

Politics in the Year of the Rat

David Rhodes

Mix two parts COVID with one part election year and garnish with global protectionism and climate change. Aside from being a recipe for a full plate, this past Year of the Rat tested the industry like few before. So, what did we learn?

Well, we discovered just how quickly and extensively the Government can assume near wartime powers. Under the unchallengeable banner of saving both lives and jobs the Government passed, literally overnight, legislation governing taxation, social security, immigration, capital expenditure, official information, tenancies and public health.

A short extract from the Imprest Supply Act sums it up – ‘Capital expenditure may, during the 2019/20 year, be incurred in advance of appropriation in relation to any Vote.’ Capped of course. Let’s say no more than \$10 billion.

Invoking these powers gave our industry some of the protection it vitally needed. Many of our contractors peered into the abyss and would have gone there were it not for government measures. However, it will be equally reassuring to see those powers put back in the bottle once we have COVID under control.

We rediscovered in the crisis, when the discretionary is stripped away from the essential, that you are left looking at the bedrock of the economy and that largely comprises the primary sector. Early in the emergence of the virus we had collective Ministers stressing to us their reliance on primary production businesses to restore the economy and indeed take a more prominent role beyond COVID. We also learnt how quickly and effectively the industry can cooperate when it needs to. The short-order development of COVID forestry safety protocols, spearheaded by FISC and FICA, is testimony to that.

We observed also how exciting life can be when a minor party needs a pre-election boost to its profile. Slow walking, but not so slow talking, Jones and his self-titled Log Mongers’ Bill left us only five working days for submissions and a couple more for a hand-picked select committee. The Bill was both good and bad. Rose-smelling elements of the Bill dealing with increased professionalism and protection were wrapped up in an omnibus, uncosted, package that felt like something the cat had left behind.

What followed had to follow, but was divisive for the industry and could have been avoided. We had a reminder that haste and policy setting are not good companions. In *Unbridled Power? An Interpretation of*

New Zealand’s Constitution and Government, Geoffrey Palmer included a chapter entitled ‘The Fastest Law in the West’. This was not a compliment, and we should have moved on from those days.

With the COVID crisis and an election campaign in lock-step, there was only media room for the party making the calls. Both James Shaw and Shane Jones talked to me about the challenge to gain any sunlight when living under the media halo of the PM. Minister Jones was a champion for the sector and deserves to be recorded as such. He passionately believed in increased benefit for New Zealand, communicated strongly with the sector at all levels, defended and promoted forestry, reinvigorated forest policy within government and invested some patea.

And this was another lesson. Under MMP politics the influence of a minor coalition partner is inversely proportional to its size. The One Billion Trees programme was such an illustration.

One Cabinet Minister who wanted the forestry portfolio was followed by another who desired it and had forestry credentials. But the new Labour Government’s increased support meant it had fresh rural friends it didn’t want to alienate. This encouraged Ministerial suggestions that we may need to look at new controls on forest planting. Ironically, rules that dictate what can be grown on private property have almost zero support by anyone truly representing the primary sector.

Classically, the Government has many agendas running at the same time. It wants to remain on-side with the rural sector, but it wants to meet climate change goals as well. It plans to reduce agriculture emissions and have more native planting, but it also intends to employ more people and generate higher returns from the primary sector.

As the Year of the Rat came to an end, the Climate Change Commission delivered its 180-page blueprint for resolving these tensions. Exotic plantation forestry is its key to filling carbon gaps until at least 2035. The Commission is budgeting on 380,000 ha of new forestry to remove a huge volume of emissions by 2050 – more than a quarter of New Zealand’s current total. It was yet another reminder that no matter how much you play around with the variables of the emissions reduction equation it cannot be solved without the forestry and the wood products industries playing a key role.

Maybe it’s fitting we are now in the Year of the Ox.

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