

Opinion

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A word of advice to the premier: always expect the unexpected

John Brumby finally has his chance to lead Victoria. But he must tread carefully.

GEOFF ROBINSON

IN 1983 when a 29-year-old John Brumby was elected to Federal Parliament, he would never have imagined that 24 years later he would reach the summit of his political career as premier of Victoria. Brumby's political career has overlapped a period of dramatic change in the Victorian economy and society. The economic restructuring of the late 1980s and early '90s hit the Victorian economy — dependent on tariff-protected manufacturing — particularly hard. The centre of a new globalised Australian economy shifted to Sydney and

the Victorian Labor government failed to manage the crisis.

Voters deserted Labor, first at the 1990 federal election when Brumby lost his seat and then at the 1992 state poll when Labor, led by Joan Kirner, was reduced to a rump. The shattered party soon turned to Brumby as leader. This was a time when politics was about the conflict between winners and losers; those who had benefited from economic change and those who lost out. In government after 1992 Jeff Kennett embraced this politics, and promised Victorians that his tough policies would purge the state of the weaknesses that had dragged it down.

In early 1999, when Labor dumped him and installed Steve Bracks as leader, Brumby seemed permanently confined to the ranks of political losers. Today the political upheavals of the 1990s seem far distant. John

Howard went from being yesterday's man to four straight election victories and now John Brumby, the struggling opposition leader of 1999, will be premier in 2007 with a Government in an apparently invincible position. But Brumby might reflect that his political career may have more twists and turns to come and that the emerging challenges for the Government may be greater than those that have confronted him as Treasurer during an economic boom.

The example of other state Labor governments suggests that the political tables can turn quickly. Labor administrations in NSW and Queensland sailed through two largely trouble-free terms before enduring crisis-ridden third terms plagued by major infrastructure collapses. Both governments survived these crises, but Brumby would hope he would not have to rely

on the Victorian Liberals being as inept as their NSW and Queensland counterparts.

There are potential minefields ahead for a Victorian Labor Government that Brumby will have to guard against. It has been easy to demonstrate fiscal responsibility during an economic boom, but this boom has increasingly been financed by a debt explosion that now encounters real resource constraints, apparent in the squeeze on housing affordability.

Any economic downturn will force harder political decisions, ones that Labor was unable to make in the early 1990s. Even if the economic good times continue, voters' expectations will continue to rise and they may turn on Labor as they seem to be turning on John Howard.

Over the past decade environmental policy has moved from a values or lifestyle issue

towards the centre of economic policy, but with limited natural resources available, environmental debates necessarily create winners and losers. Labor's electoral collapse in the Latrobe Valley at the 2006 state election was largely due to local grievances about water allocation — and conflicts around water use may prove intractable for the Government.

4 The example of other state Labor governments suggests that the political tables can turn quickly. 9

With this current generation, state Labor governments have striven to distance themselves from the financial crises that crippled Labor administrations in the early 1990s; they have borne the banner of fiscal con-

servatism with pride, and one of Brumby's key goals as opposition leader was to commit Victorian Labor to this approach. Yet in NSW and Queensland, Labor has been accused of allowing public infrastructure to decline.

As Treasurer, Brumby has extolled the virtues of Public-Private Partnerships to finance infrastructure, but their implementation has been problematic. The rocky career of the regional fast train project has exposed weaknesses in Labor's ability to manage complex projects and it contributed to the slump in Labor's Bendigo support at the last state election.

In a globalised economy it is human capital as much as physical infrastructure that drives economic competitiveness, yet public education in Victoria faces significant challenges. In government, Labor has stressed a

rhetoric of quality and benchmarking but the drift of students to private schools has continued, while regional and working-class youth are increasingly disinclined to continue with further education after year 12 as the rewards of entry to a labour market approaching full employment seem attractive.

