

MERSEY HOSPITAL SPEECH

Mr President

I intend to make only a short contribution to this debate, a debate which if the subject matter were not so serious you would think that what we've witnessed was nothing more than a script for a political sitcom.

Yes Minister comes to mind maybe.... but then again the Federal Government's intervention is so bad, so laughable that the mental picture I get is more like the Keystone Cops from the 1920's.

In fact the Keystone Cops is probably the vintage where this sort of parish pump parochial politics should have been left behind.

Mr President who could believe this script?

We are here today discussing the sale of what has been a significant Tasmanian asset, a Hospital, for one dollar.

Hmmmm yes it is certainly an interesting premise upon which to base our political satire but then again maybe the real cost is a lot more.... maybe the real cost is the attack on good governance and the attack on long term strategic planning..... but Mr President maybe that's getting to the sting in the tail too quickly.

Let's instead continue the development of the script.

In fact, why don't we throw everything into it?

Let's take a State Health system under siege from escalating financial pressures, and then let's say a long long time ago some bright spark had the temerity to commission and prepare a report into the State's Health system and let's imagine that the report was written by well-respected experts and was based purely on well considered strategic outcomes that the authors considered were in the best long-term strategic interests of the whole State.

Oh and by the way, just for fun, let's imagine that the authors did not base their outcomes on politics or even any parochial interests.

Oh hang on, where's the satire?.....

It's all too text book good governance so far so we need to spice it up a bit.

Let's see. We'll probably write in a couple of yes Minister type Ministers who say....
“Well yes it's a nice report but where's the section on voting impacts?”

And, Mr President, this is where we can make the story really interesting. Let's imagine yes Minister moves aside, and in their place comes a gutsy, strategically focused, passionate Minister who says "hang the politics and parochialism, we have the plan, we believe it's the right thing to do, let's implement it!"

Ahhh can you imagine that..... and this is naturally where we can start throwing in all sorts of things like local interest groups, and competing local councils and councilors with elections coming up, and a whole mix of things like fear, parochialism, information and misinformation, some Federal politicians, let's imagine they are in marginal seats and then the piece de resistance..... a Federal election!

Rallys! We'll have lots of rallies!!!

We'll need a good parochial local newspaper to spread the message.

And out of all of this comes a great grassroots “save the hospital” campaign.

But through it all.... our hero, the embattled courageous Health Minister, stands tall. Fronts the rallies and takes the abuse and never wavers. She has the plan and she knows it's right.

But wait - at this point, we need a little bit of humour injected. Let's throw in a local State Government member, a backbencher under siege! An angry mob at a rally! “What can I do?” he says. Ahh I know.

He strides to the microphone.

“I'll stand by you” he promises..... “I'll cross the floor.” The boos turn to cheers.

Another hero is born..... at least until the reality sets in..... He'll never have to cross the floor because there will never be a vote in Parliament..... Ahhhh perfect! A Clayton's crossing the floor.

Politics doesn't get any better than this!

But wait... maybe it does.....

Let's not forget the Federal election scenario... the marginal seat.... the embattled federal member.... bad polls... he's going to lose his seat..... a Federal Government

becoming increasingly more desperate... there at risk of losing power! Ahhh the marginal seats.

Enter.... our new hero.... the Prime Minister!

The PM strides into town... "I'll save your hospital" he says. "I'll take it over and run it myself". "I'll show that State Government a thing or two."

The vision cuts to Canberra.... the office of his federal Health Minister. "He's done what?"

"What am I going to do with a hospital?"

Then we'll cut to Hobart and the State Health Minister crying, "what about our Health plan?"

Mr President, my imaginations running wild..... the possible scenarios are endless!

Our next episode could be all about a Hospital in another part of the State, with its staff and the local council, and its local parliamentarians getting together..... seizing the moment..... seizing the opportunity to grab the money saved for their hospital... and why not... who could blame them?

Mr President, I could go on.... but I think at this point I will stop with the script.

And I should probably apologise because as I said the tragedy is that everything I've said is not a figment of my imagination..... it is not a script for a political sitcom... the tragedy is that it's all actually happened.... it is actually reality!

And I do apologise for being flippant, because it is in fact a very serious matter.

Because we are talking about the Health and well-being of Tasmanians, and that's something which I, like all other honourable members in this chamber, take very seriously, as I'm sure every one of the participants in this public debate likewise do.

In fact I applaud the State Health Minister for her courage and fortitude in biting the bullet and having the strength and political courage to attempt to implement a reform of the State's Health system with a strategic State-wide approach. I applaud her strength in fronting all of the rallies and public meetings. Having said that I think she has blotted her copybook with her broken promise at the Launceston rally but that's another matter.

I applaud the State Opposition for actually supporting the plan. You don't often witness an opposition party acting strategically in the best interests of the State rather than simply playing politics.

At the same time I applaud those people of Devonport that have fought rightly or wrongly to save their hospital. It's their democratic right to do so, and they've done it well. I admire their passion, and I admire their local newspaper for getting behind their local community.

And I applaud the supporters of the Launceston General Hospital for politically seizing the moment, as they should given the opportunity they were handed.

But what I don't applaud is the extraordinary cynical sleazy vote grabbing actions of the Federal Government.

Mr President, as the Federal election draws nearer, I like the majority of Australians, am just constantly appalled, horrified and at the same time bemused by some of the breathtakingly blatant vote buying politics being announced by both Federal parties but especially the Howard Government.

First of all, the playing of the race card by the Federal Government with what amounts to an armed forces invasion of indigenous communities of the Northern Territory, just to me beggars belief.

I was perhaps even more shocked by the timid response of the ALP.

The reaction of Pat Anderson, the author of the report "little children are sacred", upon which the Federal Government relied to justify the invasion said it all. Her shock and devastation of the reality that her report had been misused in such a grossly political way.

Personally, I was dumbfounded that in the space of one Prime Minister, we have moved from the spirit of Paul Keating's Redfern speech to Howards invasion following his decade of neglect of the indigenous communities Australia wide.

Mr President, my reason for digressing is that I didn't believe any Federal policy could top the Northern Territory invasion but I was wrong.

For sheer stupidity, for sheer and adulterated marginal seat vote grabbing, the Howard intervention in the Mersey Hospital has surely secured it's place in the

annals of Australian politics as one of, if not the most extraordinary election promise of all of time.

Given these extraordinary circumstances, I believe the State Government has acted wisely (with the exception of the Ministers heat of the moment broken funding promised to the north)

I will support this motion but in doing so express my disgust at the Federal Government's actions in this matter and as I said at the beginning, the sting in the tail in this sorry saga is that the real cost of their actions is not one dollar but it is in fact the damage done to good governance and good long-term strategic planning.