

## Campaigning in turbulent times

**Far North Queensland won't decide Saturday's state election, but it's a barometer of the stresses brought on by the economic downturn, reports Peter Mares from Cairns**

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Above: Wendy Richardson, Liberal National Party candidate for Barron River in Far North Queensland.

Photo: Peter Mares

AT FIRST, after my plane touched down in Far North Queensland, I couldn't see much evidence of either financial or climatic turbulence. Towering banks of purple-grey cloud clung to the forested slopes that surround Cairns, but there wasn't even a tail wind from cyclone Hamish, which was whipping up ferocious seas to the south. My flight from Melbourne had been full and Cairns international airport appeared to be a hive of noise and activity. Disembarking passengers were directed to the terminal through a makeshift walkway of shipping containers, opened out at both ends like empty tin cans and joined together to shield us from tropical downpours. The occasional break between containers gave a glimpse of an army of workers in fluorescent shirts and white hard hats, labouring away on a \$200 million airport upgrade. "Three million reasons to build a better airport," the signs said.

But in Cairns itself those projected visitor numbers look like a legacy of sunnier economic days. The cafes, gift shops and tour businesses clustered along the Cairns Esplanade are quiet, as is the wharf, the departure point for trips to the Great Barrier Reef. Eighty-thirty in the morning should be rush hour here, as passengers are welcomed aboard the formidable "reef fleet," a collection of giant catamarans, half-day cruisers and small, specialised dive boats. There are gaggles of Asian and European tourists, but no big crowds. Steve, a ship's captain with passable Japanese, tells me that there used to be no off-season for reef trips. His 400-seat vessel would be full to capacity every day. Now it's hit and miss, and the big catamaran often heads out half empty.

Over at Big Cat Green Island Reef Cruises the general manager, Kim Thomas, agrees. He's been running reef trips for twenty-one years and still comes to the wharf every morning to see his boats leave. He says 60 per cent capacity is breakeven for his business, so with boats only half full he's "going backwards." Thomas has only seen it this bad once before, during the 1989 pilots strike. "We had a fair idea that couldn't go on for ever," he says. But with the global financial crisis, he is not sure there is an end in sight: "I don't believe we've seen the worst of this yet."

I am in Cairns recording a program on the Queensland election for Radio National's [1] [The National Interest](#), and that means getting a sense of how the region is weathering the economic slowdown. Tourism is the economic engine of Cairns and surrounding communities, and Rob Gaison from Tourism Tropical North Queensland says the industry creates thirty thousand jobs and is the driver of the construction industry and skilled trades. In June last year, long before the full impact of the global financial crisis, tourism was hit hard by Qantas's decision to scale back direct flights from Tokyo and cancel direct flights from Osaka. The weekly number direct flights from Japan fell from seventeen to seven, representing a potential loss of 100,000 Japanese visitors per year.

Gaison estimates that two thousand jobs have gone in hospitality and tourism so far, though most have been casual positions held by backpackers on working holiday visas. Only a year ago tourist operators in Far North Queensland were crying out for extra foreign labour and lobbying the federal government for a guest worker program for the industry. The change was "so quick," says Gaison. Although the industry planned for a downturn after Qantas cut flights in June, he says, no one anticipated that "the floor would collapse beneath everybody" when the global financial crisis hit in September.

Desley Boyle, Labor MP for Cairns and tourism minister in the Blich government, also expects things to get worse before they get better. She says there is a lot of fear in the local community about the future of the tourism industry, and she's hoping that this will encourage voters to back Labor's "jobs-focused election policy." But Boyle claims she is not confident of retaining her seat, which has been in Labor hands since 1904: "As I've got into bed a few nights of this campaign, I've thought to myself, Desley, you could be suddenly retired."

Wherever I go in Cairns, I see Desley Boyle's election posters – and most of them have been altered by a local political activist who has stencilled the words "Yacht Club" across the MP's hairline in a typographical tiara. "We have a new yacht club in Cairns that has better facilities than the old one had," says Boyle defensively. Nevertheless she admits that the old yacht club was "much loved by some old locals who enjoyed a cheap beer on the balcony looking out over the inlet" and "they are very angry that the building is gone." She expects the issue to cost her votes on Saturday.

As a colleague from ABC Far North Queensland pointed out to me, the demise of the old yacht club is symbolic of the changing nature of the city. The wealth generated by tourism, the emergence of a plethora of small business operators, the northward migration of well-heeled retirees following the sun – all are fundamentally changing the character of Cairns. "It was a very blue collar city all those years ago and it isn't any more," says Boyle, with a note of nostalgia in her voice. "Some of the blue collar workers are being pushed out... and we've got a lot of new people in town who don't have any political allegiance or any history of Queensland politics. We think that is putting more and more pressure on the Labor vote in the city and is probably the main reason why I think that it is going to be a very tight call."

