

ISSUE 1802

“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

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An Accolade

At the outset, I would like to congratulate the local newspaper (The Mercury) for its sustained effort in considering some longer term options for the state. It is rare to see a daily newspaper, normally focused on the news of the day, dedicate its resources and time to the issue of “vision”, The series concentrated on a 5 year plan, called Tasmania Vision 2022, and it teased out the bigger issues confronting the state. Although in the main the issues were obvious (eg growth, education, health, transport and traffic) it was encouraging to see the effort made by the newspaper. So, some issues to consider now – further comment in later editions:

The Case for Growth.

I am a fan of growth. I believe we need a larger population, to drive economic growth and help improve living standards. Why? Well, some statistics first. Over the last few years, our growth rates have been as follows:

	Tasmania	Australia
Economic growth (5 yrs)	4.8% (GSP)	13.0% (GDP)
Population growth (10 yrs)	5.6%	18.1%

In other words, we have been seriously lagging behind the rest of the country. That may be all very well and good for some, (why should we grow?) but if we continually fall behind the rest of the country, then our living standards and the opportunities that growth provides will also fall behind the rest of the country.

It is all very well to ask the commonwealth to provide us with extra funds to help cover the difference, through special grants or favourable GST disbursements, but it is a tune that is beginning to fall on deaf ears around the country. We must pull our weight, or we will suffer grievously.

If our growth rate matched that of the rest of Australia our population would increase from the present 520,000 to 650,000 by the year 2050. The government has stated it wants our population to reach 650,000 by the year 20250. In other words, to match the rate of the rest of the country.

Growth does not come easy, and carries with it a series of issues that need to be addressed. First of all, it needs to be recognized that the numbers will need to come from in-migration. How many, who will they be, what infrastructure will be required, where to house them etc.

These are important questions, and growth should not be determined in isolation from these other factors. The government until now has been silent on its strategy, which has been unhelpful, but in recent times has embarked on a campaign to entice people from Sydney to pull up stumps and live here.

Who to expect? Young families, older sea/tree changers, migrant communities, and if so from where? An older age group will require a different set of services than young-families, and migrant communities will require a set of skills in language and cultural matters. Will they be dispersed around the island or will they be concentrated on one particular region? If so, where? What infrastructure will be required to support the influx?

The Case for Growth

Roads

Hobart City Deal

Tourism

Backpacker Tax

Glenorchy City Council

It is unfortunate, but I have seen nothing to suggest that these matters have even been considered by the government or the broader political environment, and that is concerning

Road Infrastructure - Hobart

The inbound traffic into Hobart is clogging up. The Tasman Highway from the east, the Southern outlet from the south and the Brooker Highway from the north, are experiencing serious congestion problems. Governments have spent or announced intentions to spend on road improvements, such as extra lanes on the Tasman Highway, a new bridge over the Derwent at Bridgewater, and three intersections – a flyover at Summerleas Road, near Kingston, a flyover on the Tasman Highway near the airport, and an improvement (realignment) to the Elwick Road intersection on the Brooker. Why the latter was not a flyover eludes me. It should have been, and it will eventually need to be, as the traffic problems there have compounded in recent times.

This is all very well, but these decisions/intentions are being taken in isolation from the bigger picture. The more traffic flow is improved for inbound traffic, the more there will be problems closer in to the city. A candidate for Franklin in the coming election wrote an article recently espousing a more holistic approach, stating that the major problem lay within the CBD precinct, but with no real detail from him as to what that might be, other than some generalities regarding the need for improvement in traffic flow and to say people had told him that there should be improvements in the public transport system. Not very helpful.

Because public transport will not solve the traffic problem. Hobart is growing at its extremities, such as in the Brighton, Sorell and the Kingborough/Huon municipalities. As much as planners do not like to hear the story, and reject it when they do, the most popular mode of transport is the private vehicle and will remain so. Even if public transport was to double its patronage, private transport would still cover over 80% of all trips made. Bob Cotgrove, in a series of articles recently, keeps making this point, strongly.

