Cardboard booths are foundations of change

The World Cup has lessons for life, writes Bruce Manners.

I WAS there for each of Australia’s World Cup matches – in the lounge room there. The first game was difficult, kind of embarrassing, actually.

The 4-4 drubbing by Germany had commentators looking for blame and “Reper” on abc.net.au asking the question: “Will someone put their hand up and admit that we’re not an automatic qualifier?”

Penrith resembles outer Newcastle. Like, say, Maryland. Penrith is dominated by young families living in recently built brick homes they are paying off. Typical. Each house has two cars. Both parents work, the woman probably part-time. There are two kid families, both at school.

The state election next March looms as a massive, historic defeat. But before then, NSW voters will visit the cardboard booth at the local school. The state election is in a federal election, a prospect that surely had a lot to do with the participation by NSW voters in the assassination of Kevin Rudd in Maryland.

When she catches her breath and looks more closely at NSW, our new prime minister will share their alarm, and frugal will show even on her kind of face.

Like Kevin Rudd, Janine Gullard faces the challenge of holding the votes of onces loyal but now unpredictable suburban voters.

Lesson 1: Y ou can’t help win if your kids don’t want to lose. Slowly, these voters – husbands and wives on modest incomes, parents, car-based commuters, mortgage holders on the edge of our cities – have lost a belief that Labor represented their interests.

And even if there were a will to respond, state and federal Labor governments have lost the financial capacity to improve suburban life. The quiet Maryland commuter, like the Penrith commuter; car-bound. There is no alternative to get to work other than by joining neighbours and others on congested roads.

Connections to the wider world – by train, freeway, copper wire – were built for a century ago. Their children’s schools are barely adequate and their medical services below par.

Forget carbon trading schemes, refugees on boats and mining taxes, for too long Australia’s quiet suburban families have been spending on urban infrastructure and services fall behind the pace of the rollout of new suburbs.

The dream of young successful families in new houses in new suburbs is unfilled.

John Howard’s government neglected the new estates. His treasurer Peter Costello chose to pay down government debt and squeezed away the massive government revenue of the sale of Telstra into a future fund to cover public service superannuation liabilities. New infrastructure spending was sorely neglected.

Then the global financial crisis racked up new federal debt which Labor’s retiring Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner says will peak at $310 billion. Federal Labor’s treasure chest for infrastructure spending has evaporated.

At the state level, the Australian Financial Review revealed last week that NSW will max out its borrowing capacity at $70 billion by 2015-16 simply to maintain struggling infrastructure and fund paltry new promises.

We may not be Greece, but neither the NSW nor the federal government have the wherewithal to fund the infrastructure needs of new belt of suburban settlers.

Each morning, Maryland cars turn onto Minmi Drive, drivers squat at the sun, windows washers spray the windshield, another busy day starts. In the late afternoon, the drivers head home, squatting into a western sun.

These quiet suburban families do their bit. Both parents work hard. They earn. They pay the mortgage. They save for retirement. They look after their ageing parents. Most importantly, they feel cheated that governments aren’t putting it in likewise.

The quiet suburbs go to the cardboard booth at the local school. They vote.

They have discovered the little pencil is a murderous weapon.

This is our new politics. No rallies. No noise. No local heroes. Just the scrape of carbon across a ballot paper.

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