

Grattan on Friday: In politics, those who are risk-averse don't leave much of a legacy

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

New South Wales Premier Mike Baird is coming under enormous pressure over his bold and controversial reform – to put an end to greyhound racing in the state from mid-next year.

So far Baird is holding firm, tweeting on Thursday, “When parliament resumes, we will introduce the legislation to ban greyhound racing. The legislation will be debated. And it will pass”, and reaffirming his position at a news conference held outside the RSPCA.

Baird is battling opposition from the industry, some in the Nationals (the state Coalition’s minor partner), and the Labor Party. Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce has been critical; Labor senator Sam Dastyari wants a Senate inquiry. The decision could cost Baird, whose gloss has already started to wear off, a good deal of political capital, especially as he adopted a crash-through approach to reform rather than acting more cautiously.

But, assuming the ban comes in, he will have done something worthwhile. And there is no use having political capital if you don’t spend it on good policy.

Baird has been a leader willing to invest in hard decisions. He went to the last election with a policy to partially privatise the electricity network – it was unpopular but voters trusted him and he won.

Taking big decisions where there are losers is increasingly difficult in today’s political world. Federally, it is likely to get more so following the July 2 election outcome.

That result, with a substantial vote for micro players who will be numerous in the Senate, has brought much talk about the need for more “engagement” by politicians with the community.

But while “engagement” is desirable, if it just results in paying most notice to the squeakiest wheels it can mean tough courses are not taken.

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The voices crying “no”, “we will be worse off”, usually have a head start, especially given a media attracted to negative stories like ants to the honey jar and a lobbying industry that enables vested interests to buy access and publicity if they have enough money.

A narrow majority, a divided Liberal Party, and a fractured Senate will make the road to strong policy initiatives a very steep one for Malcolm Turnbull.

That's if he can find that road. Turnbull starts his second term with a very limited agenda. Here's a mental exercise for him – he should throw his imagination forward to the 2019 election, and ask himself what six significant achievements – substantial reforms – he wants to have in the bag by then.

What he took to the people on July 2 was narrow – in economics, mainly the budget “plan” centred on a company tax reduction phased in over a decade, plus a cutback of superannuation tax breaks for the rich and a change in one income tax bracket; on the social front, mainly the proposed plebiscite on same-sex marriage.

Regardless of the merits or otherwise of cutting company tax, it is not a plan for comprehensive tax *reform*.

In the last term, there appeared at least a chance of such reform being put to the people at the election, via a green and white paper process. But Tony Abbott pre-emptively ruled out any alteration of superannuation arrangements, and later the green/white paper exercise was aborted after the change of prime minister. It was replaced by Turnbull's “everything on the table” approach that shrank into itself. Before the election, Turnbull guaranteed no change to the GST in the coming term.

In fact, green and white papers, or an expert report, if handled properly, are logical ways of providing meaningful “engagement” on the way to policy change. Baird's greyhound ban followed an inquiry by former High Court judge Michael McHugh. His comprehensive report provided a basis for the policy and its defence.

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Having solid documents with evidence and options won't always do the trick – the Henry report on taxation was mostly ignored – but they can help order the debate.

University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis this week lamented the lack of space for “consistent, coherent policy discussion” in the age of social media. Davis told the Australian Financial Review the election had shown how difficult it was for government or opposition “to have a sustained conversation with the public about matters of importance”, adding that “the channels are now so fragmented” that issues raised “immediately get caught up in vested interests”.

The fragmentation of the media, widely defined, and the decline of the “old” media’s business model and thus their resources, mean we have both more and less.

There is plenty of quantity, especially talk and opinion (which are, literally, cheap), and raw information. But there is less focused consideration of issues, and fewer journalists in the mainstream media who are independent experts in their field – health, education, economics, whatever – to get to the nub of things in an easy-to-understand way.

A government’s pursuit of “engagement” needs to be broad and real, not once over lightly and for show. Turnbull’s “mini summit” of three hours last October with business, union and community leaders was basically a feel-good session. Bob Hawke used “summits” as a policy tool, both to seek consensus and to test the limits of consensus, but they represented serious consultation.

Still, it is easier to “engage” with stakeholders and well-organised interest groups than with the general public. Yet it is the ordinary people who are the most disillusioned with and disengaged from the political process, and potentially fearful about change and roadblocks to it.

Before any meaningful “engagement” with them can be achieved (if indeed it can) must come some restoration of trust, now at desperately low levels. This requires, at its most basic, a political leader doing as he or she said they would do, except when there are genuinely extenuating circumstances.

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In this context Turnbull is right to say, as he did this week, that the government will take to parliament the superannuation changes (and other measures) that it put to the election.

The super changes are fair and reasonable. The government may have to modify them in the Senate. But to bow to the noisy critics among the Liberal conservatives who are staging a revolt would be a big mistake. Anyway, these critics should be much easier to deal with than the forces Baird finds arrayed against him in the greyhound furore.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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