



# It's our system that is stuffed



The way Queensland is governed and managed - its governance infrastructure - is in urgent need of a major overhaul, writes **Scott Prasser**

**M**OST think about Queensland's infrastructure crisis only in terms of inadequate roads, dams, schools, power stations, public transport and traffic congestion. Poor planning, lack of funding and delayed decision-making are usually blamed for this mess.

That's only half right. The real culprit is Queensland's other infrastructure crisis, our governance infrastructure: our parliamentary institutions, election processes, the public service, the judiciary system, government business enterprises, our political parties and the way we develop and deliver policy.

They do not work any more. They are out of date, ossified and manipulated by whoever is in power to maintain office rather than to reflect democratic will or to be accountable

to the electorate.

The electorate may vote every three years but between elections voters have few mechanisms to hold government to account or to force it out of office for its ineptitude.

Look at how the current Government failed to inform the electorate in the 2009 election about privatisation. The lack of consultation is as bad as the Beattie government's enforced local government amalgamation.

Look at the overseas doctors' scandal. People die in Queensland's public hospitals, but not one minister has been sacked; a man dies in a police lock-up on Palm Island and not one minister has taken responsibility and resigned.

We cannot even pay staff in public hospitals, but no minister has been dismissed.

Millions of taxpayers' dollars have been squandered on "white-elephant" projects that

were never properly costed, and failed to deliver - a magnesium project that lost millions, the proposed Traveston Dam, the Gold Coast's desalination plant, the Indy car debacle and tunnels with few cars.

And yet we have no parliamentary committee or independent inquiries into any of these debacles. Just a few post-event reports by the Auditor-General, who tells us the obvious - processes and planning were poor or virtually non-existent.

Our present system of governance has broken down. Our parliamentary system is Westminster gone troppo.

Parliament sits only 50 days a year. The governing party controls all its procedures. Question time is a farce, legislation is rushed and the Opposition, inept as it is, neutered.

Queensland's single house parliamentary system makes it

worse. An upper house, if properly constructed, might exert restraint on the present excesses of executive government, ensure more consultation and provide better representation for regions or other groups. But it has been ruled out by the current Government in its response to the Integrity and Accountability discussion paper last year.

Another problem is the crisis in the level of talent among our elected officials. Political parties are suffering from declining memberships and their own gene pool is contracting. Fewer of our elected officials are from the broader community.

More of them have had only limited careers or work experience outside their own parties, which, in turn, have ceased to be representative of the electorate. So let's consider other



methods of recruiting into the ministry the best and brightest that our society has rather than just relying on those of one political allegiance.

This means a fundamental change to Westminster government, but Westminster is not working in Queensland, so let's do it.

Then there is our public service. It has grown too much and has become increasingly politicised during the past two decades. It has lost any semblance of independence and the quality of its advice has declined. It has become too responsive to the whims of elected officials.

Even Queensland Treasury is a pushover these days as Queensland's growing herd of white-elephant projects, deficit fiscal situation and declining credit rating testify.

Unlike Canberra we do not have the independent advis-

ory bodies that provide the analysis that we all can see. We need a State Priorities Commission to identify key infrastructure needs based on publicly released cost-benefit studies and with open consultation.

Where is Queensland's intergenerational report on our ageing population and its policy impact for the future? Do we have to wait for another crisis? The present Planning Information and Forecasting Unit has done great work on population issues but is now buried in State Treasury. It should be an external independent body so we can see all the evidence and hear its unfiltered views on population trends.

Voters also want more direct means to input into decision-making, not sham consultations about decisions already made. Community cabinets had some impact,

but more substantial changes are required. That means opening up the decision-making processes and devolving responsibility to local communities.

We could start with a parliamentary committee on education to consider community input on our school curriculums.

We could have more community ownership of public schools.

We could promote more open and competitive arrangements in the delivery of a whole range of public policies, from education to infrastructure.

Queensland needs a new public service that is re-professionalised (not re-structured) and insulated from political interference but accountable through annual reporting to independent boards of management about specified performance targets.

This means a revitalised

and independent Public Service Commission to manage the integrity of the system and public and bipartisan scrutiny of senior appointments to the bureaucracy, government boards and the judiciary.

Queensland will soon have lots of shiny new infrastructure. But to get the most out of it we need a new governance infrastructure based on the solid foundations of democratic practice, transparency and maximum citizen involvement.

With fewer constitutional limitations than at the federal level, there is no reason why Queensland cannot lead in this process of governance renewal. We need to start now. It needs to happen at a state level.

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