

## **BACK BENCHER IN THE BUSH - TASMANIAN STYLE**

Seminar Chair,

Just close your eyes and imagine. You are driving through country Tasmania in a westerly direction. In front of you is a broad view of button grass plains with occasional bright red alpine wildflowers. Beyond the plains and the protected forests are rugged, blue grey mountains with slivers of silver between them, giving a hint of the oceans ringing the shores by the towns you are heading to. Immediately to your left, you are being shadowed by a magnificent eagle. He has been flying beside the car for about fifteen kilometres, strong, majestic and free. As you catch sight of him, you are struck by the beauty of the snow-capped crags of Cradle Mountain in the distance. To your right are the snow covered gentler slopes of another area, not so familiar.

Thoughts go to the people of the townships that you are about to visit. They are resilient people used to the ebbs and flows of life in an area rich in commodities such as silver, lead, copper and nickel, where gold is extracted to be sent to the Perth mint. Prices are high at the moment, the people have hope, but you are troubled by the Health Minister's decisions about the likely future of their hospital. Getting staff is a major problem.

Thoughts compare that situation with yesterday's townships that you visited. The Port Arthur district with its sadness so long reflected in the faces of good people there. The stunning beauty of the crumbling old ruins, the dark cliffs, filthy surf beaches, the sense of community involvement and pride. A multi-purpose centre there serves the district very well, with efficiency and a range of services.

Down the East Coast of Tasmania, the white sands, the turquoise waters, the pinks and mauves of the Freycinet peninsula at sunset, the tourist vehicles, the demands of meeting the needs of the tourist business, and the dilemmas associated with vast numbers of tourists verses quality of experience. The car park that has become a huge dust bowl where pademelons and wallabies used to mix with tourists comes to mind as a symbol of inheriting degradation because of successful marketing.

Eyes open and to the front, back to reality. The road turns sharply to the left; the surface changes and the brakes are needed, gently applied. The action reminds me of the needs of politicians. The need to be flexible to adapt to situations that alter quickly in the control of others, is a skill rarely acknowledged. Few other jobs are fascinating, with so much variation and

so many avenues for exploration. The control of information, as Weber alluded to, controls power. Constituents can be helped by small amounts of information sometimes. Snippets of information can provide a basis for advocacy on behalf of constituents, particularly when health is of concern.

The job of a politician sees this on so many levels day in day out. The release of limited amounts of information can give comfort, but so often brings lack of clarity, confusion, suspicion and a feeling of a lack of control. So often, in contemporary politics, individuals, groups and communities are given a snippet of a story or a direction.

As a Member of the House of Assembly for the seat of Lyons in Tasmania, it is my honour to travel over 62 percent of the state, to get to know people and groups in the most rurally dispersed seat in the state. At an electoral office audit earlier this year, it was determined that sixty seven thousand six hundred and thirty seven people of voting age live in that 62% of the land area of Tasmania. As you may have guessed, I believe that it is one of the most spectacularly scenic seats on the planet with terrific diversity.

Chairman, the seat of Lyons touches each of the four coastlines of the state in the north, west, east and south. There are some of the whitest beaches in the world such as the Bay of Fires strip on the East Coast, the wild, southern surf beaches such as Roaring Beach, near Port Arthur, and the exciting fast flowing waters of Hells Gates near Strahan. There are wide rivers brown with the tannins of old forests, the beautiful Tamar Valley with it's wine growing, and rivers that flood annually from melting snows such as the South Esk. There are ancient wet forests featuring trees such as the huon pines of the Franklin river system, the dry sclerophylls of the warm East Coast, broad scale agricultural areas such as Ross and Campbell Town, areas of low rainfall and drought like the townships of Oatlands and Kempton.

Strong aboriginal heritage abounds all over the electorate. The most openly known practices and legends, at least as far as I am familiar with, occurred on the East coast where the tribe led by Manalagenna lived and traded ochre along trails from St Patrick's Head through the coast and hinterland before the notorious Governor Arthur's Black Line was established about 1830 and aboriginal people were sent to Flinders Island.