The problem areas lie within Hobart, and the Council is disinclined to assist resolve this problem. Improving the Davey Macquarie dual carriageways, through parking bans and better light synchronisation, will only be placing a bandaid on a festering sore. There is a need for a new bypass, cutting through or under West Hobart, and joining with the Brooker and the Tasman north of the city centre, and the sooner we start planning for it the sooner we will have a better traffic flow system.

Added to that is the parking issue. As much as Councillors may wish its citizens to walk or pushbike everywhere it is just not going to happen. Commuters will still drive cars and will need to find places to park, and new parking stations are the answer. What a terrible indictment it has been that it has fallen to a cinema owner in North Hobart to develop a private parking station at the back of his cinema complex to accommodate the broader need. This should have been a council responsibility – it owes it to the commercial interests in North Hobart to do so, but - not a peep.

And as for the farcical situation at Salamanca, where yet another private developer, wanting to develop a complex which involved a significant underground carpark, was denied the application on the basis that creating the basement constituted a quarry, is nothing but a cruel joke and an indictment on the entire planning process.

The Salamanca precinct is crying out for extra carparking, but the council has done diddly squat about it, other than to increase the number of parking attendants and raising parking fees. Not a good way to attract good will or custom into the precinct.

All of which is but a signal that the powers-that-be have no notion or skill as to catering, not just for the present demand, but for the growth in demand for such facilities, that growth in general will bring.

Hobart City Deal

The Prime Minister has flown into town for a day, brandishing his pen, and signed an MoU (or a Heads of Agreement) with the State government for a "Hobart City deal", which will consider whether governments will work together to enable a co-ordinated response to certain development issues.

Before his arrival, the buzz was that funds would be made available for the Uni to further develop its STEM project (some \$400m), and for Macquarie Point to plan for the development of an "Antarctic precinct" on-site (some \$2b).

However, in the final wash-up, the MoU was all about "developing a framework to look at issues", with "much work still to be done, working together to work out the details". Whatever that all means. Gobbledegook! Apparently, a further deal is to be signed off later in the year after further talks and negotiations

No promises of money, no project detail, other than a broad understanding that projects to be considered would include the Uni's desire to move its STEM activities into town, the desire for Macquarie Point to become a centre for Antarctic studies, and that consideration be given to a "Greater Hobart Transport Vision". In fact, much ado about very little indeed.

One would have thought - and hoped - that much of that detail was already available, but apparently not. So it was an announcement to foreshadow some future announcement - maybe.

The PM also announced in the morning that the decision to consider further these projects was conditional on the return of a Liberal Government at the next state election. Later in the day he clarified (read backtracked) from that statement to say he believed there would be a return of a Liberal Government in the state, with which he would be looking forward to working with on these matters.

Words that are said cannot be unsaid, and the intention was clear. Such behaviour, to blatantly attempt to bribe the Tasmanian community before an election, goes far beyond the normal pork-barreling that accompanies elections, because this promise is conditional on a political outcome, not of his government - which would be at least understandable, but of the state government, over which he has no control. Frankly, my experience suggests that Tasmanians do not take kindly to such an approach, it is insulting to say the least, and in my view has done him considerable harm, no matter what the later spin might be.

If this deal came off, which I suspect is highly unlikely given the loaded politics surrounding it, then what consideration has been given to the ramifications for growth in city traffic that these projects will bring? According to the powers that be, yet another study? How many studies have there been already? One should really get into the "study" business. And as for Mac Pt, the beat goes on.

Tourism – growing pains?

In the last newsletter I commented on the growth in tourism in this state. It has been strong, and it has been sustained. Folk in the Tourism division of the Department of State Growth should be comforted by their success in promoting the state, and getting people to come and visit. I suspect that we want their experience to be so delightful that they will want to come again, and to also act as our agent in talking up the place to their friends, acquaintances and colleagues.

