Over the past 30 years the average voter perceives a reduction in the efficiency and capacity of Government delivered services. Why would that be so?

This paper tries to identify some of those reasons and why the average Joe & Jane is fed up with the system.

The following insights come from a well retired Engineer/Manager who can recall over 40 years’ service to the State.

In the early 1980’s I worked in a ministers office for a period of approximately 3 years.

The scene should be set in the context of successive Governments perceiving a threat to them by agencies that were technically based and the development of those technologies was diverging from the ideology of the Party/s. One poses the question of what running surface electric vehicles will travel along? Are we still convinced that private enterprise can deliver better service for less cost?

Let us commence in the early 1980’s with the election of the Hawk Government. This administration introduced the new political appointment that of the “political advisor”. These advisors were appointed by the Cain Government in 1983. These appointees became the one and only point to access the Minister, of whatever responsibility, with the total communications of the Department. These gatekeepers were ruthless in their defence of the new order, disagree and redundancy was the immediate reward. (It took a further 8 years to catch up with me)

With this came the demise of the public service as there was no real means for “frank and fearless” advice as everything was vetted by the advisors who, over time assumed more involvement in technical advice regardless of their qualification in that matter.

The name of the game became reduce the public service until all knowledge was dispersed to “compliant consultants” where the knowledge acquired over decades was soon lost due to lack of continuity of projects and ever shortening planning periods.

Government’s of either persuasion lost interest in any project that could not be delivered in the current term of Parliament. It became very apparent to practitioners in the area that long term planning (beyond three years) was a lost cause.

Up until 1980 there had been significant investment in planning the road network with a
30 year planning horizon, Those planning reservations that survived the 1980’s purge have been subsequently ignored or removed (East-West tunnel; Healesville Freeway) with only one new additional new road route proposed by a toll company to maximise their cash flow. Where is the next 30 year vision coming from?

One additional factor that was introduced in the 1980’s was the concept of “consultation”. Initially this was introduced as a mechanism to determine if the idea/project was politically vulnerable. Over time the concept has been expanded to now embrace the notion that Joe or Jane on the trams has “the unique answer” and can follow that solution, no matter how stupid or impractical, to the High Court via a multitude of appeal mechanisms not available to the proponent. These conflicts presented the politicians with a total dilemma and led to a paralysis in the decision making system due to the parish pump political issues, not to the planning merits or the overall public good of the project.

My experience of over 40 years would conclude that the only beneficiary of consultation has been in the consulting industry. I worked as a consultant for 9 years so have an insight to that operation.

The taxpayer has picked up the bill for, delay, cost increase, community division, changes to scope of work, dysfunction and in some cases an inferior end product.

So where do the effects of this mess show up. A few current examples might be instructive.

Water Policy – now based on individual catchment so no strategic overview at a State or Federal level other than on the Murray-Darling basin.

Projections of a increase in population by 2050 of over 20 million extra population has yet to identify a new dams policy whereas the response has been to build limited desalination plants.

Power Policy – now largely delegated to industry. No interest in investing in new base load stations.

Gas Supply - Again up to industry who will cherry pick and sell a maximum of Australia's gas to overseas purchasers for less than the locals pay, that's really smart. It would appear that almost all other gas producing counties have a two tier pricing system, it’s time to practice being a lucky country.

Education – this is where the pollies get really smart and change the curriculum to suit their political ideology. There have been countless examples of really smart political thinking by pollies but the one that takes the cake was that of Joan Kirner who
pontificated the closure of technical schools in the 1990’s so that “everyone should have the opportunity to become a brain surgeon”. We were very lucky that a lot of potential brain surgeons dropped out but we are still catching up on graduating competent tradespersons.

Health - one of the most diverse, costly and rapidly changing services that demands technical expertise at both policy and practitioner levels. Who do we entrust health policy to, not even a Doctor but a political figure . If the advisors are like the ones of my experience then we will continue to get the services and standards they dish up rather than the ones we need.

