associates. The wide advertising blitz of the federal election hasn't been replicated. The Senate inquiry into the Queensland state government that PUP had set up in the hope of getting some electoral advantage turned into a farce.

Palmer himself insists everything is hunky dory. "We think we will take some seats and have the balance of power to guarantee there will be no asset sales," he tells The Conversation on Friday. He predicts a Liberal National Party loss, but doesn't trust Labor not to try to divest assets, notwithstanding that preserving public ownership is at the core of the ALP campaign.

Palmer says PUP has done more advertising in regional areas than in the federal election but hasn't undertaken much in Brisbane where it is running only seven candidates. In the federal election it contested all seats.

Where would a demonstration that the PUP bubble has burst leave Palmer? Still powerful, but with a greater prospect that power will be eroded, adding to the Senate's volatility.

PUP now has two senators, Glenn Lazarus and Dio Wang, rather than its original three. Last year senator Jacqui Lambie defected to become an independent. She remains in contact with Palmer, however, and voted with PUP against the universities deregulation package before Christmas.

The alliance with Motoring Enthusiast Party's Ricky Muir remains in place but is not guaranteed on every vote.

On a good day, when Muir sticks, PUP continues to command a deciding three votes. The government needs six of eight crossbenchers to pass legislation opposed by Labor and the Greens.

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While Muir is still allied, one would expect he'll increasingly act more independently as he gains in confidence and experience. He switched from voting with PUP to voting against it on the crucial financial advice issue last year.

Lazarus, PUP's Senate leader, will remain solid. There is periodic speculation about Dio Wang's position on the universities package but he is also very loyal to Palmer. Of the two PUPs, he seems the more likely to eventually show greater independence.

Palmer on Friday reaffirmed PUP's opposition to the university changes, regardless of the desperate efforts Education Minister Christopher Pyne will make to get the legislation through with further compromises. Palmer says he is "absolutely confident" that Wang will stay firm, and adds that he thinks Muir, who voted with the government for the second reading, will change next time the Senate considers the issue.

Asked whether his authority will take a knock if the pundits are right and Queensland brings him no seats, Palmer says, "No. Politics is about mathematics". PUP will gain more senators next time, he says, "and have the balance of power for the next 12 years".

When it comes to chutzpah, Clive will never be beaten.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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