

Don't be fooled by claims of bipartisanship

Will our political leopards truly change their spots? Asks **Meg Webb**

How will we tell whether our state political leopards have truly changed their spots, or merely applied a temporary tinted filter?

With the resumption of the Tasmanian parliament following the snap early election there has been much hand-wringing and belated acknowledgement that the community is demanding a change to the tired business-as-usual political approach.

We've heard much from the two larger parties about collaboration and needing to make the current parliament work.

Hard to argue with that.

If taken at face value, this would indicate the two major parties recognise they need to rebuild both trust, not only across the parliament but with the electorate and also radically invest in rebuilding any political capital previously held.

But don't be fooled. This is a huge ask.

Such a transformation is not the natural comfort zone of either Labor or Liberal parties. Nor is it a happy prospect for their respective corporate stakeholders and vested interest backers.

Previous power-sharing parliaments at both federal and state level saw opposition parties miffed at not receiving the crossbench's hand in government decisions to take on the role of jealous and destructive spoiler.

The challenge for the Labor Opposition is to seize the moment and work constructively with the crossbench and Upper House independents to deliver progressive public policy reforms, instead of wasting time and energy trying to prove the crossbench got it wrong and refusing to work with them.

The Rockliff government faces the challenge of changing its secretive, autocratic and vested-interest policy-driven compulsions.

Refusing to work on sound proposals put by others, while failing to bring workable ideas to the table yourself, is not constructive differentiation but is just playing the wrecker. Which is more of the same and undermines any protestations of listening to the electorate.

So given the scale of the challenge ahead, how can we test whether the former spots have truly metamorphosed or have merely received a superficial whitewash?

Elevating the public interest test as a decisive factor in decision-making will be a crucial indicator.

For example, getting out of the way of the Integrity Commission's new rigorous Lobbyist Code of Conduct and Register, legislating

and resourcing its implementation would clearly and transparently reassert the public interest over that of vested interests.

We know there will be push back by corporate vested interests and lobbyists for both the salmon and greyhound racing sectors respectively, to the recent announced reviews of those industries.

They have a right to put their case. However, the community also has the right to know this is occurring on a level playing field with animal welfare, environmental, and other NGO interests receiving equitable access to decision-makers.

It is also in the interest of our robust democracy for the Legislative Council to be recognised and resourced as an equal player within the parliament, rather than a rubber stamp to take for granted.

Crucially, respecting and implementing the outcome of upper house private members' votes will also be an important indicator of real change.

For instance, implementing my motion calling for more timely, detailed and searchable disclosure of ministerial diaries passed by the Legislative Council last year, but ignored by the Rockliff government, is clearly in the public interest and invests in delivering greater transparency and accountability.

Acting on my call, also passed by the upper house late last year, for a Tasmanian Human Rights Act to be drafted in accordance with the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute's recommendations would prioritise the public interest test.

There are many other important areas, including the critical matter of budget repair and intergenerational structural reform which risk falling at the first hurdle should the public interest test not prevail over partisan ideology and nepotistic vested interest advantage.

The concerted breakdown of stagnating political tribalism can occur without requiring the abandonment of values worth holding in the first place.

In fact, it may allow those values freedom to breathe, come to the fore and drive effective change on behalf of the community and – do we dare say it – in the public interest.

Then we may see whether any changing spots were only skin deep or a true metamorphosis.



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