

View from Canberra: Special Election Edition

“Sound and fury signifying nothing” this was the very apt description of the federal election campaign by Kevin Rudd on the eve of a crushing defeat for Labor and his exit from the office of Prime Minister.

While, for reasons yet to be fully understood, the seat count didn't reflect the national vote, Labor suffered its lowest primary vote result since World War 2.

We will leave the tea leave reading about why Labor managed to escape with more than 55 seats to the number crunchers and political whiz kids, but one thing was blindingly obvious about the result. DISUNITY IS DEATH. This adage holds true in politics as it does for our industry. Australians had a gutful of the internal bickering and mixed messages that had come from the Labor Government since June 2010, when an elected Prime Minister was deposed in the dead of a freezing Canberra night without a word of warning.

DISUNITY IS DEATH, which is why it is so important that we circle the wagons around our industry's agenda of ensuring the Federal Government, takes an active role in public transport infrastructure investment and the urban development agenda for our major cities.

The BIC's Moving People agenda brought two big wins during the election campaign. In the fourth week of the campaign then Prime Minister Rudd announced that a Labor Government would appoint a Minister for Cities to oversee capital city strategic planning and better integrate land use and transport planning to improve public transport and reduce congestion. This is a policy approach BIC has championed since 2007 and importantly, while Labor lost the election, the policy is on the table now for any future Labor governments.

The same week saw Senator for Perth Scott Ludlam develop a policy based around significant investment in bus manufacturing and bus services in the Perth area. While they are advocates for public transport, this is the first time the Australian Greens have moved beyond the specific Light Rail only approach.

This is a very encouraging start and with Senator Ludlam holding his Senate spot this is an approach the BIC will expand on so that in 2016 we will see Greens policies targeted at growing bus services and upgrading the Australian bus fleet to improve environmental performance.

Public transport featured throughout the campaign, with the Labor party running on their record investment into public transport and involvement in cities, planning and land use management. We expect that they will continue to push these policies in Opposition. This will act as a key point of differentiation between the parties in the Parliament and this will keep our Moving People agenda in the mix as parliament reconvenes.

Over the next three years the BIC, with the help of Labor and the Greens and the odd mix of small party winners in the Senate will work to leverage some influence in the Moving People space when the new Government attempts to pass legislation through the Senate.

There were some good signs too from the newly elected Coalition Government. The Coalition announced they will retain Infrastructure Australia (IA) and may increase its analytical capacity to determine infrastructure priorities for the nation. IA were developing an National Urban Transport Strategy prior to the election, the BIC anticipate that as a Statutory Authority with its own Board it may be able to continue this agenda. Only time will tell what the Coalition will do with IA and its strategic direction.

In our time in Canberra the BIC has dealt with some members of the incoming Government, especially outer metropolitan and inner city members who believe that there is a role for the Federal Government in the growth of our major cities and how we move people. BIC will be primarily working with this group to influence the Coalitions policy platform running into the next Federal election in 3 years time.

The National Party will hold the Transport and Infrastructure portfolio, with Warren Truss likely to be appointed to this Ministry. The BIC has always had a good relationship with him and his office. BIC will continue to raise the need for Federal Government involvement in how we move people and public transport. Building roads benefits the bus industry, but some conditionality for states to include bus priority and bus lanes where practical would be a good start for the new government.

Over the next three years we need the support of a unified industry in kicking goals with the new government and growing the bus industry share of the passenger transport pie. Are you with us?