

# Hard work meeting expectations

Let's lift the veil of secrecy over who ministers and department heads meet

**A**CCORDING to Greens MP Rosalie Woodruff last week, Premier Jeremy Rockliff attended a fundraising dinner with the salmon industry recently.

That he did so is unremarkable in one sense – politicians often break bread with potential donors to their cause. But should we not know, in the interests of disclosure and for the purpose of keeping executive government accountable, whom it is Mr Rockliff and other government ministers meet with?

How about this for an idea? Our premier and his or her ministers publish, on a weekly basis, their meeting schedule. This, by the way, is not a radical idea. It happens in the ACT, Queensland and NSW.

Last week the Centre for Public Integrity, an independent think-tank, called for the Victorian government to do likewise.

A glance at the latest meetings schedule summary for NSW Premier Dominic Perrotte shows that in the past few months he has met with News Corp and the NRL on rugby league matters and lobbyists on e-safety, while the planning minister met with Harvey Norman and BlueScope, two major corporates.

The Queensland government ministerial handbook requires ministers to "proactively disclose on a monthly basis portfolio-related



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meetings and events. For any meeting with a registered lobbyist or any person working for the lobbyist in any capacity, other than administrative staff, the diary must also include details about all attendees and a short description of the subject matter of the meeting."

In New Zealand, a healthier democracy than Tasmania by a mile, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's daily schedule is available for all to see. In Tasmania you wouldn't have a clue who ministers and the premier meet or who is lobbying them.

Secrecy prevails, as is par for the course for this jurisdiction.

So if Mr Rockliff were in New Zealand, NSW, Queensland or the ACT, he would have to disclose he attended a "function" or "event" with the salmon industry. The companies attending would be named as well.

It should also be the case that heads of government departments be subject to diary disclosure rules. They are powerful entities in government and regularly lobbied by interest groups and individuals.

Alongside ministerial schedules

and diaries being disclosed, we need to move to release Cabinet papers within 30 days after they are tabled at Cabinet meetings. Again this has been happening in New Zealand for years. As the department of justice in New Zealand describes the rule:

"Cabinet papers and minutes must be proactively published within 30 business days of final decisions being taken by Cabinet, unless there's a good reason not to publish them (whether in part or in full), or to delay the release. The policy doesn't apply to Cabinet papers concerning the appointment of individuals to statutory and other roles."

Queensland is heading down the same path, with Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk announcing that Cabinet papers will be published after 30 days. This initiative was in response to a review of government by eminent academic Peter Coaldrake, who rightly observed that trust in government is enhanced if people know decisions made that impact them are "made in the open and subject to scrutiny".

As the Mercury team knows, the Tasmanian government is obsessed with secrecy. Political reporter David Killick has written about receiving right-to-information documents where nearly all of it is blacked out, or redacted, to use the security state lingo.

So the state of play in Tasmania is



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To build trust in government is a gargantuan task given the cynicism that the community rightly feels about the political class

Columnist Greg Barns says Premier Jeremy Rockliff, pictured here in state parliament, should publish his meeting schedule. In order to be more transparent about who he and his ministers take meetings with. Picture: Chris Klidd

a veil of secrecy over who ministers and their departmental heads meet with and what they discuss, draconian laws that would see any person who leaks a Cabinet document go to jail, and the weakest political party funding laws in the nation.

Mr Rockliff has promised to improve democracy via the increase

in the Legislative Assembly to 35. But while this is an important step, on its own it will not prevent the culture of secrecy prevailing in the halls of executive government.

It would be so easy for this premier – and one would hope and expect this would be a bipartisan issue – to announce he too will insist on making

public meetings and events he and his ministers attend, and what they talk about when such meetings and events take place. And because Mr Rockliff wants to increase faith in government and democracy, he ought to have no problem allowing all to read Cabinet papers.

There are, of course, some data

and some information that should not be disclosed. Meetings with whistleblowers or vulnerable individuals, and discussions that might unfairly smear the reputations of individuals are examples of exemptions that apply in other disclosure regimes.

To build trust in government is a

gargantuan task given the cynicism that the community rightly feels about the political class. But opening the blinds and the windows will help to rebuild civic engagement.

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