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“In Support of Progress” Newsletter

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Elections

The election season in Tasmania is over.

In the House of Assembly, Michelle O'Byrne, a Labor member for Bass, has become Speaker in an uncontested ballot. In one sense this can be seen as a loss for the government, now a Minority Liberal Government, although the Opposition loses one from the floor of parliament, leaving 9 to prosecute their case.

In summary, the government has embarked on its Strong Plan, although with much more humility than before, while Labor has pivoted to focus its attention on its core belief of jobs and employees. This is more than just a strategy from labor, it is a re-affirmation of its core value. The JLN are searching for their *raison d'être*, while the three Independents are already struggling to make waves. No doubt their time will come.

In the Legislative Council, Labor has lost a seat, the Greens have gained one, while the Liberals have held on to the one they had and gained a supporter in the new Member for Elwick.

We now await the government's response to the findings of the Commission of Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the ongoing saga of Macquarie Point, and the budget. I predict sparks will fly. No easy ride for the government!

A road of good intentions

Many government policies start out with the best of intentions, to make the world a better place, to alleviate suffering or disadvantage, to improve the economy, or some higher moral purpose.

And yet many end up in a mire of confusion, doubt, a failure of administration, and even condemnation, with claims and counterclaims as to their efficacy or management. It is the stuff of political debate - and even political purpose.

Some rely on a high level of service provision, such as the NDIS, others face competing aims, such as forestry or energy, while others lead us to some navel gazing as to what sort of country we really are and what we want to be e.g. immigration.

Take the NDIS

The NDIS commenced in 2016, with the admirable purpose to provide support for people with disability, their families and their carers. However, no sooner had it commenced than it struck problems with its IT payments system – and payment issues have continued to haunt it to the present day.

On commencement, it was anticipated the scheme would benefit up to half a million people (now called clients) - for an annual cost of just over \$20m. Yet six years later, costs have blown out to around \$35b, and with an estimated cost of around \$50b by the end of the decade. Similarly, the number of clients, already in excess of the anticipated 500,000, is now predicted to reach 800,000 by 2030.

There is no doubt that many have benefited from the scheme, and their lives made more manageable and more fulfilling. And this is to be applauded.

But there has also been an element of uncertainty in the running of the scheme, and questions do need to be asked regarding eligibility, and what might constitute a “reasonable” level of service.

Which obviously is a grey area, and an emotionally charged one. It is a hard question, but it does need to be addressed.

However, also in the firing line is the issue of mismanagement. The level of overservicing is widespread, and fraudulent behaviour by some service providers is on the public record. Obviously service providers have a vested interest in providing a "high" level of service, which can lead to overservicing, and claiming a maximum amount from the scheme. It needs oversight.

At the same time, larger service provider organisations will have a vested interest in minimising costs, and this can easily lead to a level of mistreatment of those who are in institutional care. Compounding the problem is a tendency to cover up any misdemeanour and a reticence by staff or clients to report any wrongdoing for fear of retribution or loss of service..

As one person said to me recently - If I report a problem, then I become the problem!

As the scheme has grown, so has the bureaucracy to manage it, and as is usual in such situations, bureaucratic systems can be a muddle. Efficiency is not the normal hallmark of success, but it is obvious there needs to be a dramatic rethink on how the scheme is being managed. One classic issue concerns the receipt of invoices on behalf of a client, and confirming that the invoice is an accurate reflection of the service provided.

Minister Shorten has now pledged to crack down on wasteful spending and sorting, a statement which is well and truly overdue. The responsibility lies with the Minister to ensure this is done, but he may well need to consider not just the what but the how.

Because it needs to be thorough and beyond criticism. Whatever the audit provisions, it will be an expensive exercise, and will be up against entrenched and vested interests. And this will no doubt lead to claims and counter claims of misdoing, which could lead to an unsavoury political stoush, and drag the scheme into disrepute.

Take Renewables

Every day we are confronted with claims that our future energy supply will need to come from renewable energy because....well, because fossil fuels – of which we have a lot – will cause the release of carbon emissions into the atmosphere and will lead to a climate disaster. It all seems like a noble cause, no doubt, truth notwithstanding.

And I make that point purely to emphasise that this argument will be ongoing. No matter what we do, it will never stop. It will never be over. There will always be claims that we should be doing more, or in some cases doing less. Climate has become the mantra of the age we live in.

We were told when starting on this course that renewables would be cheaper and that energy prices would fall. It made economic sense to do so. So driven were we to move to renewables that we embarked on the journey by branding thermal generation as evil and calling on thermal power stations to close. The problem was that they did – and we did not have a replacement.

And so began a serious discourse into the need for more wind farms and solar farms, proselytising their virtue while at the same time coming up against planning laws and a community backlash.

Quite frankly, the planning for the transition has been a shambles.

Power prices continue to rise, and the government's \$300 rebate will only scratch the surface of the money consumers will need to find if they are to keep the lights on and the stoves working.

New transmission lines need to be built to service wind farms and solar farms. The energy source might be free, but its capture certainly isn't, and nor is supply guaranteed when it is needed. Which then leads to the need for battery storage, again neither renewable nor free.

Where is the money coming from? Subsidies? Tax breaks? Guaranteed pricing? and what to do when renewables do not meet demand?

Not to worry, says the Minister, as he bravely attempts to resurrect his policy from the ashes. Having got us to this point, he now says – well, what is the alternative?

Reality has dawned. The AEMO has forecast blackouts as a distinct possibility come this summer, Governments have now asked thermal power station operators to remain open, and a "Future Gas Strategy" has been rolled out. One hopes this "Gas Strategy" will drive further exploration in Victoria, even if against the wishes of the present Victorian Government.

The bold predictions of "net zero" have fallen further into the morass. What has not helped the cause is the continuing blowout in time and cost of Snowy Hydro 2.0. The tunnel boring machine Florence has got stuck again. Present estimates now suggest a further delay in the completion of the scheme (now 2030), and the cost of the scheme is now approaching \$25 billion, which is quite an eye-watering figure.

The Opposition is now moving forwards to promote nuclear power as an option. The government response has been to ridicule it, and to embark on a fear campaign as to its costs, its siting and its dangers. Never mind that it is operating safely in over 30 countries already.

This is a problem of the government's own making. It is its policy, which its Minister continues to stand by, but with power prices continuing to rise, and reliability of supply on the line, the public will form its own judgement and will "reward" the government accordingly.

Take Immigration

The immigration debate has taken a nasty turn in recent days, with migrants being blamed for everything from housing shortages to crime. Many of the claims being made at the moment have been well and truly over-hyped, but they have made it difficult to have a rational conversation about the topic.

In the last edition I provided figures to show that the majority were on temporary visas, for study or for work. I invite you to look again at those figures, the actual numbers and the trend lines.

Clearly, we are a multicultural country, and clearly, we must have "assimilation and acceptance" as our goal. And that means that the intake needs to be managed. Students are a good export earner. Furthermore, many of those in work are being engaged in agricultural pursuits, or absorbed into government service programs such as the NDIS and Aged Care,

Politically, it is becoming a poisoned chalice. The balance is everything - Heavy cuts will be enormously disruptive, whereas too high an intake will be socially disruptive.

So, on this road of good intentions, three examples of government policy which have the capacity to divide, rather than unite, where confusion reigns regarding facts, where players have shown inflexibility and a desire to divide, and yet where it is hoped there can be some consensus reached as to a better way forward.

Is that too forlorn a hope?