

## **THE MANX ELECTION AND THE MANX ECONOMY**

***St John Bates\****

In November, the newly elected members of the Keys will enter the refurbished parliamentary facilities on Bucks Road. The refurbishment will have cost Manx taxpayers over 50% more *per capita* than the new Scottish Parliament building cost Scots taxpayers. The cost of the Scottish Parliament building has been the source of major political controversy in Scotland, and the subject of an extensive judicial inquiry, but here there has been only the mildest public murmuring of discontent at the expense of the local refurbishment. Two conclusions that might reasonably be drawn from this comparison are that it is a reflection of both the low level of serious public involvement in Manx politics and also of the limited and unsystematic scrutiny of political decisions and action.

The low level of serious public involvement in politics can be attributed to many factors. Our size makes it difficult for non-governmental institutions with sufficient independence and expertise to provide a forum and focus for systematic critique to flourish. The professional bodies that might play a part in this, perhaps understandably, prefer private lobbying to judicious public comment, and are anyway primarily concerned with their immediate professional interests. We have an underdeveloped system of party politics, a state of affairs embraced with affection

by the more traditional of local politicians, but which makes it difficult to determine the views and ambitions of independent politicians on matters of major economic and other concern and closes avenues of participation to those who would wish to put their knowledge and experience towards developing strategy which could be evaluated by the electorate.

Despite this, it is not uncommon to find Manx politicians characterised around many a Manx dinner table as people of minimal knowledge, experience or distinction who learn that there is an increasingly easy living to be made from mastery of the ponderous phrase and indulging in some parliamentary happy-slapping at home in intervals from running around the world, usually for no useful purpose that could not be equally well achieved at home by a person with reasonable application. The analysis is unfair to the extent that we are fortunate to have politicians who are, in the main, well-intentioned and hard-working, and our economic future is heavily dependent on attracting economic interest from overseas. However, we have to accept that there are many contemporary Manx politicians whose education, knowledge and experience equip them well to deal with the day-to-day problems of their constituents, but alas equip them more to address the strategic issues of the past rather than the major modern political and economic issues facing the Island. There is perhaps an inevitability that a small island will have a somewhat inexperienced bureaucracy which will be obliged to compensate by buying in expertise to manage major initiatives and a significant proportion of increasingly complex service delivery. We should accept this but be alert to the danger that domestic

debate will focus with relief on micro-management. The background of politicians will exacerbate that because it has a systemic effect. They tend to appoint advisers in their own image, both as civil servants and as external consultants, or simply fail to appreciate what is required to undertake a task.

An advertisement last year in the local press for a “Legislation Manager” in the Department of Transport exemplifies the problem. Applicants were required to have “ at least five years previous experience of drafting legislation or ‘drafting instructions’, and be experienced in the progression of bills and/or sub-ordinate (*sic*) legislation to the Council of Ministers and the Legislature or Tynwald (*sic*) (as appropriate).....A good working knowledge of the organisation and structure of the Manx Government and of the Island’s Constitution, together with an appreciation of the working relationships with the UK/EU and the principles of how International Agreements/Conventions can impact on the Island, is highly desirable.”

And what where the qualifications required for this apparently professionally demanding post (albeit curiously presented in the advertisement)? “Applicants should possess a minimum of 5 GCSE’s at Grade C or above, including English Language, or suitable equivalent qualifications”. An extreme and possibly insignificant example perhaps, and no doubt the successful applicant is doing the job to the best of his or her ability, but the reality is that by any objective criteria a significant proportion of, the earnest and often willing, Manx senior public service are over-promoted and under-qualified.

The result is, not uncommonly, that decisions are being taken by the relatively inexperienced politician advised by the relatively under-qualified civil servant. This may be masked, but not much alleviated, by a trend to corporatism in government, informed by a private – though sometimes institutionalised - network of local advice.

A way to mitigate the consequences of the decisions is to have adequate and systematic parliamentary scrutiny. Unfortunately, despite its long history, Tynwald remains “playing at parliament”, showing an institutional preference for the trappings rather than the task. Virtually all members of Tynwald hold government appointments and therefore experience difficulty in delivering independent scrutiny of government. Draft legislation is presented to members with, by modern standards, minimal background information. It appears that there is no real demand from members for any more. The scrutiny of primary legislation before enactment is haphazard and the scrutiny of draft subordinate legislation is virtually non-existent. Despite a plethora of parliamentary committees, there appears to be little interest, although perhaps it is growing, in systematic committee scrutiny of government policy and its implementation. Instead there appears to be a preference for committee scrutiny of random peripheral matters such as the siting of a single post office or the nomenclature of the Queen’s representative.

Of course it could be argued that this is a purist view and that for our size Manx politics serves us pretty well. However, in the modern competitive world, where many are striving for so much

more, it is no longer sensible to settle for the merely passable. A couple of matters, each of which deserve rather more analysis than is feasible here, serve to illustrate the point.

First, as a result of inadequate analysis of options, in the face of EU and OECD concerns, the Manx Government settled for a “zero-tax policy”, widely publicised before the means of recouping the shortfall in the tax base was worked out; and there is some evidence that economic consequences of redressing this have not been fully analysed either.

Secondly, there have been indications that consideration is being given to the scaling down one of the most creditable achievements of successive Manx governments – the strong financial support for Manx students undertaking tertiary education off the Island. This would be a worrying development in an Island largely dependent on a service economy. A more constructive approach would be introducing incentives to encourage our graduates back to the Island, and a realistic graduate entry programme for the Manx civil service would not be a bad start. I imagine that the £10 million or so spent on such tertiary education presently would not appear such a large figure were it compared with what is currently spent by the government in taking rather routine external advice.

The most obvious immediate response to the cumulative effect of these considerations is a traditional political one. If real progress is to be sustained, those with necessary attributes to address the future must rise from the dinner-table and put their views before the electorate, if the Island is not to become excessively

dependent on a hotch-potch of film production, on-line gambling, the commercial exploitation of space, and whatever else is viewed as the contemporary solution for diversifying the economy.

In any event, we should all ensure that we get from those that do stand for election coherent answers on the issues that really matter to the economic future of the Island.

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