Historic towns with their rich stories of convicts and early settlers feature through the seat. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, convict labour from both sexes helped farmers to establish very large properties in the seat of Lyons. There is plenty of documentation of the allocations of ticket of leave provisions and pardons for work done by

convicts through the early decades of settlement. Direct descendants of the original early eighteen hundred families still run some of the larger properties in the Midlands area of Lyons, including *Fosterville*, *Winton* and *Rosedale*. They have detailed records of their land, weather patterns, their stocks and are prepared to alter their practices and educate their sons and daughters while being prepared to adapt to their various choices in life. Their knowledge, tolerance and patience is to be admired.

Towns such as Sheffield featuring artistic murals set beneath the majestic Mount Roland and the barren but beautiful pinks of the Owen Conglomerate hills surrounding Queenstown, give other aspects of Tasmania's past. The gentle dairying areas surrounding Sheffield are green all year round and the population remains constant working in tune with the rhythms associated with farming.

Chairman, the mining industry in Tasmania, as in other states, remains strong. The story of Allegiance mining at Zeehan is an interesting talking point. Chairman Tony Howland-Jones and CEO Paul Richardson were young geologists working in the western forests mining areas during the 1960s. They believed that they had found good indications of nickel deposits, but were not given permission to pursue their wishes at that point, as the commodity price was not sufficiently attractive at that time. They both worked independently for different companies and came together again in order to fulfil their dream. There is now a joint venture with a large Chinese company. Approximately fifty people have been hired at the top management and accounting levels and hundreds more will follow. The price of real estate in the nearest town has quadrupled. There are other spin-offs into the hot rocks ventures being explored and further companies that plan to employ three hundred people. Zinifex has just announced major plans and investment at the Rosebery silver, lead and zinc mine near the west coast over the next twenty years. They need more housing for the young families arriving there and are working with the state government to extend the childcare centre in the town.

As a backbencher, I travel to all of these various areas. There are no cities in the electorate. The Sorell area, approximately twenty minutes to the east of Hobart is the fastest growing municipality in the electorate with all of the infrastructure problems that are usually associated with outer urban areas across Australia, such as drainage, sewerage and traffic flow. These problems have arisen as the area has had young families moving into what has been a commercial centre established for farmers and full-time occupancy has replaced holiday and weekend stays in beachside areas.

Many of the issues raised by constituents in this district are matters which pertain to local government.

Chair, as a newly elected member in 2005, I moved my office to my hometown of St Helens, a fishing town on the East Coast of Tasmania. It was a risky move as I am located on one perimeter of the electorate and therefore have to travel long distances to reach constituents. For many members of Parliament in other larger states, three hours to the capital city is not onerous, but in Tasmania, in my electorate, it does mean long hours and driving, fraught with the dangers associated with many animals on the roads at night. I travel approximately six thousand kilometres per month by road.

There was unusually dry weather last December before the terrible bush fires when the humidity reading was an unprecedented 7. Having an electronic "shoo roo", a device, which emits an electronic sound that makes animals stop in their tracks, has become an OH and S issue for Lyons members. All members' cars are to be fitted with these devices. It is unavoidable to miss wallabies and kangaroos that jump down from banks higher than the road and animals racing to get water from roadside streams or to the mate across the paddocks.

In Tasmania we have the Hare-Clark multi-member system of proportional representation. Since being returned in my own right in March last year, as I was originally elected on a recount, I have become a figure that is part of the establishment rather than a figure replacing someone who people had been used to over seven years. This means an increase in the invitations to events and closer links with people who need funding and Councils. Fortunately or unfortunately, it also means being more closely identified with the decisions taken by Cabinet members. I am sure that many members will identify with finding oneself asked questions on live radio about matters which have been decided on by others. I suppose if one has come through branch structures over twenty years one has some idea of general policy directions, but sometimes the detail can be evasive when one is put on the spot. I think now, that is why so many politicians just run their own answers, not really answering the question at hand.