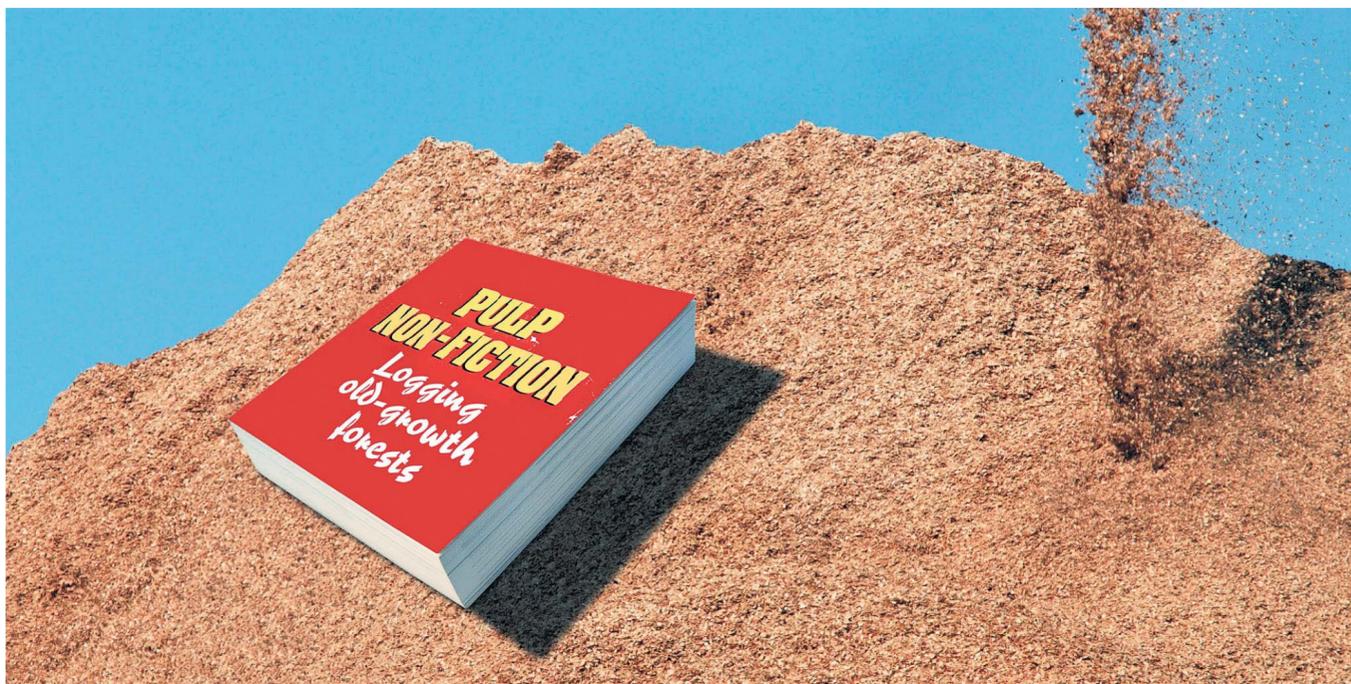
The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning has been popular but it, together with the expansion of selective public schools, threatens to revive the level of class streaming in secondary education outcomes that previous Labor educational reformers such as Kirner campaigned against.

During Labor's years in office, the Greens have had unexpected success — and many Labor politicians are probably happy with the migration of much of the political left out of Labor into the Greens. Certainly in the short

term this has aided the Government's ability to manage the Labor Party. At the 2006 election, opportunistic preference deals deprived the Greens of the balance of power in the Legislative Council, but in the long run Labor must resolve whether its current aggressive stance towards the Greens is sustainable.

Brumby's harder-edged style, together with the departure of John Thwaites, may reduce the Government's attractiveness to Green-inclined voters. The prosperity and stability of the past decade in Australia may not last forever. Brumby's own political career has demonstrated that successful Australian politicians should always expect the unexpected.

Geoff Robinson lectures in politics at Deakin University, Warrambool. His book on former NSW Labor premier Jack Lang will be published later this year.



Will the real Rudd please stand up?

WHEN I write critically of Gunns and what is going on in the Tasmanian forests, a journalist I know from living there who now works for the Government writes me angry emails saying I have become a typical mainlander, exonerating my environmental conscience by attacking Tasmanians when similar things are going on in my own Victorian backyard.

