

View from Canberra July 2015 – Did you Feel that?

Did you feel that shift over the last month or so, the shift of language, the subtle messaging of politicians transitioning to a new stance on an issue?

We are half way through the Parliamentary term and I have no doubt that the Government is lining up its ducks in a row, and positioning itself from a policy perspective for the next Federal election.

I am not saying there will be an early election, the polls would not support that decision at this time. But, things are on the turn for Abbott, evidenced by the declining popularity numbers for Bill Shorten - 28%, the AWU scandal that we are still to hear the details about at the Royal Commission, a well-received Joe Hockey budget and a series of wins in the final Parliamentary sitting week before the Winter break, such as the pension changes, the renewable energy target and Free Trade Agreement with China.

I think the Prime Minister is playing the long game and the subtle change in language in relation to public transport and investing in our cities would seem to support this.

The ALP hold the trump card when it comes to public transport and cities policy. Anthony Albanese (Albo) and a number of other ALP members led by Andrew Giles, the Member for Scullin (Melbourne) raise the Governments “no policy – no action response” in this space at every opportunity. Senator Janet Rice, the transport spokesperson for the Greens is also keeping the pressure on.

The Abbott Government up until recently has steadfastly stated that “roads is our knitting” and cities and public transport are the responsibility of State and Territory Governments.

But there has been a shift in this message.

At recent events attended by Deputy Prime Minister Truss and Assistant Minister Briggs, such as the AFR Infrastructure Summit in June, discussions have touched upon the Federal Governments investment in to public transport through the Asset Recycling Fund and the need to seriously look at road pricing arrangements. Though to be fair, Mr Briggs was more serious about road pricing as a future funding tool than Mr Truss.

Mr Truss was very happy to launch the Victorian Regional Rail link in mid - June as an important public transport initiative. Sure, the project was funded by the previous Government, but the fearlessness shown by Mr Truss to take credit for it, indicates to me a change in this Governments approach to public transport.

The Prime Ministers speech at the NSW Liberal Party Conference on June 20, explicitly mentioned his Government investment in public transport. This is a long way from his commentary on public transport in his book “Battle Lines” and in my view is another strategic move to take air from the ALP in the public transport policy space running into the next election.

The Government presents the view that Asset recycling allows States and Territories to fund public transport, that funding roads is good for buses, so therefore good for public transport and providing funding for roads to States and Territories frees up money for them to spend on public transport.

At the end of the day, these are at best, indirect funding that relies on a State or Territory to decide to fund public transport. At worst, recognition that public transport is a real election issue that requires the Coalition to have a view. It may be a shallow view at the moment, but, it is an emerging view.

It will be interesting to see what happens at the ALP National Conference at end July, where ALP members vote on the ALP policy platform, and see how far the ALP will go on public transport and cities.

The ALP platform will be the foundation stone of the Federal Election campaign and will in my view see the ALP move to strengthen their policies on direct Federal Government involvement in cities and public transport.

This can only build further heat on the Coalition.