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"In Support of Progress" Newsletter

A new Government?

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The media

The power(s) behind the throne(s)

Labor's Administrative Committee took over from leader Rebecca White just after the election, the JLN Management ousted Tammy Tyrrell, and now the Liberal Administration is tearing itself apart in a power play in the Franklin electorate. Why? No doubt parties are feeling a bit vulnerable at the moment and internal tensions are high. However, these back-room maneuverings should stay in the back room. They do themselves and their cause a disservice by hanging out their dirty laundry, and the public are not impressed. They want those who were elected to be the spokespeople, as they were elected to do.

On that point, it is rather dissembling to hear the government downplay the current ruckus surrounding their Party President and quick to deny anything untoward was going on behind the scenes (nothing to see here, the public are not interested etc.), but merrily hopped on the bandwagon when Labor was having internal ructions. I just say you can't have it both ways. If you are happy to take a shot at the others, don't be surprised and don't complain if they take a shot at you in return.

I can only say what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

A deal

The speed with which the JLN struck a deal with the government took many by surprise, and even more so when it seemed they got so little in return. On the one hand, it was argued that a deal was necessary to give certainty to the government, but even with the three JLN on board the government was still one shy.

And remained so when they went to the governor to be sworn in. And remain so even as this is written. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter. Political guarantees such as these are not binding and can be broken at any time that suits the circumstance.

In the last two newsletters I suggested that there was in fact no need for **any** deal to be done. The government could be sworn in with no deals in place. And in fact, they now have been without a "majority" on-side. It may seem to be unstable to do so, but I would argue that doing the deal with the JLN is in fact a more unstable act.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but let's reflect on the internal stability of the JLN for a moment. They are untried and untested. A deal with the JLN places both parties in a coalition of sorts. A collapse in one spells a broader instability for the government, at least it would give the perception of a collapse. Whereas if no deal was done, an implosion by the JLN would be just that, and have no greater effect on the government. Just saying!

There have been some calls for one of the major parties to enter into an alliance with the Greens to form a majority government. The Liberals could do it (14+5), or Labor could do it with the Greens and the JLN (10+5+3), but neither will touch it with a barge pole. Both have done it in the past, and both have been burnt for doing so. And the reason is simple – the Greens' brand is toxic to over 80% of the population.

Which, as an aside, will make it exceedingly difficult for their campaign for the Leg Co seat of Hobart, where they will need to amass 50% of the vote.

AS much as the Greens may try and soften their image by showing concerns for issues such as housing, health and education, these causes are accessory to their core raison d'etre, which is environmental activism.

It may seem like an opportunity lost to some, but the argument that the people have spoken cuts both ways. The Greens have increased their numbers in the parliament, but not because of an increase in votes. Their vote increased only marginally, but the quota for election fell substantially. Yes, they are in parliament, but will remain a vocal but isolated protest group.

The New Cabinet

The government has now been sworn in and is back at work. The Parliament of 25 is now 35. The government had 13 members on the floor of the 25-seat house, (but lost two during the course of the parliament, plunging it into minority) and has 14 on the floor of the 35-seat parliament. Up by one. The extra numbers offer the Premier greater flexibility in determining his Cabinet, and of those 14, 12 get a gong (Minister or Parliamentary Secretary) and one waits in the wings to be elected Speaker.

That leaves only one with an empty lunchbox – newcomer Rob Fairs from Bass. Mind you, he is the only Liberal new to parliament – everyone else has been there before. So, a backbench of one!

Mind you, the Speakership is no certainty. There are a majority on the floor that could exercise their authority by NOT accepting the government's choice for Speaker. That would be an immediate upset. We wait and see.

Nine Ministers made up the Cabinet before the election, 11 Ministers after the election. Nine in the Lower House, two in the upper House. It is an old argument, that the Cabinet should come from the Lower House, but the pragmatics cause governments to tap into the talent of the Upper House from time to time. In this case, the "independence" of the upper House has been reduced by two.

Existing ministers have in the main kept their portfolios, which in some respects is a good thing – it does allow for some continuity, but there are some major changes and shifts. And these do suggest some change in priorities. The major moves would appear to be these:

Jo Palmer has handed the Primary Industry baton to Jane Howlett, newly descended from the Upper House. Howlett also gains Racing from Felix Ellis.

Jo Palmer and Roger Jaensch have then swapped a couple of big portfolios. Palmer takes on Education from Jaensch, who in return gains Community Services from Palmer.

It's a big step up for Palmer – education is a challenging portfolio (not that the others were without difficulty),

Newly elected Eric Abetz has leapt straight into Cabinet, and been given much of State Growth - with the new title of Business, Industry and Resources. This allows the Premier greater freedom to be Premier, although he has kept Tourism. Abetz has also gained Transport from Michael Ferguson. One presumes the portfolios of Advanced Manufacturing, Science and Technology will also be subsumed into this broader portfolio.

This will be a big workload for Abetz, as he comes to terms with the bureaucracy of the Department of State Growth, and the business environment in our regional economy, and particularly so when there would appear to be significant economic headwinds ahead.

As well as Transport, Ferguson has also shed Planning – to Felix Ellis, somewhat intriguingly - thereby allowing him to concentrate on what is going to be a miserable time with the Budget looming. He will need to. The State finances are anything but healthy. He will share some of that load with Nic Street, who has also been given Finance (and retains Local Government and Sport), and who has shed Housing to Ellis.

It is interesting that Local Government is held by one Minister, while Planning is held by another. Somewhere down the track, sparks will fly.

Barnett keeps the heavy work of Health and Attorney General, while Duigan holds on to Energy (and Parks) while taking on Environment from Jaensch (and presumably Climate Change).

So, even though the workload has been spread somewhat amongst the members of Cabinet, for some the workload has actually increased. There remains for some a very busy time ahead.

The Media

The recent findings of Justice Michael Lee in the Lehrmann case are indeed damning. His findings are scathing. His dismembering of the obfuscation and lies that have surrounded this case was thorough and forensic. No-one comes out of this well, in particular Lehrmann, who initiated the present round. As the judge wryly noted, he escaped the lions' den only to return for his hat. Big mistake. The lion has roared.

But neither does the media, and in particular the two commercial networks 10 and 7, Channel 10 for its interview with Higgins and Channel 7 for its interview with Lehrmann. Channel 10 in particular was rounded on by the judge. It was the extent to which these networks went to gain a "scoop" that was so woeful. It was sensationalism of the worst kind, and showed the media in a shocking light.

The tragedy that was the carnage at Bondi Junction was another example of the media jumping to conclusions and rushing to judgement (and a scoop) before the facts were known. One channel went so far as to name an innocent person as the perpetrator, while others quickly concluded there was a religious motivation to this attack. Both were wrong.

I would not be a bit surprised if another defamation suit was already in the pipeline.

The media plays an important role in bringing information to the public. In fact we rely on the mainstream media to do just that, and particularly so when social media is so rampant with hype and mistruths.

But that comes with a responsibility to report accurately and objectively. At this time, with heightened tensions pretty much everywhere, it is simply wrong to stir up anger and angst simply to sensationalise a story. It may well be a competitive game, to get "breaking news", but that does not mean it should indulge in fantasy and untruths to do so.

It does the media no credit – and we should demand so much better than that.