Each time, I have written back and pointed out that the view I have expressed is shared, for example, by my elderly parents and parents-in-law, people from working class and farm backgrounds. If they're not Tasmanian, I don't know who is.

My point is that I don't accept his implication that mine is the "mainland" view any more than his is the exclusively "Tasmanian" view. Plenty of Tasmanians share my views — they just don't fit the political stereotypes used by the Tasmanian Government to describe the debate.

Last week, federal Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd stated his position on Tasmanian forest issues. Addressing timber workers in Launceston, he said, "My job, if elected as the next prime minister of Australia, is to govern in the national interest and to govern in the public interest, not to govern in the Greens' interest."

This view of the dispute, with the public interest on one side matched against a political pressure group on the other, would have been deeply familiar to his audience. It is the view of Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon. In the political equation employed by Rudd, there is no place for people opposed to the Government's forestry policies who are not Greens.

A few months ago, 10,000 people marched through Launceston — a large chunk of the population in a place the size of Ballarat — to express their opposition to the pulp mill being built by Gunns in the picturesque Tamar Valley. The opposition has two planks. One is the environmental and aesthetic impact of the mill in a tourist area. The other is the integrity of the process whereby the proposal has been pushed through. In one incident, Supreme Court judge Chris Wright, who was in charge of one branch of the process, alleged Lennon tried to improperly influence him.

I would argue that Tasmania is a corporate state by which I mean its Government is directly responsive to the state's major corporation, the timber company Gunns. By corporate state, I do not mean totalitarian state. Corporate states co-exist with consumerism and consumer demands, including in news. The corporate politician par excellence, Silvio Berlusconi, was simultaneously prime minister of Italy and that country's biggest television mogul. On the subject of dissent and democratic activity generally, Berlusconi said, "If it's not on television, don't worry about it." The



MARTIN FLANAGAN

The Opposition Leader's forest policy seems to be another example of his "me-too" politics.

criticism of the corporate state is that it causes power to narrow into fewer and fewer hands, often unelected.

What is happening in Tasmania should concern people in other parts of Australia for two reasons. One is because it concerns the environment and that is now a global concern. The other is because it involves the Labor Party. My question for Kevin Rudd is this — is Tasmania the future of the Labor Party? If not, then exactly why not? This question has added importance in an election year in which it is feasible that Labor could end up holding power in every parliament in the country.

What do we know about Kevin Rudd? Not much, really. The game he is currently playing with the Prime Minister is known in yacht racing as tacking. What we do know, however, is that several months ago Rudd wrote an essay for the *Monthly* magazine on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the outstanding Christian figures of the 20th century.

Bonhoeffer was a German, a Lutheran minister, who became involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler in World War II. As a theologian and

moral philosopher, he had to address the moral issues associated with an act of murder in a time when evil is paramount.

I read Rudd's essay as a sound defence of a Christian approach to politics that is separate from, and possibly at odds with, the politics of fundamentalist Christians that have had so much impact in the United States and, to a lesser extent, here. The essay contained statements on the environment that people in Tasmania opposed to what is happening in their state would identify with — saying, for example, that "the fundamental ethical challenge of our age (is) to protect the planet". He also talked about truth-telling and "the Prime Minister's now routine manipulation of the truth".

Rudd's visit to Tasmania brought him into the spotlight. Either he is a conservative man of limited vision — a description that might be otherwise applied to the Prime Minister — or he is capable of the sort of political behaviour he objects to in the Prime Minister.

Martin Flanagan is a senior writer.

An issue beyond trees

The forest industry is often held up as an example of environmental profligacy. But the truth is often lost in emotional campaigns against logging, writes **Tricia Caswell**.

AT HEAD of the federal election, the Liberal and Labor parties have set their policy sights on sustainable forest industries in Tasmania — and the jobs, skills, economies and environmental values that go with them. These are issues for the whole of Australia.

