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“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

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Parliament
TasWater

The return of Parliament

Hands up who thought it was going to be a quiet week. Come on, be honest. A majority government, keen to pursue its agenda, the normal processes of a new parliament, a Governor's speech, members swearing and affirming allegiance, the election of a Speaker, inaugural speeches etc etc. All normal stuff. All routine. Well, didn't we get that wrong!

What a tumultuous week it has been, and it is only Wednesday!

First, the speakership. A first term backbencher elevated from a position of no consequence to the most powerful position in the parliament, the Speakership, with no parliamentary experience and against the wishes of her own party.

Wow!

The Opposition nominated her, and that nomination was seconded by the Greens. Her first utterances were to the effect that she would act independently of her party (she would not attend party meetings), she would make her own decisions about legislation before the parliament, but would guarantee her support for Supply.

So much for party allegiance! But then again, what's that!

What an extraordinary tactic it was, and, as a tactic, it worked brilliantly. For the individual, it has thrust her from relative obscurity into a position of enormous power. However it has done so at the expense of her party and of its leader (presumably he is still her leader), but It has really thrown the cat amongst the pigeons in so many ways and at so many levels.

The government is now in disarray. It may argue that it still has the numbers and that one of its own is still the Speaker, but that is extremely tenuous. With an “independent” Speaker who has stated she won't toe the party line, the government can no longer boast it has a majority, and no longer can it say with confidence that it can get its agenda through the parliament. In fact, I think we can say farewell to some of its more draconian and ideological positions such as mandatory sentencing etc.

Furthermore, it is now in a bind as to how to respond to such an act, as to exact revenge such as expelling her would only cause a greater rift within parliament where it needs the numbers.

Second, it has shone the spotlight on the leadership of the government in that they did not see this coming, and had ignored the obvious ambitions of this first-term electee, particularly if promises were made to get her to stand in the first place, and were then broken.

Moreover, it now throws the light on the Premier, what with his promise not to govern in a minority. Arguing that he still has the numbers is now a thin argument indeed.

The party's own nominee, who incidentally rolled another in the party in seeking the Speakership, has walked away with his tail between his legs and is now pondering his future.

For the Opposition, it has been seen as a smart tactical move and has certainly raised the profile of its leader as a master tactician. The Opposition leader has stated she had no prior conversation with the Speaker, and incredulous as it may seem, I think she is right. In fact I suspect it was not her idea at all, but that of some people outside the parliament who are closely aligned with the Speaker. It has in fact been a classic "your people talking to my people" scenario.

The reality is that there is something deeper at play here. This is in fact a power play within the Liberal Party, and shadowy figures have been playing a part in the background, either to destabilise for their own purposes, exact revenge, or to show that they can wield influence.

The tactic, no matter how successful it may have been on the day, in its planning and its execution, does not come without consequences.

First, just because one can do something does not mean that they should do that thing. Because a tactic needs to be linked to a strategy, and I am unclear as to the long-term benefit of this move. What is the real objective here?

First, the Speaker's position within her Party is unsustainable. Already party leaders are denouncing her act of "treachery". She will not be re-endorsed by the Party and if she wishes to be re-elected she will need to stand as an independent, and trust that the electorate will continue to support her. The sooner she makes that move the better, for her.

Second, she has destabilised her own party. The government will try and regroup, but as a matter of principle they will need to resolve her role within the party. Better to make the break now than to have the matter hang like the sword of Damocles over their head. And then there is the issue of the much-heralded stability of "majority government", now in tatters.

Third, the Opposition and the Greens were both involved in the motion to nominate the Speaker. This was a tactic that had been used before against the Premier's dad many moons ago when he had been nominated by his party for the Speakership only to get rolled by one of his own. It is what Oppositions do, to try and destabilise and put the government on the back foot. Nothing wrong with that. However, I suspect doing it in concert with the Greens will continue to haunt them.

All of which makes for a fascinating dynamic in the new parliament. And certainly not the stability the government – or the electorate – was hoping for.

Which leaves us with the Government's nominee for Speaker. A former leader of his party, and a Minister in the previous government, he announced he would step down from the Ministry to become the Speaker.

Bargaining for public office it may not be, but there was certainly a degree of hubris in the announcement – a nice sinecure to be sure – an easy ride home as he considered retirement. He certainly had the requisite parliamentary experience, but now, eking out his time on the backbench next to the person he rolled for the job – there's not much point in him staying. A rather less than salubrious end to his career to be sure.

TasWater

Which brings us to another earthquake moment.

During the last parliament the government moved to take over the ownership of TasWater from the 29 local councils. The councils balked and it soon became a political issue, with legislation pushed through the Lower House only to be defeated in the Upper House. The government went to the people seeking a mandate for the takeover, and argued that its re-election gave them the mandate they required.

Come day 1 of the new parliament, and before parliament even sat, the government in association with TasWater, announced a new deal of a partial ownership only, subject to each of the 29 councils agreeing to it. It was recognised by both parties that it will take some time to get all the Councils to agree to this proposal.

The parties then signed a Memorandum of Understanding to consummate the deal. The MoU states that the parties will “work together to develop a joint ownership model” with the objectives of ensuring that, amongst other things, the councils will retain majority ownership, that the State will not receive any distributions for TasWater, and that for the privilege it will pay \$200m over the next 10 years. Meanwhile, dividends will continue to be paid to the Councils.

So, another “Wow!” Councils 1 Government 0.

What a backflip from the government. No matter how this is dressed up, the government has walked away from its commitment to transfer ownership, and in exchange, agreed to pay \$20 million a year for ...well what exactly?

What is it really getting in exchange for such largesse? As a minority shareholder it will be consulted, and have certain reportings made to it, but where lies the responsibility and accountability? This move has simply made such matters more uncertain. Because TasWater now has 30 owners!

Meanwhile...

Meanwhile, in the real world, people are living under canvas, the queues in the emergency departments of our public hospitals remain unresolved, and traffic snarls remain in the “too hard” basket.

Each of these is a product of “growing pains”, and the government will need to establish a strategy for managing “growth”. Each requires public - as distinct from private - expenditure, and public expenditure is a product of government action. So far the silence has been deafening.

Still, it is only Day 2.