

Comment



A ray of sunshine

Customers banding together to reduce the cost of solar panels is one of those simple ideas that appears obvious once someone else has thought of it. In this case it could have been the government, but it is in fact a private company, Beyond Building Energy, which is already putting the idea into practice. Byron Shire is among the first places where it is introducing the solar panel bulk buy scheme.

As we reported last week fifty neighbours together can purchase panels, which reduces the price considerably, and although they pay up front, after the government rebate of \$8,000 is received the householders finish up paying less than a thousand dollars for a 1kW solar system. That probably won't run everything in a modern house, but it's a start, and you can even sell excess electricity to the grid.

The federal government has recently reduced the threshold for receiving the solar panel rebate to \$100,000 a year. This won't affect too many people in the Byron Shire, but it is nevertheless a short-sighted and retrograde step. Indeed the government should not be leaving this brilliant idea in the hands of private enterprise (much though it deserves a reward for implementing it).

The neglect of government is underlined by the irony of the solar panels supplied in this scheme being made in China. Solar technology developed in Australia was taken to China when no support was forthcoming here.

The spread of solar energy could be encouraged in many ways, and although the budget couldn't support an eight grand grant for all the houses in Australia, some solar enthusiasts claim that it would only take an aggregated array of about 50 square kilometres to replace all the coal-fired generators in the country. There is plenty of sun and roof space to go round.

Devil in the detail

Although we are still over ten weeks away from the Council election due on September 13, there are signs that candidates are already beginning to break out the armaments. However, this time round the warriors will have to negotiate some new hurdles.

The state government has passed its reforms on political funding, so candidates for local councils will find themselves being treated in the same way as large corporations, whose dubious contributions to the major parties instigated the changes. Most of the reforms are sensible, but there are two nasty details.

The first is a ban on candidates managing their own donations and campaign costs. Individuals and parties must now appoint an official agent to handle these matters, but the sting for people campaigning at the local level is that the agent must be trained by the Election Funding Authority in the arts of receiving donations and managing expenditure. Where is this training to take place? How long will it take and how much will it cost? So far the government has not answered these questions.

The second and worse detail in the reforms is the period of reporting. The government has set July 1 as the cut off date for reporting political contributions. From now until September 13 we will be completely in the dark about which interests are funding the various campaigns. Candidates will only have to report at the end of December when the damage will have been done.

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Gippsland pokes the government

The Gippsland by-election was a dreadful result for the government, and there is no point in pretending otherwise.

Not that anyone is – Kevin Rudd and his colleagues have experienced their share of defeats over the years and they never expected their time on the treasury benches to be trouble free. But they would hardly have been prepared for such a massive kick in the groin quite so soon, when all the national polls were indicating that they were still enjoying a prolonged honeymoon with the voters.

It wasn't just that they didn't win the seat; Gippsland has always been considered safe National territory, and although it has occasionally appeared on ALP wish-lists, it has never actually shifted very far. Even last year, the swing in Gippsland was only just over one percent, far less than the state and national average. And of course, a swing against the government is normal in by-elections; people use them as a wake-up call and protest vote.

On top of this, the Labor candidate was hardly ideal; he was parachuted in by head office on the basis of some star quality which was clearly invisible to the locals. Finally the issue of petrol prices, very much in the headlines of late, is particularly powerful in rural electorate like Gippsland.

But having said all that, eight per cent would be horrendous at any time – a national swing of just over half that would see the government out on its ear. And the swing is especially worrying because, in spite of what Rudd said in the aftermath, the impact of the hard decisions is still to be felt; indeed,

most of them haven't even been taken yet.

If the current price of petrol is a cause for concern, how are people going to feel about a further government-induced jump of ten cents a litre, which is what will have to happen if Rudd is serious about tackling climate change? And of course the flow-on effect will kick up

people were led to believe when John Howard launched his Northern Territory intervention. But it is not the main game, especially for the federal government.

Family matters and especially child welfare are the responsibility of the states, which are closer to the populace and are more directly involved with the delivery of

introducing populist but unprincipled legislation which left his opponents divided over whether to support it or oppose it; the decision was a real one, because with the aid of the minor parties in the senate the legislation could be amended or even defeated. But with the government in full control, that option no longer existed so there was no point in Labor tying itself in knots over dilemmas which could have no practical outcome.

A key example was the above-mentioned Northern Territory intervention: many people had grave reservations about many aspects of it, and normally the party would have agonised publicly for days, damaging itself considerably in the process. But in 2007, Howard was going to ram it through anyway; there was nothing the opposition could do so the opposition did nothing. Howard, poised to claim that sections of Labor supported child abuse, was left comparatively speechless. There are times when omnipotence not only leads to hubris but actually gives the enemy strength.

The new senate also marks the demise of the Democrats, Australia's second longest running minority party after the Nationals, formerly the Country party. The Democrats never had a similarly solid socio-economic base, or even a coherent political organisation, but did amazingly well without either. More often than not they represented hope, and many will miss them.

One of these will be Kevin Rudd, who must now negotiate with the uncompromising Greens and a couple of fanatics to get his legislation through. Beside them, the Democrats looked positively rational.

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by Mungo MacCallum



the price of everything else, most notably food, which is already running at record levels. Thus cost-push inflation will get an extra kick along, while demand will be severely reduced – the classic recipe for stagflation, a period of both high inflation and low or even negative growth, leading to rising unemployment.

This is the gloomy prospect ahead and the government will not only have to find ways to ameliorate the pain as far as possible, but also to convince the punters that the bits the government can't deal with – and there will be plenty of those – are actually necessary and worthwhile. And it had better start pretty soon.

At least some Labor supporters were disturbed that straight after the Gippsland debacle Rudd, instead of prime ministerially returning to the national economy, immediately set off on a crusade about child neglect. Now there is no doubt that this is a serious and emotive problem, and not just in the Aboriginal communities, as

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