

## It's not quite a royal visit, but Tasmania has made a step to better government transparency

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### [Topic: State and Territory Government](#)

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*Queen Mary's return to Hobart this week saw hundreds of adoring fans line the streets. (ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke)*

You'd have to be living under a rock if you missed that "our" Danish Queen Mary visited Hobart this week.

The other big news that might have escaped your attention (but could lead to a better government) was the launch of a new Tasmanian parliamentary friends group\* and the Tasmanian state parliament flexing its muscles.

Sure, only one of those things sparked people to rush into Hobart's city streets and wave flags, but the other two could potentially help restore some trust in voters that elected representatives are truly serving the public.

Call me Pollyanna if you like, but I hope the new friends of Public Integrity group might usher in a new era of transparency that the state needs.

That, combined with the three new motions passed by parliament this week, could lead to better governing and ensure taxpayer dollars are well spent.



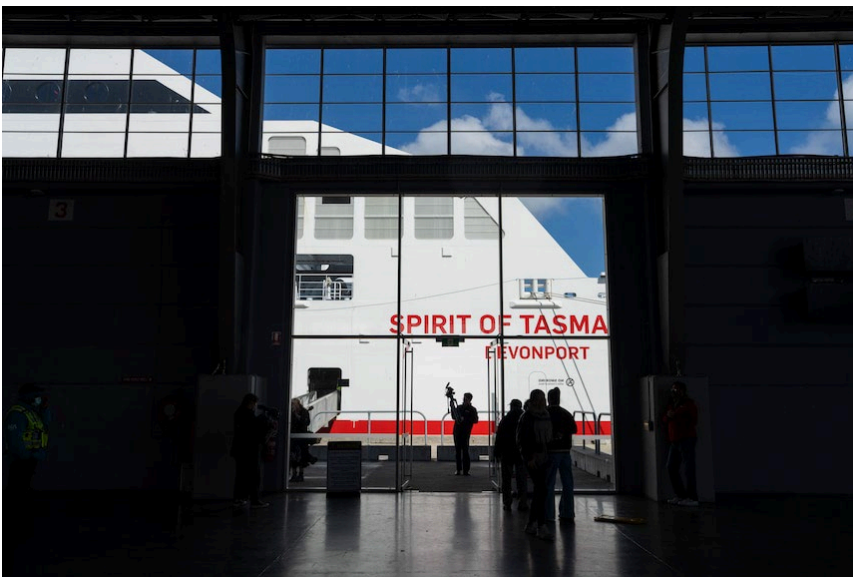
*Jeremy Rockliff's government is being pressured to improve transparency. (ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke)*

Integrity and transparency go hand-in-hand.

The state already has a Tasmanian Integrity Commission, a Tasmanian Ombudsman, an Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, an Audit Office, and a Tasmanian National Preventative Mechanism.

But some argue they're hamstrung because of how they've been set up or that a culture exists within the public service that's actively resistant, secretive and obstructionist — as concluded by a recent review.

Exhibit A is TT-Line, the state government-owned entity responsible for the Spirit of Tasmania ferries.



*The botched delivery of the new Spirit of Tasmania ferries has been the subject of intense scrutiny. (ABC News: Maren Preuss)*

The agency was embroiled in controversy last year for failing to appropriately plan the multi-million dollar replacement program for its two aging ferries and build a suitable, sizeable new berth in time to accept the bigger ships — both of which have led to massive cost blowouts.

The state's auditor-general, Martin Thompson, [declared the Spirit's operator insolvent last August](#), despite a \$400 million increase in the entity's borrowing capacity.

The Rockliff government — in Trumpian fashion — dismissed the independent auditor's findings and TT-Line's chairman declared them "perverse", saying the government would never allow the business to become insolvent.

(NB: That would be the same auditor the government praised this week for not finding fault over giving money to a media company to positively spruik Liberal party policies, but I digress.)



*Martin Thompson (left) declared TT-Line insolvent due to its inability to pay debts. (Supplied)*

The auditor-general is correct, the government could use any amount of taxpayer dollars to make sure TT-Line stayed afloat (pardon the pun).

And even though TT-line is a government-owned entity supported by taxpayers, it doesn't have to keep a public log of Right-To-Information (RTI) requests, like most government agencies.

It means information of great public interest is often only disclosed to those who made the RTI requests, and not made public.

TT-Line is not alone, the yet-to-be-built \$3.47 billion Marinus Link and TasRacing are other entities that don't have to make RTI results public either.

The government has agreed this rule should change.

What it won't agree to is a government-commissioned review recommendation to automatically release Cabinet documents after 10 years.



*Kristie Johnston moved a successful motion to force the government to release cabinet documents 30 days after a final decision on an issue. (ABC News: Kate Nickels)*

The review said Tasmania should "join the growing number of Westminster systems that now routinely release cabinet policy information 30 days after a cabinet decision. These changes would send an unambiguous message that transparency in government information practice is the new default, not the exception, and act as a circuit-breaker to the prevailing culture."

Exhibit B for change is the 16-year-old Tasmanian Integrity Commission.

It's yet to hold a public hearing. That's right. It has not held one public hearing.

In fact, the commission last October finished a secretive six-year investigation into allegations of misconduct within the state service.

It's still not decided if it will be made public.



*Tasmania's Integrity Commission is yet to hold one public hearing. (ABC News: Magie Khameneh)*

Justice needs to be seen to be done is the adage. In this case, justice looks like it's lolling about in a banana lounge, while waiting for a chilled Tuborg (Danish Beer).

The lack of transparency is cited as one of the reasons why voters are turning away from the traditional, major political parties.

Another parliamentary motion passed this week, not supported by the government, was to set up a parliamentary inquiry to examine last year's election campaign, and how well (or not) the government stuck to caretaker conventions.

During elections, the state public service is supposed to remain apolitical and governments are supposed to refrain from making major decisions. Yet TasRacing sent out communications to the public backing a Liberal policy, and the multi-billion dollar Marinus Link was given the green light.

Let's not even go there on why a government minister has [spent \\$300,000 in legal fees](#), paid for by taxpayers.

(I can't tell you why, because we don't know.)

Is it any wonder that voters are turning away from the major parties?



*Meg Webb is one of the independent MPs who co-founded the parliamentary friends of integrity group. (ABC News: Kate Nickels)*

Clearly, there is an appetite within parliament and beyond to examine public integrity and how to improve it.



*Tasmania's minority parliament has delivered the Liberal government a stinging verdict on integrity and transparency.*

A range of politicians across the political spectrum attended the launch of the parliamentary friends of integrity group this week, the co-founders are independents Meg Webb and Kristie Johnston.

It's aimed at providing a platform to champion evidence-based good governance and strengthen Tasmanians' trust in democracy.

Importantly, every integrity agency chief was there.

It's not a political-bashing exercise, rather a way to collaboratively discuss and investigate how to deliver transparent, ethical, accountable good government.

Tasmanians weren't waving flags in the street for it, but if it functions well, the group might go part of the way to restoring some badly needed trust.

*\*I was part of the launch this week — interviewing the Centre for Public Integrity's representatives on why better integrity in democracy matters.*