

Can Campbell do it?

Campbell Newman is in the fight of his life as the countdown begins to the state elections. But will he make a good Premier, asks Alex Bernard

Energetic. Passionate. Driven. These are the words frequently repeated when asking past colleagues to describe former Lord Mayor of Brisbane Campbell Newman. Those in his inner circle say that it is these qualities that will get him over the line on 24 March when Newman goes up against rising star Kate Jones in Ashgrove.

Labor has held Ashgrove since 1989, but if Newman's performance in City Hall has shown the people of Brisbane anything it's that he's not afraid of a challenge. LNP councillor Geraldine Knapp, now serving in her fifteenth year, has known Newman since his pre-selection in 2002 and he was the fourth lord mayor she has served. "I have a lot of time for Campbell Newman personally and the utmost respect for him professionally. He was a terrific lord mayor and while we had plenty of 'robust debates' he really did make things happen. Getting the traffic flowing is just one good example of that. He thought about what was essential to allow Brisbane to grow," says Knapp.

But does a good lord mayor equal Premier material? Clem Jones and Sally Anne Atkinson weren't able to make the transition. "Leadership is leadership. Of course, it's a leap from lord mayor to Premier but he has the vision and the drive to do it," says Knapp. "He also has an understanding about where the state needs to go. As lord mayor he always made us (councillors) accountable and I believe he can bring those talents to the state.

"Local governments across Queensland will be a damn sight better off with someone who's done that job and understands how they work from the inside."

Although there had been rumours for some time that Newman might make the switch to state politics, the man himself



Campbell and Lisa Newman with daughters Rebecca (far left) and Sarah

remains adamant he really didn't consider it until after the Brisbane floods of 12 months ago. "I really enjoyed being the Lord Mayor of Brisbane. It was a terrific job but in the aftermath of the floods there were so many frustrations with the current government and so much that needs doing, I thought 'I can do that,'" says Newman.

He cites former Prime Minister John Howard as the political leader he admires. "It was his poise, his passion for serving his country, and don't we miss him now? His measured, dignified approach to running the country, that's what I revere."

The term "workaholic" comes up often when colleagues describe him and Newman himself admits there wouldn't be much work-life balance in the state's top job. "There isn't really much balance when you're in those roles, but people have every right to demand a lot from their political leaders and I know the first term will be incredibly hectic as there

is just so much to do. I accept that."

Radio 4BC morning show presenter Greg Cary has been interviewing political leaders, both international and domestic, for more than 25 years. "I've always found Campbell to be a decent bloke and a very straight shooter. In an age where spin rules, that's a big plus. Moreover when, as lord mayor, he said he would address issues on behalf of listeners he did. Like Peter Beattie, he also has a very positive outlook and personality which is a key factor in modern political leadership."

So what does Cary think are the challenges Newman faces if he were to become Premier? "His challenge will be to lead a parliamentary party in the hot house of State Parliament. There will be a greater complexity of issues and politics and he won't be able to win battles by weight of personality alone. It's also fair to say that not everyone in his own party was thrilled with how he became leader. They will have their own agendas."

Rod Birch was the chairman at Grainco Australia and worked with Newman for five years until 2001. "If you gave Campbell a task you knew it would get done, on budget, on time and to the best of his ability. He always was 'Can Do Campbell'."

"I haven't had much to do with Campbell since he left Grainco 10 years ago but my overwhelming view is that he is someone who gets things done, he includes his team in decisions, and I disagree with that notion he's supposedly an autocrat. I think you'd find it hard to find ex-colleagues or staff members who would tell you he wasn't a team player."

There's no doubt Newman's biggest and most ardent supporter is his wife of 20 years Lisa, although even she admits to being a bit anxious about the task at hand. "It's nerve-racking, [for me] because I'm watching someone I love go through this very arduous process, like watching your children doing exams. But he's a really honourable and committed man. He's passionate about the things that matter to him, his family, his work, the environment, the community and what I saw in him that made me think 'he's a keeper' are the same things that will make him a good Premier for Queensland."

She laughs good naturedly when told how much has been made of the open affection the couple shows each other. "Oh look, that's just how we are! I think it would be sad if we felt we had to change."

And she's given up trying to change her husband's "workaholic" tendencies. "He takes on everything with gusto and passion. He likes to do things! The biggest waste of money was the hammock I bought when we first married. He's only ever used it once to swing the girls in - it's in pristine condition in a cupboard."



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