Joel Harrop, the Liberal National Party candidate for Cairns, is certainly banking on demographic change to work in his favour. We meet at the Cairns Base Hospital, an imposing building occupying waterfront land on the Cairns esplanade. In the hallway an Aboriginal kid is playing with a five fingered balloon made from a surgical glove; outside,

Indigenous families sit in the spreading shade of tropical trees whose dangling air roots a reminder that the Esplanade parkland was reclaimed from swampy mangroves. The hospital is a major local issue in the campaign. Labor is expanding the facility to create 168 extra beds and introduce new services, like radiation oncology, which are currently only available in Townsville or Brisbane. The upgrade is financed with \$530 million raised from the sale of a ninety-nine year lease on the Cairns airport to a consortium of banks. The airport was previously owned and operated by a government corporation, the Cairns Port Authority, and some locals question the value of the sale, since some of the \$78 million in annual revenue from the airport was used to promote tourism in the region.

The Liberal National Party has promised to build a brand new hospital, at a cost of at least \$1 billion. Labor says the only way the LNP could fund its promise would be to sell the prime waterfront land to developers. Desley Boyle says this would be like selling “a sacred site.” But Harrop says Labor’s redevelopment is a “short term plan” and Cairns “needs a world class tertiary health care facility.”

A former army officer who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, Harrop is young, eager and clean cut. Like all LNP candidates out on the campaign trail, he wears the regulation uniform – a blue party polo shirt adorned on the breast with the yellow and white LNP logo. Harrop declares himself to be “a true Liberal National,” having joined the LNP after last year’s amalgamation and having never been a member of either of its constituent parties. He says that voters are “fed up and frustrated with not being listened to” by the “Labor dynasty” in Cairns, and he thinks southern migrants to the region are likely to support the LNP too. “A friend of mine from Melbourne recently told me that the Cairns Base Hospital reminded him of the Dandenong Hospital back in the seventies,” he says. Harrop says such people will not tolerate substandard services, “which is what we have here in Cairns.”

If Joel Harrop scores an upset and unseats Desley Boyle in Cairns then Labor will almost certainly lose office in Queensland. Labor holds Cairns by an 8 per cent margin, and the swing Harrop needs is roughly equivalent to the statewide swing the LNP needs to capture twenty-two seats from Labor and govern in its own right. Such a result would turn other Labor strongholds in Far North Queensland into marginals. Labor holds the vast electorate of Cook, which covers Cape York, by more than 11 per cent, and it holds Mulgrave, which stretches south from the edge of Cairns, by almost 10 per cent. But, as with the Cairns yacht club, there is anger at Brisbane’s perceived failure to listen to the far north’s concerns over local issues in both electorates. Resentment at Labor’s decision to replace retiring MP and main roads minister Warren Pitt with his son, Curtis Pitt, could dent Labor’s vote in Mulgrave. (According to a reader’s comment on the [2] [Cairns Post election blog](#), Labor has not even bothered to print new election posters. Since the posters don’t have a picture, just a name, “Curtis” stickers have simply been plastered over the name “Warren.”) In Cook, there is lingering bitterness over the forced amalgamations of local councils, particularly around the tourist town of Port Douglas.

An LNP victory in Queensland seems an unlikely outcome, but – as the party’s environment spokesman David Gibson tells me – the required 8 per cent is smaller than the swing that tipped Labor from office in Western Australia last year. I meet Gibson on the SkyRail cable car, where he is campaigning in support of Wendy Richardson, LNP candidate for Barron River, the party’s most likely win in the region. It’s one of the ten seats in Queensland that Labor holds by less than 5 per cent and can afford to lose without losing government.

Barron River stretches north from the suburbs of Cairns. Thanks to a redistribution, it takes in the exclusive resort of Palm Cove – an addition that is unlikely to boost the Labor vote. To the west the electorate stretches up into the Cairns hinterland around the “rainforest village” of Kuranda, where the Greens vote is particularly strong. As the Sky Rail climbs up to Kuranda, the cable cars almost graze the rainforest canopy, and the ride

affords a spectacular view of much of the electorate. It passes over the river from which the seat takes its name, and over the falls, which are in full flood thanks to the wet. But like the Cairns wharf, the Sky Rail is quiet. Patronage is down 20 per cent on last year, and operating hours have been cut back to reduce power bills.

When I ask Wendy Richardson what she would do to revive tourism in the middle of a global financial crisis she talks about the “common sense decisions” needed to “make the path as easy as possible for business and tourism entrepreneurs” who are often “confounded at the last minute by some bureaucratic issue.” In practice this means reviewing Labor’s 2031 statutory plan for the Cairns region, which aims to limit the city’s urban footprint and preserve its natural assets. Richardson says it is “extremely important” to protect the environment, but she says the 2031 plan was “a rush job” and is full of “grave mistakes.”

