

Bracks Dumbs Down Parliament

One of the anthems of the Bracks Government has been open and accountable government.

In opposition, Labor chanted to “restore democracy”, demonising Jeff Kennett as a modern day Atilla the Hun.

Never mind that there was no threat to democracy, it was a good tagline and provided a basis for a policy for the threadbare Labor platform for the 1999 election.

In fact, it also became a good point in the negotiations with the gang of three independents that delivered government to Labor in 1999.

The ‘democracy’ theme is a very good example of Bracks Labor: spin over substance, slogans will wallpaper over the cracks and keep media and public scrutiny at bay and rhetoric will warm the faithful.

The reality is that the Bracks Government has been bad for democracy in Victoria.

In five years in government, Bracks has succeeded in dumbing down Parliament with scarcely a murmur of dissatisfaction from the independent MPs, the media or any of the grab-bag of organisations that were ready to man the barricades to defend the auditor general against Kennett the marauder.

Set aside the changes to the Legislative Council that Labor insists on describing as reform and a win for democracy. Labor could, at least, claim a mandate for introducing proportional representation notwithstanding that the electoral carve-up of the state was subject to little public consultation.

What is more alarming is Labor’s approach to the basic issues. Staffing for MPs has been cut under Labor. This is not an economy measure but a move to hobble the Opposition.

Labor’s central staffing of advisors and media hacks has ballooned and feeds lazy Government MPs with propaganda and even speeches to read in Parliament while Opposition MPs work with less staff resources than Kennett allowed Labor. What’s more, Labor is currently pressing to cut the Liberals Opposition staff further from 11 to possibly as few as three!

Labor promised to make Parliament more democratic and to be an open and accountable government. Well that was the rhetoric.

The reality is that Ministers refuse to answer even the most basic and direct questions (check out Hansard rather than take my word for it), sit in the Parliament under sufferance on a roster basis and refuse to attend the adjournment debate other than on their rostered night.

Bracks Labor has introduced new sessional orders in both Houses of Parliament to gag debate on key legislation and it is now possible for a Bill to be passed by both

houses without any substantive debate. Mind you, that would be unlikely to happen as the Liberals ensure that bills guillotined by Labor in the Assembly are given full debate in the Council.

Bracks Labor has cut the number of times Opposition MPs in the Legislative Council can speak or raise matters on behalf of their constituents and introduced time limits to gag debates on important issues.

In recent changes, Labor attempted to pass rules that would have made it virtually impossible for MPs to introduce a private member's bill. Fortunately, common sense prevailed when the Liberals pointed out the possible ramifications of the new rules.

We hear tell that Bracks Labor now wants to put a clamp on questions on notice. Hardly surprising, given that it took more than 12 months to provide an answer to a question that the Legislative Council rules demand should be answered in 30 days!

Bracks Labor provides Government MPs with glossy brochures and reports produced by Government departments but refuses to provide the same public information to Opposition MPs, depriving their constituents of the information.

Bracks Labor invites Government MPs to events and project openings in their electorates but refuses to invite Opposition MPs even where they may personally have been working on the project or event over many years.

On information and invitations, Bracks Labor is not the only Government ever to offend Opposition MPs but it is worth considering they promised a new standard for democracy and an open and accountable government.

Open and accountable? Almost laughable that, especially when you consider Bracks Labor's brake on Freedom of Information requests from the Opposition and the media.

Bracks Labor has sought to delay or frustrate attempts to obtain information by various means including absurd requests for clarification of what Liberal MPs means by the terms "contracts awarded", "executive officer", "signed contracts", "consultancy", "invoices", "conflict of interest" and "papers".

Only 516 or 21% of the 2404 requests for information from government departments resulted in full disclosures between July 2002 and June 2003 down from 25% in 2001-2002 and 28% in 2000-2001.

Coincidence in that trend or an indication the Bracks Government has more to hide and, of course, no commitment to its mantra of open and accountable government.

The Ombudsman is currently reviewing the abuses of the FOI process by Bracks Labor.

