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TITLE: Left need not abandon all hope

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PUBLICATION: The Canberra Times

PUBLICATION DATE: 14/09/2013

LINK: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/left-need-not-abandon-all-hope-20130913-2tqoq.html>

A common response from progressive Australians to electoral defeat is to threaten to move to New Zealand. Just what moving to a country with a weaker economy, worse weather and a conservative government is supposed to achieve is typically left unsaid. But political strategy is not really the hallmark of the modern progressive, many of whom seem far more concerned with media strategy than Machiavelli.

Tony Abbott's Coalition achieved a strong majority in the lower house on the back of some simple slogans that are largely anathema to many progressives, particularly his promises to "stop the boats" and "scrap the carbon tax".

There is no doubt that if he sticks to his word there will be plenty for progressives to complain about in the next few years.

But at the same time, a close look at what many members of his new backbench want, and an even closer look at the composition of the new crossbench in the Senate, suggests there is a wide range of areas where substantial progressive reform may be possible.

Take the National Party's complaints with Coles and Woolworths, for example. The party of the farmers has, for a long time, been concerned about the incredible market power that the big retailers in Australia have achieved. Put simply, the grocery giants use their combined market share to crush small agricultural producers and food processors.

The most obvious solution to the dominance of Coles and Woolies is to give the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission much stronger powers, including the power to force companies that have grown too large to "divest" themselves of enough of their stores to ensure the marketplace approaches something resembling fair.

The power to break up big companies that behave poorly exists in many countries, including the US, but to date governments have been too afraid of big business to introduce them here. With parliamentarians such as Barnaby Joyce, Bob Katter, Clive Palmer and Nick Xenophon all

pitching for the "Aussie made by Aussie battler" vote, then the next three years may get us a lot further than the past 30 on this front.

Another area that is ripe for reform in the coming Parliament relates to coal seam gas extraction and the right of farmers to "lock the gate" if they do not want exploration to take place on their farmland. The Coalition has worked hard to take the heat out of this subject by pretending it is a "state issue" but, again, the presence of Clive Palmer and Bob Katter will likely make it a lot harder for the Coalition to duck the matter.

The Liberals and Nationals are divided on whether they should be on the side of the farmers or the miners, but the ambition to form government has, to date, dominated their desire to deliver for their constituents. But now that they have won, it is unlikely that the National Party backbench will be as compliant as Nationals leader Warren Truss has been.

You would usually expect Barnaby Joyce to take the populist pro-farmer line but, then again, you would not usually expect Australia's richest woman, Gina Rinehart, to be at the victory party of a National Party MP on the other side of the continent to her home.

Watching Joyce balance his desire for popular support with his desire to deliver for his powerful mining friends will be interesting to watch, but regardless of which way he jumps, this Parliament will likely take the opportunity to protect farmers from miners.

A third example of where a conservative Parliament might deliver some progressive reforms is in relation to the foreign ownership of natural resources and land. If there is one issue that united the conservative voters of regional Queensland, it is that too much good farmland is being either dug up or sold off and that "something" needs to be done.

Kevin Rudd obviously sniffed this wind, and it will be hard for Tony Abbott and whoever the leader of the Nationals will be now that Joyce is in the lower house to keep the scent from the nose of their new backbench.

Now that both houses of Parliament are full of so many high-profile conservatives, it is going to be very hard for Abbott to appear in control of his new joint party room. This is especially so if he is unwilling to heed the National Party's concerns over the need to rein in the big retailers, the big miners and foreign investors.

The election of the Coalition government is likely to see significant shifts in policy that many progressives will find uncomfortable. But rather than threaten to move overseas or retreat inwards, individuals and organisations that are serious about progressive policy change should focus at least some of their attention on the possibilities that the new Parliament presents.

The National Party has long been described as agrarian socialist, and its support for new taxpayer-funded rail infrastructure through its electorates suggests that nothing much has changed. Electorates held by the National Party are likely to have high percentages of children in public schools and low percentages of people with private health insurance.

Any Coalition policies that harm public schools will disproportionately harm voters in National Party seats. Similarly, pouring more money into private health insurance will do nothing to help rural Australians who live hundreds, or even thousands, of kilometres from the nearest private hospital.

If the Coalition simply delivers for the wealthy then, by definition, it will not deliver for National Party constituents, many of whom live on much lower incomes than the average constituent in inner-city areas. Progressives who want to protect the funding of public services and stand up for low-income earners will be far more effective if they communicate directly with those who live in the National Party heartland rather than simply maintaining their rage on Facebook.

It is not at all clear what the next three years in the Parliament will hold but there is no reason to suspect that it will run smoothly simply because Tony Abbott has a majority in the lower house. Just as the Greens and independents' votes were crucial in the lower house for the Gillard government, so too the Greens and crossbench votes in the Senate will now be crucial.

Delivering stable government is simply another three-word slogan but there is nothing in our constitution, or our political history, that suggests prime ministers should, or do, get their way. Even when John Howard had a majority in both houses of the Parliament, Barnaby Joyce, his new National senator from Queensland, crossed the floor to vote against his legislation 19 times in three years.

While progressive Australians may well fear that Tony Abbott will try to do exactly what he has promised to do, if they really want to shape the country, they would do well to spend some of their energies focusing on the issues that he has worked so hard to say so little about.

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