

28 February 2024

Game on Education

The Election is on.

The election was called on 15 February, for an election on 23 March. Fourteen days in – and this second week of the campaign has been extraordinary. More Independent candidates have announced their intention to stand, the major parties have been presenting a hotch-potch of “policy” positions, and TV ads are now blasting across our TV screens.

Enough time has now elapsed to get a feel for the way the election is going to be conducted, and it is intriguing. For starters, it seems neither of the major parties was really ready to roll when the election was called.

The Liberals have coined the slogan “Strong Plan”, and much of their blurb has centred around the call “We have a Strong Plan”. The question of course, is “What exactly is this “Strong Plan”, to which the response is basically a blank stare. I can see it now - the party gurus sitting round the table and saying “We need a slogan – what do the people want? Mmmm, Leadership? Strong! Vision? Plan! Exactly, and thus the birth of the logo. It means nothing of course, because no such “Plan” exists - that show bag is basically empty. However, that has not stopped the candidates donning their uniforms with this slogan emblazoned on their caps (in blue or white, take your pick). I guess it makes them feel good. Being part of a team, in fact.

The Liberals have got an ad up on TV, with a red yellow and green traffic light, inviting the electorate to not vote for this “Coalition of Chaos” and instead choose the high road of responsible and stable government - i.e. them, with their “Strong Plan” - for a further 4 years. They say that, unlike their opponents - “the rabble that is the Labor Party - they argue they are a united “broad church”.

The trouble with this argument is of course their track record, which is anything but united or stable. Looking at their score card over the last few years, a majority government became a minority government, with much turmoil in between. Just consider the following degree of churn:

In Clark	Archer, Hickey, Elliott, and Ogilvie – which party again?
In Franklin	Abetz (back from the wilderness), Mulder and Petrusma, who left parliament to spend more time with her family and now presumably wants to spend less time with them
In Lyons	Tucker (who destabilized the government), and Howlett (down from the Leg Co – why?)
In Bass	Gutwein, Courtney, Alexander – and now candidate Sladden
In Braddon	Brooks – remember Adam?

Broad church indeed. It is not a particularly impressive record of stability. I guess you don’t need a coalition to have chaos.

The Libs are actually in a difficult position, policy-wise, because everything and anything announced from that slowly filling show bag invites the response – you have had 10 years to do this, why did you not do it beforehand? And that is a difficult question for them to answer – why not indeed.

Not to be outdone, Labor has its own issues. In Clark, Willie also wants to move down from the Leg Co, in Franklin O’Byrne remains a solitary figure in exile, while in Braddon and Bass the ALP is still to finalise its list of candidates.

And just as the Liberal ad invites its own criticism, the Labor ad is not much better. TV is a visual communication, and the ALP ad canning the Libs would appear visually to be actually promoting them.

Both parties are falling into the trap of being negative, and although the perceived wisdom is that negative campaigns are effective, they are also a turn-off. And that is what the electorate is doing, to both of them (see poll results below).

The Greens meanwhile have moved from their traditional basket of environmental concerns to now commenting on more traditional government activity such as health and housing. What is essentially a party of protest is desperately trying to broaden its base of appeal. It won't work.

Meanwhile, a large number of people have been throwing their hat in the ring as Independents, and many of them have high profiles and a history of standing for Parliament or local government and being elected. I expect them to do well. Here are some to watch:

Clark	Hickey, Johnston, Elliott, Lohberger
Franklin	O'Byrne, Mulder, Glade-Wright
Lyons	Tucker, Branch-Allen, (the JLN)
Bass	Alexander, (the JLN)
Braddon	Garland, Freshney, (the JLN)

(NB JLN = Jacqui Lambie Network)

Labor wants to re-write the Hydro's Ministerial Charter – the Libs got wind of it and in a classic case of me-too-ism, announced it also on the same day, without the spokesperson really understanding what he was doing or saying. The Libs also want to free the Hydro from parliamentary scrutiny for large development schemes (why?) – unlike the university move or the stadium - while Labor wants to set up a new entity (GBE) to develop new renewable generation projects, which would appear to be re-visiting the Roaring 40's organisation which established the Woolnorth and Musselroe windfarms.

