**The case for Slow Policy**

*The problems of Government are a consequence of a paucity of process – for which we are all responsible.*

A lot of the political challenges our governments are facing are caused by the demise of good public policy process. We, as a society, as well as our governments seem to have completely lost sight of what good process is.

We see countless examples, every day policy ideas thrown out into the public domain before they have been properly considered.

A friend in government summed it up nicely “Policy development in government has become little more than a series of brain farts!” Ill thought through ideas designed to manage the politics of the day.

The announcement to move the Israeli embassy is a case in point. You would expect that the public announcement of the government considering such a move would be based on perhaps a review of how well the embassy was working where it is currently located and the implications (positive and negative of moving it) or perhaps some sort of basic evaluation. Such analysis may then provide the government with something to justify the move if they were to come under criticism upon announcement. However, there was nothing. It even seemed to be news to the agencies involved.

Whilst I use a very recent example its’ not just confined to one side of politics and not only confined to ‘political’ announcements where the public service hasn’t been involved. A classic example can be seen in the Rudd Labor Government’s policy to install home insulation batts as part of a stimulus package to protect the economy.

A Royal Commission into the deaths of four installers participating in the home insulation program condemned the Labor government’s haste, badly designed policy and a lack of a focus on safety. Planning was sacrificed to speed. The Commissioner also found that the Environment Department was ill equipped to administer the program.

To the people who say … ‘well it is political’, it was announced for political reasons to manage the politics of the day … I say, ‘how well did that work for you?’ In the case of the movement of the Israeli embassy, it didn’t help the government full stop. Not in the Wentworth bi-election, probably not in the Victorian election and it helped to feed a view that the government had become all spin and no substance under its new leader. A tag that is easy to make stick in the context of Scott Morrison’s background in marketing.

In the case of the pink batts program the government probably scored some quick political points for the idea of the policy and it perhaps did have one of the desired impacts; helping to boost the economy, but the government then suffered politically. It helped to feed a view in the public that the government was increasingly chaotic and that the problem was originating from the Prime Minister’s office.

In significant part I don’t blame our elected representatives either. They are responding to external pressures. To a media who insist on having the most complex of problems solved yesterday to the public who elect them who expect the same.

I recently heard a local radio presenter grilling South Australia’s recently elected and appointed Health Minister about why he hadn’t solved the woes of the health system already. The Minister had been in the job less than 6 months; a new Liberal government following a Labor government who had been in power for more than 15 years! Another commentator on the same station noted that perhaps it wasn’t fair to judge him at this stage. She was prepared to give him another 6 months to get it sorted. How generous! Really? How long do people think it takes to resolve the significant and complex societal, economic and systemic issues that are driving the funding challenges faced by our health systems?

Given such reform requires significant societal change as well as improved systems, new policy directions probably at both a state and Federal level and improved financial management. I would argue the SA Health Minister would be doing extraordinarily well if he sorted it within two terms of government.

Our media and more importantly all of us – as citizens’ – need to take a cold shower and pause.

At the moment we want it all. We want governments to be successful in reforming to achieve the changes we want and need as a society, but we are completely unrealistic about the timeframes in which this can be done. It just simply isn’t possible to make complex reform happen fast in large part because we, the community, are a part of the equation and ‘we’ need to be on board if it is going to be successful. And yet we get frustrated, angry, annoyed and disillusioned with our government when they can’t make the impossible possible.

Reform to address the complex issues we are concerned about takes time and difficult decisions on issues that polarise us; whether it be energy prices, addressing climate change, addressing poverty, immigration, water management, resolving burgeoning demand for hospital services, land rights and land management… just to name a few.

We need to change how we measure the success of our governments and judge them by different criteria in the short term (for their first term at least).

To use public sector, speak; perhaps we need to judge them on process measures rather than outcome measures. For example, how well are they exploring the issues? Are they working with stakeholders are they talking and working with the community? Are they listening? Are they researching and exploring? Are they asking the right questions? Are they reviewing what has worked and what hasn’t? Are they being open, transparent and honest? Are they sharing and discussing the challenges, opportunities and the information they are using to help them make decisions?

Most importantly we need to allow them time to do it.

***About the author***

*Emma Fletcher (nee Lawson) is CoCEO of a company democracyCo a company that supports governments to run processes which involve stakeholders and community in policy development. She worked in senior levels of government for 15 years both in SA, interstate and overseas. She ran parliamentary inquiries for the NSW Upper House, was a senior Policy executive in the Department of Premier and Cabinet in South Australia and worked as a political advisor to the SA Premier Mike Rann and Treasurer Kevin Foley.*