

ISSUE 2315

"In Support of Progress" Newsletter

The local political landscape...

A week can be a long long time

20 July 2023

The last newsletter referred to the statement "if a week is a long time in politics, a fortnight in politics can seem like an eternity". Truer words have never been spoken.

Over the last month, if "tumultuous" is too strong a word to describe the period, then disruptive it certainly has been. And it has not been helpful.

The government seems to be careening wildly, wallowing in the mire, and cannot seem to get out of it. Health, housing, cost of living pressures continue to dominate the political and social landscape and loom like a large black cloud over the government's fortunes. These may be just words, but what they refer to describes what is in fact significant human stress and suffering within our community, and none seem to be any closer to resolution.

I am sure the government is aware of the issue – in fact they may even believe they are priority issues. It's just that they don't seem to be able to get on top of them.

Some recent judgement calls have been quite suspect. Doubling down on the stadium, supported by a vocal minority, is not in the public's mind a priority, the appointment (short-term) of a PR and lobbying firm partner to be the government's communication manager is an awful look, particularly in light of the revelations federally with the big 4 accounting firms, and the approach to local government and planning laws would seem to be random.

It may well be that the government is consumed with what to do with a construction work-force once the Bridgewater bridge has been built, but it does not help to be rolling all of those eggs into the one stadium basket, and particularly so with the way in which the process has been managed. Treasury advice? Cabinet kept informed? Let's face it, the stadium has been an enormous distraction and has literally brought the government to its knees.

A partner in a lobbying firm will be a lobbyist, no matter what Chinese walls are built, and the appointment of a PR company partner to be the comms person for the government – even if only for a short period – will offer inside information and inside intelligence which will further benefit the company in the longer term.

It also throws out bad signals to the existing communications group in government, and throws out further signals as to why such an appointment is required NOW..

Having entered into a long and tortuous debate about council amalgamations, the government has now decided to pull the pin on the topic. There will be no forced amalgamations, they said, only in the following days announce radical changes to planning laws, with no consultation.

The interesting thing about this debate is that while councils try and protect their "localness", their activities and services can extend far beyond their geographic boundaries. One Council provides IT-related services to councils in NSW and NT, for example. Integration of services is happening and will continue to happen, irrespective of "localness".

It all smacks of political "convenience". Clearing the decks.

Meanwhile, the government's rather abrupt approach to the restructure of the Emergency Services sector has caused deep unrest, and senior bureaucrats are pulling the pin. And how an emergency radio network that originally was going to cost a staggering \$567m and is now going to cost in excess of \$750 m is not a blowout in costs beats me.

The Minister is adamant though, stating that the increase in costs is because of a contribution being made by the eight stakeholder organisations. Was that not always going to be the case? Sounds like polly talk to me.

The approach by Forestry to engage Victorian forest contractors over and above local operators has the sector seething, and although it may well make short-term economic sense, there is a far bigger picture at play here, regarding the continuing support for the sector and all the government (and STT!) has done has shot itself in the foot. So much for looking after the local folk!

There is something further about the forestry story. Victoria closed its native forest industry, providing compensation to forest companies. It is those cashed-up companies that are now sourcing Tasmanian timber for their mills in Victoria, which essentially means a transfer of jobs and value from Tasmania to Victoria.

The decisions and issues cited above mark a lack of connectivity with the public and the public sector. It is not a good look, not a good look at all. People are demanding a more cohesive and coherent approach

The government needs to pivot away from the chaos that is enveloping them at this time, and articulate how the remaining term of office will look like. Otherwise that term will be very short, with no joy at the end of it.

Meanwhile, the Opposition have been making some headway, given the government's present difficulties, but it will need to step back from the criticism and focus on an alternative dialogue. What might an alternative look like?

It will also need to resolve the difficult question of "what to do with David?". I cannot see him having much of a future in the State Lower House. One rather neat solution would be to transport him to the Senate, but one- he would want to do it, and two - there would need to be a casual vacancy. Watch this space!

As for the Greens, the leader has suddenly resigned, citing the need for a break before seeking pre-selection for the Upper House seat of Hobart. Holding my cynicism in check, it is an interesting ploy indeed and not without some serious political and personal considerations. Might she meet David on those hustings?

Her baton was handed over to her deputy with the rather telling comment that she has it "until the next election". No long-term plan there it would seem.

With all of that in the melting pot, the question remains whether the government can survive in minority, and what will the two former government backbenchers do.

So, all in all, a sense of instability and turmoil.

The need is urgent to carve a new path forward, that will offer to the community an overall sense of purpose, stability and comfort. It is desperately needed..