Labor is on a winner with capping electricity prices and building more child care centres, while the Libs, who enjoy knocking Labor for this spending spree, then responded with a one-off payment (of \$250 for households and \$300 for small businesses) to "ease the pressure on their electricity bills".

And then, out of the blue, The Government announced it was not going to stop the University from moving into the CBD, but WOULD apparently stop them funding the move. In a radio interview following the announcement, spokesperson Ogilvie, with an extraordinary outburst of illogical hyperbole and waffle, explained the government position so that no-one could understand it, and then called on every candidate to state their position on this issue, while steadfastly refusing to state her position or her party's position on the move. So, it's not, as she says, an "elegant solution" at all, it's a muddle.

The Premier has asked the AFL to postpone the launch of the Tassie team on March 18 - the AFL has said No, they won't. So, who IS running the State?

Two weeks in, and three weeks to go. Will it get any better? Well, one could argue that it will need to. EMRS conducted a state-wide poll just after the election was announced and has just released its findings. The results are:

Liberal	39%
ALP	26%
Green	12%
JLN	9%
Independents	14%

Which means unless there is a BIG movement in sentiment, we will have a hung parliament, whichever way you look at it. It is in fact incumbent on the players to articulate the vision thing, the bigger picture thing, the "where you are taking us" thing. At the moment, this is lacking, and in its place a hotch-potch of random ideas without a theme.

As the saying goes: Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. (Sun Tzu)

Education

It is rare indeed for comments like this to appear in this newsletter, this is very much the exception. Jason Clare is the Federal Minister for Education. On Sunday he appeared on the Insiders program. And he was so impressive. Articulate and committed. He spoke with clarity, with understanding, and with a vision.

Speaking on the release of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report, his point is that the percentage of kids seeking a tertiary education (Uni or TAFE) needs to rise from 60% to 80%, and the Report details how to achieve that goal..

I raise this, as distinct from other topics, because education is vital to the community's overall wellbeing, and because there is such a stark contrast between what he is aiming for nationally, and what is the present situation here in Tasmania.

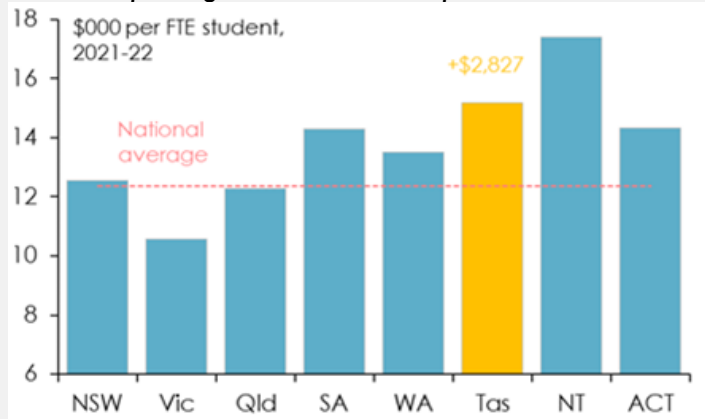
Saul Eslake and Dr Lisa Denny are both outspoken critics of the present situation and have been arguing the need for improvement in the way education is presently being administered in Tasmania. Something is not working. With permission, I reproduce two of Saul's graphs which makes the obvious point:

Our retention rates are amongst the lowest in the country, and yet we spend more per capita per student.

Retention rates Year 10 to Year 12 2023



State Govt spending on school education per FTE student 2021-22



Why the low retention rate? I am advised that no survey has been conducted recently on WHY students do not stay at school. It seems a rather fundamental question to be asking, and would certainly inform any reform measure. Perhaps it would be a worthwhile exercise to do so – a task for the next Minister for Education to pursue.