

In a Democracy, The Electorate Gets the Government It Deserves

Written by Chris Blyth

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“The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.... “ is one of my favourite quotations from Shakespeare, and is, for me, a defining statement of the need for personal accountability and responsibility in our lives. We currently appear to live in a “blame culture” – our problems always being down to some-one else, as though we had no personal control, involvement or responsibility. The VAT “tax grab” by the UK Government was the first indication that the problems facing the UK, would actually have consequences for the IOM, and was rapidly followed by the termination of the Reciprocal Health Agreement. The Manx Government, bloated with years of prosperity apparently largely funded by a previous, excessively generous VAT Sharing Agreement, has been quick to accuse the UK of intemperate action, of a lack of consultation over the measures taken.

As a result of the action taken, however, the 2010 Budget was the first in recent years that has had to face a major downturn in manx revenues, and resulted in the need to make considerable adjustments to our economy to cope with the impact.

The adjustments to date appear weak and very tentative – a long-term and gradual adjustment requiring a major raid on our reserves, an inadequate focus on gaining the maximum efficiency and “value for money” in government services, a modest increase in personal taxation, an announcement of a modest cut in public sector headcount (but taken from “unfilled vacancies” and retirements, so no actual redundancies yet), and later, an announcement of a major government re-organisation (much to the surprise of the whole of the rest of government) but without any of the necessary detail as to any headcount or cost savings (actually announced as not being done to cause job cuts).

The effect is “soft” – the intent to buy time for this mediocre government, and to ensure its re-election in 18 months time. The unstated hope is that the public will remain unaware of just how serious is our financial position, and that the problem will pass down to a subsequent government sometime in the medium future – but not to be faced up to by the current team. The pretence is that these problems are the fault of the UK Government, and that somehow, our government can deflect the responsibility, and avoid its role in our problems.

Governments worldwide (not just on the Isle of Man) rely on the electorate being ignorant, unaware, and detached from the political process – and with the hope that we (as electorates) trust our government to act at all times in good faith, ensuring maximum value for our taxes, and ensuring a fair society for all. The reality is that we have a bloated public sector, a unionised workforce which operates at its own pace, is paid excessively well, enjoys pension benefits which the rest of us can only dream about, whose efficiency has deteriorated over the past 10 years (despite the millions poured into IT systems and the myriads of management layers monitoring every aspect of government business), and a political structure built around a

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Chief Minister elected without a clear statement of policy or strategy, and who permits no opposition or dissent (since almost all MHKs and Members of LegCo have government positions).

What is needed is a much better educated electorate – an electorate participating in the political process :

- With political knowledge and understanding - which can ask the searching questions needed of our elected officials, and hold them to account for their policies and actions.
- With a knowledge of economics - of how fiscal and monetary policies impact on business, economic performance and taxation policy.
- With a Freedom of Information Act and a Conflict of Interest Act that enable the electorate to have access to the decision processes of government, and which ensures that all such decisions are transparent, and taken for the reason of public benefit, not private gain.
- Instead, we have a Chief Minister who has failed, repeatedly, to enact a Freedom of Information Act, and who sees no need for a Conflict of Interest Act, a government which asks for a declaration of interest from all MHKs but does not require it.....

In a democracy, it is the electorate which must take the responsibility for the mistakes of its elected officials – and it is the electorate which anyway will always end up paying the bill for those mistakes. The cost over-runs for the MEA or the new Nobles Hospital weren't paid for by government. The generous salaries and pension benefits enjoyed by the public sector aren't paid for by government. Public sector housing, the health service, unemployment benefits etc aren't paid for by government. Government does not have money – nor does it generate money from its activities. Governments are bureaucracies, taking money from taxpayers, and re-distributing it in ways which hopefully meet society's expectations and needs in an affordable and efficient way (the "value for money" test).

Does the manx government meet the "value for money" test ? Does it meet a test of "competent performance" ? I suggest the answers are "NO! NO!". Hopefully, at the next General Election due in Autumn 2011, there will be candidates standing better qualified, more experienced, and with the skills needed to assist the growth and development of a strong economy, able to generate the tax revenues to meet society's needs and the aspiration of a "fair society for all". And an electorate much better informed as to the failures of our current government.....

It is for the electorate to evaluate – but roll on the next election..... !!