VicRoads Following the fairly constant criticism on radio and press of the state of the roads generally I did a little bit of investigation on the current employment position. The 2015/16 VicRoads annual report has disclosed in Table 9 the then total employment numbers are 2475. Compare that to the 1983 figures when CRB/Rosta/TRB were merged the figure was, from my involvement in the taskforce numbered 13300 +/- My inside advice is that of the current staff ,approximately 2/3 are employed on L&R duties which leaves a very thin veneer of mostly administrators actually managing the road network across the State. L/R is in favour because it raises revenue.

Can there be any counter argument that this was a deliberate policy disaster and you now hold a (costly) enquiry which has its basic assumption that the organisation has failed.

The failure is assigned to successive Governments who have again failed the taxpayer by underfunding and understaffing the agency and appointing non-qualified leadership so it can deliver on it’s charter. To add insult to injury Governments have proliferate alternative road authorities independent of VicRoads on a selected project basis( East-Link , North/East-Link, City Link etc.)

The one area which highlights the total failure of Governments is in the delivery (or lack of) maintenance systems.Periodic maintenance involved activities such as line marking, shoulder grading ,removal of tree suckers in drains , clearing culverts and drains, replacing damaged guardrails, removal of overhanging tree branches, regrading pavement deformations, removal of hazards in intersection sight triangles and effective signing systems.

Preventative maintenance involved re-sealing the surface on a rotational basis of 7 to 10 years cycle which involved treating approx. 7 to 8 % of the length of the network on an annual basis to prolong the pavement life before a full reconstruction is required.

Currently the recurrence interval only treats between 2 and 3% of the network which puts approx. 5% of the network falling more quickly into disrepair and largely accounts for the current state of the rural roads.

Another obvious similar failure of Govt would relate to the totally inadequate maintenance of school buildings .

No matter what area of State service is involved the combined impact of privatisation and
decimation of the public service is now emerging as a threat to continuity of critical services as we have all enjoyed over past years.

The political appointment of non-technical CEO’s was another disaster. One came up with the brilliant thought bubble to throw out the total printed Policy and Design Manuals which were the accumulated ‘intellectual capital’ gathered over 70 years of the organisation.

This not only affected the organisation but local Government who relied heavily on Vicroads for technical leadership.

A second example of failure is the appointment of a CEO with no technical qualifications/understanding advising a Minister on what to do on engineering/technical issues.

There is more than ample evidence on the ground that the organization has been decimated, not by 10% but perhaps by a factor of 6. The remaining technical knowledge is spread very thinly across the State to be ineffective.

In part the organisation has been forced to employ consultants to prepare the contract documents for major projects. When external agents have to specify your business you know that organisation is in it’s death throws.

In some instances these ”consultants” are from legal or financial backgrounds with little or no knowledge of engineering.

The real question is how could any Govt allow a multibillion dollar investment in the road system fall into disrepair and not show any real concern for repairing that asset?

The implied answer is that every activity of Government must produce a “good news press release” with an attached “photo opportunity” to maintain the image; for maintenance work, such opportunities do not exist so “we don’t fund them.!”

What intelligent engineering authority would agree to the installation of wire rope barriers on rural freeways that limit access to emergency and maintenance vehicles? These roads have been designed with wide medians to provide built in safety.

Let me guess “we are saving lives” but these lives were at the very low probability of coming to grief, check the accident statistics. Once again the taxpayer is taken for an expensive ride.

The parallels in the water, gas, power, public transport, schools and other community service providers are a replica of what has happened to road infrastructure.

How did the community allow this to happen? Apathy is partly to blame.

I offer one further compelling argument that “Government for the People” is dead and buried.

Government has been subsumed to serve the needs of Political parties—not the needs of the country or the people.

The terms of reference to this enquiry strongly imply failure by the authority. The failure is the making of Parliament by deliberately allowing the authority to wither and die by denying it the funds needed to excel.

The is no doubt that the preordained outcome of this enquiry will take the administration of roads back to the 1970’s when the CRB and the MMBW had shared responsibilities.

That arrangement was changed because it did not work, so good good luck with the new order.
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