Chair, as an ex social worker, my primary source of joy from the job is working with people. I get a buzz out of helping others, especially if they have pain, sickness or economic hardship. I also really enjoy the community development aspect of the work. Encouraging community members of all ages with ideas, helping them to develop their ideas, finding funding sources and assisting them through their projects until a final objective is achieved is a privilege that this position brings with it. That trust from

community members is very important to me. Those sometimes-small gains are what keep me going.

I have found that a member has to be very well organised in order to serve such a large and diverse electorate. I am lucky to have a hard working and reliable electoral assistant who handles matters that come into the office with maturity and good judgement. She has a direct gaze, a broad smile, and a good sense of humour which all help to alleviate tension and to balance the stress levels, which can occur in political offices.

Electronic transfer of data certainly helps to enhance communications. I can use my laptop in the car when I am not driving, so emails are answered as quickly as possible. Phone networks do not cover the entire electorate of Lyons, so there can be intermittent gaps of one to two hours where I am not contactable. My office is large and has a meeting room which I allow community groups to utilise for meetings and training days. I also encourage community groups to get their photocopying done in the office.

The Tasmanian Parliament has only 25 members in the Lower House and 15 members in the Legislative Council. Some of the Ministers have responsibility for three portfolios, so they are very busy people. We are only 492,500 people, but constituents expect to have all of the services that people in more populous states enjoy. We are the most dispersed state in the nation, so there are many tough decisions that need to be made in order for a balance to be kept between the needs of communities and the realities of shortfalls in the availability of skilled labour and professionals.

Chairman, the city of Hobart is where Parliament House is situated. In 2006, parliament celebrated our sesqui-centenary with a sitting and other events in the northern city of Launceston. Some of you might know that both Bass and Flinders lived in Launceston, and that the city of Melbourne was actually founded by Flinders after the site of Sorrento on the Mornington peninsula was found to be wanting for all year round water supply. Our celebration was well managed by excellent parliamentary staff, in spite of some objectors in the Public Gallery who were asked to leave by the Speaker, Hon Michael Polley.

During next year, we will be renovating our “art deco” style, 1930s Parliament so that we will have some of the conveniences enjoyed by other states such as Internet access at our seats. Even an ergonomic seat to sit on in the Chamber will be a novelty. We will again be sitting in Launceston

and then Burnie while the renovations are being completed. There are strong associations with early Hobart retained in the Parliamentary buildings such as the dungeon with its history as a bond store, convict bricks and the central drain from where the barrels could be rolled out to the docks. The Speaker has ensured that lovely antique furniture has been saved from government buildings over many years, so we have a fine collection of tables, chairs and sideboards for future generations of politicians to utilise.

As one of the Acting Speakers in the Lower House, I am learning to judge the fine nuances of debate. The standing orders provide a framework, which I find intriguing as they are employed in so many instances where common sense might indicate a different outcome initially, but the logic behind them is clearly borne out of much experience in the milieu of robust exchange. Respect for the chair as the final arbiter seems to me to have blossomed from the days of the placing the fleece beneath the Speaker's chair.

Chair, as I sit at my seat in the House, I realise that I am very privileged to be able to work there, to be able to walk on the green oak-leaved carpet and to be able to provide linkages between government and the broader community. There are times when the blocks in information flow and access to decision makers proves difficult, but the trust of the community at large is a great motivator. Every day is different and most days some positive change is occurring for someone or some group who has asked for help. I am proud of being a politician, especially for my beautiful seat, the seat of Lyons, Tasmania. I encourage everyone who is listening to this address to visit the wonderful state of Tasmania and indeed the Parliament itself in Hobart.

Tasmania will be hosting the 2008 CPA Regional Conference and I hope to see some of you there. Thankyou for your kind attention