

## **It's time to question parliamentary theatrics**

After an "*interesting*" year, the people of the Hunter are hoping for the NSW Government to chart a steadier course through 2009.

Nathan Rees, having become Premier at a difficult time for NSW and for the NSW ALP, will have a hard time as he tries to correct the legacy of mismanagement from past Labor years. He will be trying to do this in a new economic climate where climate change and the international financial meltdown have impacts on nearly all aspects of life.

After just three weeks the new Premier was subject to an Opposition motion of no confidence in the Government. The fact that the motion could not be won, and would have no effect even if it were, showed the motion as a pure political stunt. I thought that the motion was unreasonable, particularly after Premier Rees' short time in the job. I believed that people would want to give him a fair go, and as I said in speaking against the motion "it was time for the Government to change, not time to change the Government."

Fifteen weeks on, it's hard to be as charitable. I've waited for signs of change, but I still don't see it. What I see instead is a Government fixated on promoting the image of the Labor Party, rather than delivering the clean start that Premier Rees promised. Even after trimming its advertising budget to \$93m, the Government still seems more concerned about spin than substance.

It's interesting to see Members of Parliament in action and to get to know many of them personally. As with any group, most are decent people. While they might be decent individuals, it is revealing to see their performances in their adversarial roles of Government and Opposition.

Question Time shows the worst behaviour, with theatrics intended to make the Government look wonderful or incompetent, depending on who's performing. Ninety-three members and many staff are tied up for nearly two hours and I think this could be much better used. Less Government self-congratulation and more time for the Opposition to hold the Government to account – could we hope for as much? If it ever happened, politicians might even see an improvement in the public's regard for them!

Parliament's historic Westminster system makes very few concessions to modern decision-making practice and I think it needs updating. It's time to improve the running of both Parliament and the state.

It was heartening to see earlier this year former premier Bob Carr raising this issue for debate. He rightly pointed out the significant changes in the State/Commonwealth relationship since Federation. These include shifts in responsibility away from the states in health, education, industrial relations and taxation. Mr Carr suggested reducing the number of Parliamentarians significantly and I think that it is something that should be explored.

While debate about changing the Constitution to remove state government is a perennial favourite, it is almost impossible to conceive this happening. The states, however, are their own masters - they could make reforms that would drag the parliamentary process out of the 17<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With some recent support for reform by others including Joel Fitzgibbon and Michael Costa, it may be something Nathan Rees could find favour in exploring.