

Oh how naïve.....

Written by Chris Blyth

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Oh how naïve and gullible....

I remember it well..... Mr Bell stood up at his election address in Ramsey less than a year ago, and stated that "the credit crunch of 2008 changes everything, and the public sector must change too, its culture, its working practices, its productivity etc etc". It sounded good at the time, because he was correct - early action within government was essential to address the major loss of revenue resulting from the renegotiated VAT Agreement, if services to the public were to be protected.

How naïve and gullible I was..... . Because since then ? Well, he was elected, and then had 5 years to effect those changes - so no need to be too rapid in the implementation - let's spend some (lots) of the reserves and give ourselves time to think about it all..... and his feet came off the pedal.

But the financial cutbacks are still necessary, so where to make them ? The Treasury's thinking caps went on, and their less than inspired answers include

- increasing revenues by, for example, raising parking fees and hiking the penalty fines for parking where you shouldn't (the good old motorist gets hammered yet again)
- cutting services such as pre-school education, cutting student grants, and grants to charities and NGOs
- and cutting the welfare bill by (almost certainly) enforcing means tests and stopping some of the "universality" of benefits (such as bus passes, prescription charge exemptions etc)

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Meanwhile, the Government would have you believe that they have cut headcount (they haven't), and improved staffing efficiencies (difficult to prove but they probably haven't). Some modest savings from centralised purchasing (for example, heating oil for government buildings) have been announced - but one wonders why it didn't happen an awful lot earlier ?

Meanwhile we learn that Whitley Council negotiated wage rates are up to 50% higher than those applicable in the private sector, that bus drivers get paid lunches, that hundreds of government employees get free car parking in taxpayer funded car parks (for which the private sector tax payer continues to have to pay - or get an increased penalty fine if caught not paying!), and that MHKs and most of the rest of the public sector are very reluctant to contribute the true cost of their very generous pension schemes (which remain largely funded by the taxpayer).

One wonders just how many more of these "perks" have yet to be revealed - meanwhile, we the public, are to pay for their continuation with our taxes, fines and reduced services. It starts to look as if this government is more committed to its own self-interest and self preservation, and less than committed to a "fair society". It suggests that Mr Bell needs to re-energise his efficiency drive, and to focus on a much slimmer, less costly version of government which gives improved value for money.

Meanwhile, the updated Report on the Scope and Structure of Government - with recommendations to do just that - has been put into the long grass, with all the appearance of being discarded as too difficult to implement and too painful on the sensibilities of the public sector workers and their unions.

Is it any wonder that politicians are regarded with less than affection ? Is it any wonder that voters are disillusioned ?