So it is somewhat disconcerting to hear of the discomfort of travellers having to defecate on the side of the road because of the lack of adequate toilet facilities around the state. I suspect something less than an enlightening experience for all concerned. It is another example of things not being properly thought through.

It is the State government that has promoted the place, but who provides the necessary (basic) facilities to ensure the success of that promotion? I took the opportunity to make contact with a number of councils to see what the relationship was between them and the department on this matter, and was surprised to hear that there was none.

So here is an idea. How about someone in the department gets on the phone, does the ring-around with local government officers, and discovers where the need is. The provision of toilet facilities – even porta-loos - coupled with aerobic waste-water treatment plants is not an expensive option at all, and they can be installed immediately, even if only on a temporary basis. Far better to do that and ensure tourists are not placed in such discomfort, than to do nothing while yet another consultant is engaged to write yet another report.

Meanwhile...

While on the topic of tourist facilities, a development application (DA) was lodged almost a year ago to enable a more effective management and movement of people in a sensitive national park. Essentially, cars out, ferry service in. The developer accompanied the DA with a draft management plan, simply because there was not one already drawn up.

The Minister, Parks Service and the Co-ordinator General advised that they could not consider the DA because there was no management plan, and then, without advising the original proponent, tendered out the drafting of a new management plan, at a cost of around \$100K, which contained in its scope matters that were already covered in the DA and the accompanying management plan.

This decision has caused considerable delay in protecting a rather fragile environment (people are still flocking to the place), has caused considerable unnecessary expenditure in engaging yet another consultant, and has soured the relationship with the original potential developer. Why was it necessary to be so pig-headed?

If the draft management plan met all the criteria, as it seems to have done because the issues raised were then laid down in the subsequent scope, why not accept it as a draft management plan – maybe with some peer review - under which the DA could then be considered. The job would have been done by now, money would have been saved, the value of the precinct would not have been further diminished, an investment would have been made and the reputation of Tasmania as a place to do business would not have been tarnished.

The Backpacker Tax

Backpacker work is short term, and it is casual. Over a year ago, this matter was being given urgent consideration by the Federal Parliament.

To recap:

Originally, backpackers were paying no tax until they reached an income of \$18,200, after which they would pay 19%. A bit like everyone else

The government did not believe this was proper, and wanted to change the law. It started with a figure of 32.5% from dollar one, (as if backpackers were making that much money – a joke) but moved to 19% under pressure, clawing back a 95% super grab and an increase in the departure tax. After much argie bargie and deal making, at the last minute, parliament finally agreed on a 15% tax rate, a super grab of 65%, and a \$100 million payment to Landcare in order to get Greens support.

The government's ideological position of principle was simple – backpackers should pay tax from dollar 1. Labor's ideological position of principle was also simple. Jobs should be available to Australians first. Politics was centre stage, with only the crossbenches mouthing any concern for the farmers and tourism operators, who would suffer greatly if the backpackers stayed away.

Well, has ideology won out? The results are now in. Backpackers have stayed away. It has become a lose –lose situation. Everyone is now losing. Government's revenue take is down, Australians are not filling these jobs. Fruit is left to rot on the trees, farmers' income is down, local communities suffer, and in fact the economy suffers.

What are the polities saying about this extraordinary state of affairs, all of their own making? Zip.

Glenorchy City Council

After a period of suspension, and then a-sacking, an election has been held, with the former mayor being voted back into office with a thumping majority, so high she has been able to bring most of her team in with her, riding on her coat tails. She is to be congratulated on achieving a magnificent result. And hopefully, Glenorchy will be able to put the past behind it, and get on with delivering services in a far more functional way.

Even though this particular chapter is done and dusted, it does not take away from the fact that mayors and deputies should be elected from the body of Council, rather than by popular vote. Resounding as this particular vote has been, it does not mean that the matter of how mayors should be elected goes away.

A word of congratulations should also be given to the outgoing commissioner, Sue Smith, who has done a masterful job in holding the show together during the interim period. I am sure the transfer will be a smooth one.