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“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

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Public Service

Local Government

A Public Service matter

The departure of the head of DPAC (Department of Premier and Cabinet) - a truly regretted loss - highlights the high level of churn at the top of the public service.

During the term of this government, by redundancy, retirement or resignation, by sins of commission or omission, oversenior members of the bureaucracy have now departed the scene.

Without even trying to be comprehensive about this, the establishment of State Growth saw two respected heads made redundant, the Chairman of Hydro Tasmania resigned, as did the Chairman of Forestry Tasmania, the Education, Health and Justice Departments have had to find new heads, TAFE has gone through a series of changes, as has the structure of the state's public hospitals, DPIPWE has a new head, the Integrity Commissioner and the Auditor-General have departed, and now the head of DPAC has resigned.

What is to be made of this? That's a lot of talent and a lot of experience that has walked out the door.

A government that argues its capacity for providing stability and leadership will be struggling to convince the people that it can deliver, given this list, to which can be added the fact that four of the original members of Cabinet no longer sit round the Cabinet table.

There are two serious points to be made here. The first is that the drain of talent will encourage the government to seek candidates from interstate, as has happened in the past. However, such interstate appointments have had a chequered history, because although they may bring a different and new and fresh approach to doing things, in many ways those different approaches don't work, or at least don't work well within a Tasmanian context.

In many situations it is simply a matter of scale, and of “distribution and delegation” to and within the three regions. But in the process, there is a degree of disruption, which in turn tends to lower morale and work efficiency.

The second point is this. Our second-tier bureaucrats do need to skill up. The public service needs leadership and leadership doesn't just happen. For that to happen, they need to be sent on senior management courses, such as Harvard, Stanford, the London School of Economics etc.

A big call maybe but it has to happen. Yet our appetite for doing so is tempered by the fear of “Right to Know” style campaigns which would want to expose how “good” these participants are getting it.

Still, we can't have it both ways. Bureaucratic leadership “on the cheap” will continue to lead to bad practice and dubious outcomes. Our political leaders need to recognize that people that give effective, reasoned and sound advice need to be skilled-up to do so.

Local Government

The Minister has finally sacked the Glenorchy City Council and has called for new elections, to be held in January. Candidates are already lining up to have a go, and are being encouraged to do so. However, although the Council was sacked, the General Manager remains – albeit on leave. In his place a Commissioner, who has steered the Council well through these troubled times, and will continue in her role at least until the elections.

However, what happens next remains unclear.

South of Hobart, another sacked Council, but in the case of Huon Valley, a totally different approach has been taken, in that the appointed commissioner will remain until the next elections are due, in October. No new elections here.

I read with some disbelief certain comments attributed to this commissioner. In arguing for a continuation of her role, she is reported as saying that she wants to uncover "suitable" candidates, and then hold workshops for them to expose them to their responsibilities as Councillors.

She wants to enable people without a public profile to get one so that they can compete against people who already have a profile, or so it reads.

"What I am hoping to do is to identify a number of people who are willing to stand and are very good for the community and then give the community the opportunity to meet them..."

Sorry, Commissioner but that is not your job. It is not up to you to determine who is good and who is not good to be on Council. It is not up to you to promote certain people in preference to others. It is not up to you to provide a platform for some to build a public profile. Democracy does not work that way.

What many elected organisations do is provide orientation workshops to those who are successful at an election, and it should be no different in the Huon. QED

But she has, reportedly, taken this matter further, by lobbying members of the Upper House to block any proposal coming from the Lower House for an early poll. In what can only be described as an extraordinary statement, she has argued that the new senior management of Council would be adversely affected by a new Council being appointed and interrupting it.

What she is inferring by this statement is that we shouldn't have elections, because it will affect the bureaucracy. Is this her view of the Glenorchy situation, which is in exactly the same predicament, if not worse?

If it is good enough for the citizens of Glenorchy to elect a new Council now, then it should also be good enough for the citizens of the Huon Valley.

She has totally overstepped the mark.

In my book, all the more reason to have early elections and invite this Commissioner to retire. Autocracy should not reign!

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