With global warming a major issue, this approach is unsurprising — production forestry, with its vast array of wood and paper products may be the most carbon positive industry on the planet. Trees, their roots and soil all store carbon, much of which stays stored in the wood and paper products we use every day. It is simply not true that all the carbon in trees turns to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere when a forest coupe is harvested and relatively little energy and water is used in the extraction and manufacture of native hardwood products. Both parties have declared there will be no further extensions to reserve systems in Tasmania. They both refer to the history and science of the Regional Forest Agreements settled in the 1990s. Both refer to the need for viable forest industries in 21st century Australia.

It is worth placing this in the Victorian context. Only 10 per cent of the state's forests are

available for production and a meagre 0.14 per cent are harvested in any one year. Native hardwood trees sequester carbon during their growth phase and most are organically grown with no chemical fertilisers. Local seeds are collected for regeneration as close to the original as possible with two trees planted for every one harvested.

Native forestry is efficient and makes good use of the resource — on average a third to sawn timber, a third to residue for woodchips and a third left on the forest floor. Compare this with most mining operations where resource efficiency is often very tiny.

Going to a coupe harvest is like going to the opera. There are spectators all around, activities are heavily regulated and monitored. No rainforest is harvested, big trees are not harvested. There are buffers along streams and special protection zones for biodiversity. The application of the forestry code is audited by the Environment Protection Authority. Each year compliance has improved. Last year it was 93 per cent — high by any industry's standards.

All of this is State Government business. The Government owns and manages our state forests, where nearly all Victorian native hardwood is sourced. Victoria and Australia have world-class sustainable native forest manage-

ment. Most production forests in Australia are regrowth — regenerated coupe by coupe. We have world-class forest reserves in national and state parks.

In Victoria the availability of the hardwood resource has been continually reduced over 30 years. Mostly this is the result of establishing reserves, the introduction of new management regions, codes and the development of sustainable yield measures.

The Government's policy framework, *Our Forests Our Future* in 2002, reduced the resource by 31 per cent in one go after a review of sustainable yield.

The promise of securing the resource at this new level of 567,800 cubic metres has never been kept. Parks have been extended and we have the devastating effects of bushfires in 2003 and last summer. This has reduced the Victorian native timber resource to 500,000 cubic metres at most.

Such reductions and unmet promises to maintain a long-term baseline resource affect the security and scale of the industry and the capacity to gather confidence, skills, investment and eventually, its very survival.

If we close the industry down, demand for timber products will not disappear, far from it. Our national trade deficit in wood and paper products of \$2.1 billion, as part of an \$18 billion industry, will increase.

We will import more illegal or unsustainably harvested wood and wood products from tropical rainforests. We will have pushed our economies, jobs and communities offshore and the global environment will be the poorer for it. Plantations are held high as the total solution to forest wars. There are many reasons

why this is simply not so. There is the threshold question. Why are monocultural plantings, often with few indigenous species, declared better environmentally than perpetually regenerated locally specific native forests?

Regenerated native production forests continue to provide for the local animals and birds, flora and fauna. Plantations of pine or even blue gums cannot do the same job.

Plantations most often provide woodchips for pulp, for paper and other composite wood products. They do not provide the range of quality of timber sawlogs that native forests do. Local conflicts over the availability of land, soil types and depth, rainfall, damaging bugs, silvicultural practices, labour costs, complicated planning regulations and the relatively low priority given by governments have not made plantation development easy.

It's a long time since I have felt that one-dimensional, protest-based environmental campaigns will get us to where we need to go so our grandchildren have a functioning planet to live on and functioning communities to live in. The tree has become the totemic symbol of every kind of environmental issue. The single issue, anti-forestry campaigns will not solve the tough sustainability issues that face us.

If you are a local anti-forestry campaigner, you are an environmental campaigner. Your only job is to save the forest. There are other big questions you never ask. Such as: "What are the environmental, social, and economic consequences of annihilating native forest industries in Australia?"

Tricia Caswell is the chief executive officer of the Victorian Association of Forest Industries.

