

ISSUE 1824

“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

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By-Elections – The Aftermath

Commentators have been quick to analyse the results of the recent by-elections. “Shorten is now safe”. “Malcolm’s position is now precarious”, “Govt in trouble” etc. The risk is always to overanalyze these things, and particularly so when so much money was spent by both sides, suggesting so much was at stake.

A simpler proposition comes from the thesis “The Wisdom of Crowds”, which suggests that crowds rarely get it wrong. (Mind you, when they do, they do so in a spectacular fashion). In this instance, it can be argued that the electorate voted for the status quo because they simply did not accept the premise for the by-elections, being dual citizenship.

As stated in the last newsletter, no-one could say of any of those caught up in this imbroglio that there was any sense of dual “loyalty”. The crowd understood that. The status quo remains. In my view neither side can take much comfort from the result.

Health -MyHealth

The federal government wants our medical records to be placed on a central register. Data will automatically go onto a register, however, individuals can choose to opt out of the scheme. In theory the idea of a central databank is a good thing, but in practice – it is turning out to be a nightmare.

There are legitimate concerns about the security of such a system not only from unauthorized access eg hacking, but also the ability of various organisations - now or over time - to gain access to the data, and of course the actions of rogue staff. Each of these has already occurred with other government databases.

In my view, the government needs to step back and rethink this matter. Already the suggestion is that it be an opt-in rather than an opt-out system, but in many ways that would be self-defeating.

An alternative approach would be to forget “big data” altogether. Everyone could own an electronic tag with their information contained on it. Privacy would not be an issue, but access to, and additions to, that data would be available to medical and paramedical staff, using a simple reader/recorder.

In the meantime, a good opt-out provision would be for organ donation. Everyone automatically becomes an organ donor unless they specifically wish for it not to be so. The following was written last year, and is lifted from #1709.

“Take Germany and Austria – the former has an organ donation rate of 12%, the latter, 100%. Or take Denmark and Sweden. The former has a rate of 4%, the latter 88%. Why such a difference?”

The answer is simple. Austria and Sweden have a policy of opt-out. Germany and Denmark a policy of opt-in, similar to Australia. There is a dearth of donors in Australia, and many lives are on the line, waiting for a suitable organ donor.

It’s time to consider a change in our policy, for us to become more like Austria and Sweden. It would be a simple thing to do. It would cost nothing, and it would save lives.”

Cricket Australia

I am entering murky waters here. Issues are not clear-cut. What is clear is that Cricket Tasmania receives substantial financial support from the government. And what is also clear is that Cricket Australia terminated the employment of their Government Relations Officer (GRO) on the recommendation of the Board of Cricket Tasmania. This action has attracted national and international attention.

The GRO, a female, had criticised the government in a tweet earlier in the year over its approach to termination services. It was a matter totally unrelated to her work, but she was responsible for fostering strong Government relations. A matter of judgment, perhaps?

The tweet had attracted the attention of the Premier's Media Officer, who, under a false name, alerted Cricket Tasmania to the tweet "fyi". The Premier's Media Officer was found out to have used an alias, and was stood down. Her contract, due for renewal, was not renewed.

The GRO, it seems, then provided private advice to the government as to why she had taken the public stance she had, which related to her having had to fly to Melbourne for a termination of pregnancy. No further action was taken at this time.

After the election, a debate in parliament on termination services led the GRO to again tweet her displeasure at the government. This time action was taken. The CEO of Cricket Tasmania endeavoured to contact the Premier to apologise for the actions of the GRO, but for some unexplained reason was redirected to the Minister for Health.

A conversation between the two occurred, but the content remains unclear. Some reports suggest that the apology was accepted by the Minister, who "as a Christian" acknowledged his forgiveness of the incident.

Other reports suggest that the reason for her criticism of the government, i.e. her medical record, was also discussed. This has been denied, but alternatively, it has been stated that the medical record was already a matter of public record, and was referred to in the conversation. She was then sacked. Now that is a serious allegation.

The GRO has lodged a complaint with the Fair Work Commission, but its role will be confined to the industrial issues. The bigger story of course, is what role – if any - the government, and in particular the Minister, played in her dismissal. The Minister denies having played any role.

It is indeed murky water. An employee employed to manage government relations should not be seen to engage in a criticism of government, a Minister should not be discussing a person's employment or medical record with their employer, and an employer should not summarily dismiss an employee for a perceived infraction, without discussion, counselling or mediation.

I cannot help but believe that if the allegation of interference involved a senior bureaucrat, that person would be advised to stand down while that allegation was investigated. In this case, not only has the Minister not been asked to step aside, it would appear that there will be no independent review of the allegation. And that is not good enough.

Health

The government cannot seem to get on top of the health issues confronting the state. The slow acceptance and then release of the meningococcal vaccination program, now thankfully in full swing, the continual ramping of ambulances, more Code 4's at the Royal Hobart Hospital, continuing unrest at the LGH, and continuing issues with the RHH rebuild, have meant the Minister's life has not been an easy one. To put it mildly.

Nor is there any suggestion that things will change any time soon. Health is a highly emotive issue, and the seeming inability to resolve these and related issues by the Minister places at risk the government's overall support within the electorate.

It requires more than soothing words to resolve it.

Macquarie Point

A ginger group, comprising a number of the State's former high-flying public servants, has come out with a plea for the government to go slow on making any decisions about Macquarie Point. No worries on that score, and that's for sure.

They are suggesting taking a larger slice of land to obtain true water frontage, which they say will excite developer interest. Although stating the case for a privately-funded anchor development, they recognize that government may still need to underwrite such a project.

Unstated, but implicit in their argument is that they wish to develop the waterfront, not the hinterland. Yet it is the hinterland which is the issue.

They make the point that such a development should be demand-driven, as distinct from the "build it and they will come" approach. As for what such a development might be, maybe a convention centre?

Mmm. And Ho Hum. Nothing new there. Importantly, and this point has been made before, it is the government that needs to decide what it wants on that land – no-one else. Once that decision is made, then the Corporation should go ahead and provide it.

However, apart from platitudes, the government remains silent on what it wants for the site. So no action, no decisions. And there's the rub.

Cable Car

The plans for the cable car are now on the table. The footprint is minimal, but the opposition remains the same. The Hobart City Council is yet to consider a formal document, but already aldermen (or is it councilors) are lining up to condemn the project.

This exemplifies the problem. Like traffic congestion, this issue is bigger than that of one council. Like traffic, the mountain is as much a part of life for the inhabitants of Glenorchy or Clarence or Kingborough as it is for the citizens of Hobart. And the planning arrangements should reflect that. Bring on regional planning.

In the meantime, let me place on the record my support for this development.