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Molesworth & Featherston In The Loop

STORIES AND UPDATES FROM LAST WEEK'S GOVERNOR'S EDITION

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National's leadership

The sequence

The 'he-did-it-no-she-did-it' blame game for making Don Brash's marriage a political issue has rumbled on because just about everyone accused has had a role.

The episode has been the subject of rumours for months. Nothing new there - parliament runs on rumours; most of them are rubbish and more of them irrelevant anyway.

Trevor Mallard and David Benson-Pope referred to the rumours in interjections during parliament's question time. Mr Benson-Pope might feel he is only giving back some of what he took (National called him a 'pervert' after all, a disgraceful low point in politics which Don Brash should have punished at the time). Mr Mallard had fewer excuses.

Yet those interjections may have counted for little until reporters followed up the threat to escalate a war of grubby personal attacks. Once the threat was made reporters were always going to want to know what the stories were that were being referred to.

Meanwhile, rumours about Helen Clark's family had been raised with her (stories didn't run because they were wrong). Some felt it was only fair the pressure should be applied to the other side as well. So late in the week (a week ago) Don Brash was asked by reporters about the rumours referred to in the House. Those questions brought the issue out in his marriage. It also brought the issue onto his colleague's radar.

Dr Brash raised the issue of personal attacks himself in caucus. It was then Brian Connell asked directly whether Dr Brash had been lying to his wife. And it was only after that caucus things spilled into public when the story was fuelled by two factors: Off the record confirmation from rivals positioning for a change of leadership, and Dr Brash's own handling of the issue. If he had refused comment on the first newspaper reports - and fired back at personal attacks - queasy news media would not have drawn the story out for a week.

His early handling of the episode - showing again his poor political radar - is more damaging than the substance. His colleague's reluctance to say he is secure in the leadership shows the pack is circling.



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When ▶ 21 & 22 September 2006

Where ▶ Langham Hotel Auckland

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- ▶ Capacity building NGOs and engaging the corporate sector
- ▶ Differential Response Model trials and the nationwide roll-out in 2007
- ▶ Indigenous models for responding to family violence
- ▶ The interface of key legislation in preventing violence
- ▶ Best practice intervention methods
- ▶ Reviewing *Child Poverty Action Group v Attorney-General*
- ▶ Comparing domestic and international responses to care and protection
- ▶ Assessing the theory and practice of supervised contact
- ▶ How to make a family group conference work
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Weekend update

Rolling average poll steady

No new data in our rolling poll of polls this week, so the numbers are:

	Percent	Seats
National	43.12	55
Labour	40.65	51
Greens	6.37	8
NZ First	3.30	0
Maori	2.53	4
United Future	1.60	2
Act	1.16	1
Progressive	0.24	1

It is a 122 seat House with overhang seats for Jim Anderton and the Maori Party.

Media tattle

Radio New Zealand staff have been given some details of the state broadcaster's audience ratings, which show an overall easing. However there was some disgruntled muttering because breakdowns show by show were not given, making it impossible to judge whether the recent revamps and new presenters on 9 to Noon and in the afternoon in particular are having any impact either way.

We reported last week that we could not get upset TVNZ news boss Bill Ralston chose to send a string of obscenities down the line at a Herald on Sunday reporter. But knock us down with a feather when a bowdlerised transcript of the diatribe emerged. (More dots and dashes than a morse code message, though we managed to decipher c--- and f --- easily enough!) Can it be true that the estimable Jane Bowron, whose name appears on the media column that featured the full horror, wanted such a silly thing printed? We hear not and that it might have produced an – ahem – parting of the ways when the editor saw merit where la Bowron saw gratuitous rubbish.

Parliamentary funding

We would not want for a minute to suggest that Labour did the right thing with its pledge card funding - and in particular it is hard to see how it did not willfully breach the spending cap when it knew the view of chief electoral officer David Henry.

However, we think it might be time to say that in some regards the auditor-general and the supporting legal opinion from the former solicitor-general have got some deeply worrying aspects.

We think the implied view that inside our elected representatives are a) a good parliamentarian and b) a venal political hack, is worrying. They are one and the same person and their activities as parliamentarians and their electioneering activities overlap hugely. To try to separate them is a herculean task.

Parties have long believed it is a parliamentary - as well as an electioneering - function to tell voters what you have done, and what your policies are. That, after all, is what they will implement through parliament if they get there. (On the other hand the argument that incumbency gives parties a huge advantage unless there are rules around how they use bulk-funded money does suggest a tight test is needed.)

On a more specific level, the determination that the Green Party's Greentimes newsletter - which came out all year as well as during the campaign period - was caught around election time but acceptable at others has got to be wrong. That means there are probably plenty of other newsletters and information sheets across all parties and MPs that should not have been caught too.

We also think the ruling that where there was mixed information - some electioneering, some acceptable parliamentary fact spreading - is flawed. The solicitor general said there were three methods of determining how they should be funded; by dominant purpose, by apportionment or by the tainting view, i.e. that even a line of electioneering taints the whole document and means it was unlawful to fund it from parliamentary cash. Reversing his logic and applying his ruling, it would mean that much of this "mixed" material will involve political parties' funds subsidising parliamentary activities. That can't be right.

Since apportionment would be a huge and imprecise exercise, surely a "dominant purpose" test would have been the fairest way to go. We await with interest his final report to see if he has become more flexible. .

Education

We spend less than per student on education each year than most developed countries but some indicators show kiwi kids are doing okay, a new OECD summary of education performance shows. The OECD's Education at a Glance 2006 report shows we drop out of degree courses more than most countries and our tertiary fees are higher.

New Zealand is above average for the number of years spent in education, but fewer of our young people complete secondary education compared. Only less affluent countries like Chile, Spain, Brazil, Turkey and Mexico rank behind us for kids finishing high school.

All the same - kiwi kids are better at maths than average kids in developed countries.

In a finding that affects debate over school choice in New Zealand, the OECD study shows variation between schools is a lot lower here than elsewhere - in other words, when it comes to reaching your potential it matters less in New Zealand what school you went to.

New Zealand spends about twenty-five percent less per student each year than the OECD average. But spending less doesn't mean lower achievement. For example, the cumulative expenditure per student of Korea and the Netherlands are below the OECD average and yet both were among the best-performing countries in maths tests.

And while our total spending is low, the proportion of the government's budget spent on education is much higher than in most developed countries. It has rocketed up since 1995, when it was already well above average. Only Mexico spends a higher proportion of public funds on education.

Tertiary students nevertheless get a raw deal. Private spending on tertiary education in NZ is higher than in most developed countries. Our tertiary fees are very high compared to the average of OECD countries (very few European countries charge tertiary students at all).

Tertiary institutions have often claimed they need to charge top up fees to ensure overall spending on tertiary education is sustained - the report debunks their claim. Countries with low or no tertiary fees do not spend less on the tertiary sector. It's probably no coincidence that countries with lower tertiary fees and higher completion rates have higher GDPs.

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