

The importance and power of independent members



Hobart independent MLC Rob Valentine

Twelve years ago I was first elected to the Legislative Council seat of Hobart during a period of minority government, and indeed next month I will be retiring from the parliament as another minority government is due to commence.

In my inaugural speech of May 2012, I basically reflected that many residents on the doors were frustrated with the general thrust of politics – being so adversarial and party-focused. Fast forward to 2024 and the recently elected House of Assembly, including the 11 minor party and

The Legislative Council's party-based system reduces scrutiny and works against the best interests of the state, writes **Rob Valentine**

independent members, would strongly suggest voter frustration and rejection of adversarial party politics has a significantly increased momentum.

I stated I felt quite strongly that, “the party-based system militates against good decisions being made for this state, as party takes first row in the scheme of things, in preference to

the welfare of the state, rather than party taking the second or third row back”.

My views have strengthened in that regard, particularly in the context of the Legislative Council, based on much practical experience.

I have witnessed first-hand the limitations of party-aligned members in the Legislative Council, over and

above their thoughtful contributions.

As the ‘house of review’, the Legislative Council is there to thoroughly test legislation – looking for unintended consequences, its completeness and overall impact.

If a member is from a party represented in the House of Assembly, they will obviously toe the party line and are most unlikely to entertain changes outside their party’s position. If they do so, they do so at their peril. In this situation they are hamstrung, are basically marking their own homework and real scrutiny is reduced.

MERE01Z01MA - V1

and debate in our parliament cannot be overstated

To avoid such circumstances, it is most important a variety of independent voices occupy as many seats as possible in the Legislative Council, expressing diverse views and bringing forward matters which may not have been canvassed in the prior House of Assembly debate on the legislation.

While all members will of course have principles on which they focus, independents have the important flexibility, without any party stricture, to evaluate new material from colleagues, or community stakeholders who brief the chamber.

Independents can more readily incorporate constructive ideas and suggestions within the field of the legislation and vote according to the best information available at the time – instead of following a dictated party position most often set before the council debate commences.

I have also witnessed how party allegiance can insert unhelpful barriers that prevent members from taking on board valid points of consideration during debate, lest they be seen as being aligned with, or influenced by a particular party of another stripe.

Another salient point to note with such a small Legislative Council Chamber of only 15 members, to gain full value from a properly functioning house of review, there is a definite benefit to be gained from as many MPs as possible engaging with debate on legislation. However, in practice, party groups tend to nominate only one MP to provide their party’s position on legislation, effectively reducing the variety and rigour of debate and overall accountability.

Furthermore, for each minister appointed from the Legislative Council, it is one less member that

can participate in inquiries. Ministers do not take part in such scrutiny, given they are members of Cabinet. If proper scrutiny is to be maintained, the workload of the remaining members is effectively increased.

It is my sincere hope that on May 4 the voters of Hobart, Elwick and Prosser seriously consider the role of non-party MPs in the upper house, and vote for those independent candidates who have the freedom to vote according to the evidence immediately before them.

A vote for genuine independents is a vote to help ensure legislation is fit

for purpose and in the best interests of Tasmanians, with party interests taking a back seat in what is the house of review.

Finally, while I am to work until Saturday May 4, I take this opportunity to sincerely thank the electorate of Hobart for allowing me the pleasure and privilege of serving you and the people of Tasmania as a whole in the Legislative Council over the past 12 years. It has been truly an honour.

Rob Valentine MLC is the independent member for Hobart