Women's fight to wear the veil will test Turkey's move towards modernisation

YOU SEE all kinds of veils, or headscarves, in Turkey. Last week I saw a woman in a black veil and tight jeans; another in a wildly multi-coloured veil and high heels; another wearing a pink veil and make-up to match.



JAMES BUTTON
EYE ON EUROPE

This country has a chance to show that Muslims and progress can co-exist.

the woman wears a veil. Yes, Turkey also has women in black, wearing a shapeless overgarment with only a small part of the face showing. But the kal-eidoscope I saw challenged all my preconceptions.

In just a few years these

small pieces of cloth have become a faultline of European politics, symbolising fears of a resurgent, strident, even separatist Islam. In 2004, France banned the headscarf in public schools. Last year the Dutch Government and parts of Belgium proposed banning the burqa, the covering that shows only the eyes (at times not even them). Former British foreign secretary Jack Straw caused a storm when he voiced unease about the niqab, a covering similar to a burqa.

Of course the headscarf is not the same as the burqa, which denies human contact by shutting off the face. Yet both are highly visible symbols of a deep, if not always admitted, Western belief that Islam oppresses women.

Turkey is not Europe, but its

cosmopolitan and secular elite identifies strongly with the West. Last week's national election was triggered by a dispute over whether the wife of the ruling party's candidate for president should be allowed to wear a headscarf. Although almost entirely Muslim, Turkey is the fiercest opponent of Muslim symbols such as the headscarf.

The paradox goes back to the determination of Atatürk, founder of the secular state in 1923, to modernise his country by keeping Islam out of public life.

Female MPs, lawyers, public servants and tertiary students cannot wear the veil in their place of work or study. Since the ruling Justice and Development party has Islamist roots, the elites, including many educated women, are terrified that a head of state with a veiled wife would

be a step towards sharia law.

It is hard to share their fears. Yes, headscarves are more visible than ever in Turkey. But here is the surprise: their use is declining. The reason more are seen is that their wearers are coming out of their homes and demanding a place in public life.

A report by the European Stability Initiative found that in the past seven years the proportion of Turkish women who do not cover their heads has risen from 27 to 37 per cent. Among the 60 per cent who cover, most wear the scarf in the loose, traditional style that often shows hair.

Only 10 per cent wear the veil in the strict, religious way: tied tightly around the face, often with a bonnet, so that no hair shows. But here is another paradox: among these appar-

ently religious Muslims are some of the strongest feminists.

They are young women whose parents — the religious, rural poor — moved to the cities in Turkey's huge postwar urbanisation. Their mothers work, they are educated (female literacy has risen from 13 to 81 per cent since World War II) and they want better jobs than their mothers had.

Mahcupyan, whose foundation has studied the "scarf girls", says the scarf is their "passport out of the family". It allows them to stay out late and tell their parents they cannot be misbehaving: they are religious, after all. It also frees them from harassment by men.

"It's a very modern garment, even a feminist statement," Mahcupyan says. The wearer "is trying to differentiate herself,

first from her family, then from society. She is saying, 'I'm a person, I have my own career, and this is my choice.'"

These women also see Islam as patriarchal and are redefining it in their own image, he says. One told him she was afraid her husband was not very Islamic. Asked why not, she said, "He does not help me clean the house." The women are provoking a small crisis: their scarves prevent them from going to university.

Mahcupyan estimates that a few thousand have been expelled; tens of thousands more do not apply.

Selin Bolme, 32, is a doctoral student and a researcher with an Ankara think tank. She wears jeans and a T-shirt to work and is not religious. But she thinks Turkey's rigid stance on the

"scarf girls" denies them their natural rights.

"A woman who is more successful and smarter than me cannot go to university: how do you explain that? She will turn back to the home, become a mother with three children, maybe become more radical. It's not right," she says.

Emboldened by its landslide win last week, the ruling party may move on behalf of the scarf girls' rights. Change is bound to come, even if Turkey shows that not all cultures modernise in the Western way.

This vibrant country also shows the world that while militant Islam is a great force, the rise of women is greater. There are plenty of reasons to believe the latter will prevail.

James Button is Europe correspondent