

ISSUE 1731

“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

Date: 10 December 2017

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The fortunes of government

The year is coming to a close. Christmas will soon be upon us, and Santa in his various guises is now roaming the highways and byways spreading good cheer. Parliament has risen for the year, and presumably will be prorogued before meeting again, for a State election due in March.

It is tempting to run a score card, but for now I will refrain from doing so, other than to say some Ministers have kicked goals, some Ministers have kicked own goals, and some have even done both.

Maybe Santa should visit the Parliament to spread some good cheer amongst government members, as the polls are showing that an election held today would return a hung parliament, and with a more popular Opposition leader than the Premier.

The Premier and his cohorts say that only the Liberals can achieve majority government. Once an expression of hutzpah and optimism, it is now looking less likely by the day. Both major parties are saying – and meaning – that they will not do deals with the Greens, and that can be done. A minority government, as distinct from a coalition government. The issue for the Greens is which party would they support, given no deals.

The question that is being asked within the Liberal camp is “Why are the polls so bad for the government? After all, the budget is in surplus (according to the Treasurer), business confidence is strong, investment is strong, the property market is strong, tourism is strong, retail is doing well, natural disasters (fire and flood) were seen to be competently handled, employment is holding up, agriculture is faring well, etc etc.

Well, for starters, there have been some hiccups. Difficulties within the public service (e.g. TAFE, Justice –early prisoner release – and lately Premiers) and within local government (e.g. Huon, Glenorchy) grabbed headlines, the Royal redevelopment is nothing but a continual headache, reports have been withheld from public release. and have exposed problems in health service delivery, child protection seems to be in crisis, the conflict over TasWater was a battle lost, a new Forests Minister is spoiling for a fight with anyone, and traffic issues in Hobart remain unresolved. Even the reforms in the Education sector have hit headwinds.

However, in my book, and I have stated this throughout the term of this government, and the one before it, what people are looking for is a vision, and a pathway forward. They want to know where they are going, and what plans are in place to get there. They want good governance, i.e. an effective and an efficient public service that can deliver change in a changing environment. And they want stability. It's the difference between leadership and management, of change versus the status quo, of direction versus standing still, of resolving issues rather than letting them fester.

The government wants growth, but growth needs to be managed. If the population is to increase by 30% in the next few decades, where will those people come from, and what does that mean for infrastructure, housing, education, support services etc.?

The government needs to ask itself whether it has provided that vision, whether it has provided such governance. What has it done well, and what needs to be done better, and what changes are required in order to do so?

Soon there will be an election. Will the coming campaign be about the pathway forward, or the path already travelled? Will it be a negative campaign (which the government ran in Pembroke), or will it concentrate on policy? Will it be for change, or simply holding on to the status quo? Will it present simplistic quick-fixes, or holistic ones?

Local Government

The recent suggestion by the Eastern Shore Council that the four large southern councils agree to a new "Greater Hobart Act" to set up a regional planning body has received a degree of support. It is certainly an indication that councils themselves see that regional issues, such as planning and transport, are problematic and need to be addressed and resolved at a regional level.

As suggested, the new Act would require regular discussions between government and local government regarding these regional issues. In other words, another bureaucracy. And that would lead to even more duplication, obfuscation, and buck passing.

For this to not happen, there would need to be a further step taken, which would require councils to relinquish all control over such matters. If that was to happen, then the idea has merit. However, given the approach taken by Councils over TasWater, I cannot see that happening, and I am suspicious that there is another agenda being played out here concerning council amalgamations.

Traffic

Three road corridors into Hobart (the Brooker, the Tasman Highway and the Southern Outlet) are becoming gridlocked. To date, little has been done to resolve these problems, other than words, reports and meetings. Cotgrove in particular has been scathing in his criticisms of the process followed to date, and I endorse his comments.

The dual carriageway of Macquarie and Davey Streets needs to be incorporated into a regional solution, and not be left in the hands of the Hobart Council. But that is part of the solution only. Resolution of these matters requires improved parking in the city (which would benefit the Council and its ratepayers) and a bypass road.

So it comes as something of a surprise to see the government spruiking up an 8 year road improvement program from Sorell to Hobart. For two reasons: The first year will involve a study! Oh, please. What has the Roads division of State Growth been doing all this time?

And the second is that after 8 years, when the improvement and duplications have been done, the problem will remain because nothing has been done to resolve the bottleneck in the city itself.

So, methinks the timing of this announcement has more to do with winning votes than solving problems.

Forestry

In passing, I note that the Victorian housing industry is suffering from a shortage of supply of framing timber. How ludicrous to lock up local supply, as the Victorian government has done, and where will they now source the material they need? From other states? Maybe from imports? And if so, from sustainable forests elsewhere? I sense some hypocrisy from those who have striven to close down the local industry.

It is pleasing to see that a proposal has been brought forward to resolve the issue of southern woodchip exports. The proposal involves a loading facility at Dover, in Tasmania's south. It appears to be sound, involve no government funds, and use side roads that are off the "beaten track".

Although proposed by a single company, it should receive the support of the entire industry, as it is about resolving an industry-wide problem. Needless to say, the anti-group are marshalling their troops.

Of fire and flood.

We have reached that time of the year again when the fire risk is high. The fire service has advised that a fuel reduction program has alleviated the risk, but the risk still remains high. In our flammable environment there are no soft options. Fuel reduction is a MUST DO.

Also on the agenda is the issue of flood protection. The extraordinary rains of last weekend caused river levels to rise, and the threat of flooding was again with us. We watch and wait, but we are strangely silent when it comes to mitigation works.

A Tasmanian Design

The Design Tasmania awards have just been announced. The Award focuses on design excellence, innovation and craftsmanship, and one of the stated criteria for making the awards is "the ability to go into production".

It is all very well to design something, but translating that into a commercial venture is what makes design work. All things we utilize have a design element, whether it be a light fitting, a candlestick, plates, cutlery, furniture, jewelry etc. It is more than making chunky breadboards.

Tasmania is, and should be, searching for a design "signature", and Design Tasmania should be congratulated for establishing the Award. However, I do urge them to concentrate on the translation from a one-off piece that can win an award, to providing a capacity for it to become a commercial opportunity. In other words, to manufacture that piece production-line style.

As yet, that appears to be lacking.

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