Driving to the base of the Sky Rail I had passed through lush stands of sugar cane on the outskirts of Cairns. I put it to Wendy Richardson that the 2031 plan would also make it difficult for her farmers on the urban fringe to subdivide their land and cash in on development if and when the tourism revives. “Certainly we need to be looking at what that all involves,” she says.

The future of the 2031 plan is one of the key points of local difference between the LNP and Labor. Another is Labor’s plan to protect the Great Barrier Reef by reducing fertiliser and pesticide run-off from farms. Richardson says “we need to look very carefully before we have knee jerk reactions and blame only farmers” for reef damage. “The last thing farmers want to do is pay for fertiliser only to see it washed down the creek and out to sea.”

Wendy Richardson is keen to present herself as a protector of the environment. “I don’t think anybody could represent this electorate who didn’t at least have a tinge of green,” she says. In Cairns, Labor’s Desley Boyle expressed an almost identical sentiment: “I am a very green person myself. You’ve got to be when you live in Cairns and you’re surrounded by the barrier reef on the one side and the world heritage rainforest on the other.”

The Greens won 13.3 per cent of the primary vote in Barron River in 2006 and their preferences secured a surprise victory for Labor. Under Queensland’s system of optional preferential voting, electors can choose to “just vote one” but the sitting Labor member, Steve Wettenhall, knows Green preferences will be required again if he is to survive in 2009. He urges people who vote Green “to use their second preference wisely.”

Barron River Greens candidate Sarah Isaacs thinks that Labor’s environmental policies are better than the LNP’s, but she believes Labor would not have taken action on issues like restricting urban development and reef run-off without the electoral pressure exerted by the Greens. When I visit Isaacs at her home near Koah, west of Kuranda, I have to abandon my hire car on the main road and wait for her to collect me in her small, rather worse-for-wear four wheel drive. The rough dirt road to her mudbrick house crosses seven creek beds in three kilometres, two of which are flowing fast. Isaacs consults the weather report every evening to decide whether to leave her car out on the main road in case it rains heavily overnight. “If the creeks rise then it’s easier to get through by bicycle,” she says. Together with a dial-up internet connection, running an election campaign from her isolated small farm is a challenging task.

THE QUEENSLAND ELECTION will ultimately be decided around Brisbane and on the Gold and Sunshine coasts, where the majority of seats are located. But if the LNP can make inroads in the far north then their task in the Southeast corner of the state will be that much easier.

Labor holds four of the five seats in Far North Queensland – Cairns, Barron River, Mulgrave and Cook. (Locals were quick to correct me when I inflated the list by adding in Labor’s seats around Townsville. Townsville, I was quickly informed, is “north”

Queensland, not “far north.”) The only non-Labor seat in the “far north” (although it stretches as far south to the Mackay hinterland) is the new seat of Dalrymple (created from the abolished seats of Tablelands and Charters Towers). It will be contested between the two incumbents, the LNP’s Shane Knuth (Charters Towers) and Queensland’s last remaining One Nation MP, Rosa Lee Long (Tablelands).

Long has built a reputation for herself as a staunch defender of “northern” interests in the “southern” parliament in Brisbane. “Every parliamentary sitting she’ll ask the tough questions of government and stand up for the people on the Tableland,” says Gavin King, chief of staff at the *Cairns Post*. “She’s a stark contrast to what Labor MPs do in Brisbane.” The *Cairns Post* has done Hansard searches to show how rarely Labor MPs from Far North Queensland speak in parliament. “Apart from Dorothy Dixers directed towards Labor government ministers, you would be hard pressed to find a Labor member asking as serious and tough question of their own government.”

The sense that the region is ignored by the government “down south” is palpable. Locals are quick to remind blow-ins like me that Brisbane is closer to Melbourne than to it is to Cairns. As Labor’s Desley Boyle puts it, antagonism towards the south is “a permanent state of mind.” According to Boyle, “In regional Queensland we always have that view that the south-east corner think they run the state, and of course we say dreadful things about people in Canberra, and the triangle of Sydney and Melbourne.” Whether or not such parochialism will actually cost Labor votes at the election remains to be seen, but certainly the LNP is hoping that it can cash in on the sentiment.

“I think Far North Queensland is going to be the lynchpin for the election and if these seats go down we will win government” says Joel Harrop. “Will we get there? I just don’t know, but there is so much anger in the region at being ignored. Brisbane ignoring Cairns is not acceptable.” •

*Peter Mares presents The National Interest on ABC Radio National. His feature on the electorate of Barron River is available on the program’s [1] [website](#). The National Interest will analyse the results of the Queensland election at midday on Sunday 22 March.*

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