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THE AMOS REPORT

What happens when you've held positions of authority with increasing degrees of seniority, been a Government Minister with a cluster of demanding portfolios, been instrumental in breathing life into seacage aquaculture and rethinking forestry policy, lived in Brisbane after losing your parliamentary seat, moved back to Hobart eight years later to sit on various Boards - only to become increasingly frustrated by the apparent failure of the new guard in government to resolve longstanding problems?

Do you stay away from the issues and bow out gracefully, accepting that your time in the political limelight is over? Or do you sit down, take a deep breath, and write a report that makes very clear where you think Tasmania's economic future lies? This is the line that Julian Amos has taken.

'Tasmania: Present Prospects, Opportunities and Constraints' arose out of Dr Amos' conviction that our State is facing a crisis. This crisis isn't just a reflection of current government budget woes, or folding forestry industry. In his mind it goes deeper than any of these problems, which are but current symptoms of it. The real crisis stems from two sources: a lack of vision from hamstrung politicians who should be leading us, and an institutionalised muddle within senior ranks of our civil service. There are other factors, and in his report he isn't shy of identifying them, but these are the main culprits.



Julian Amos

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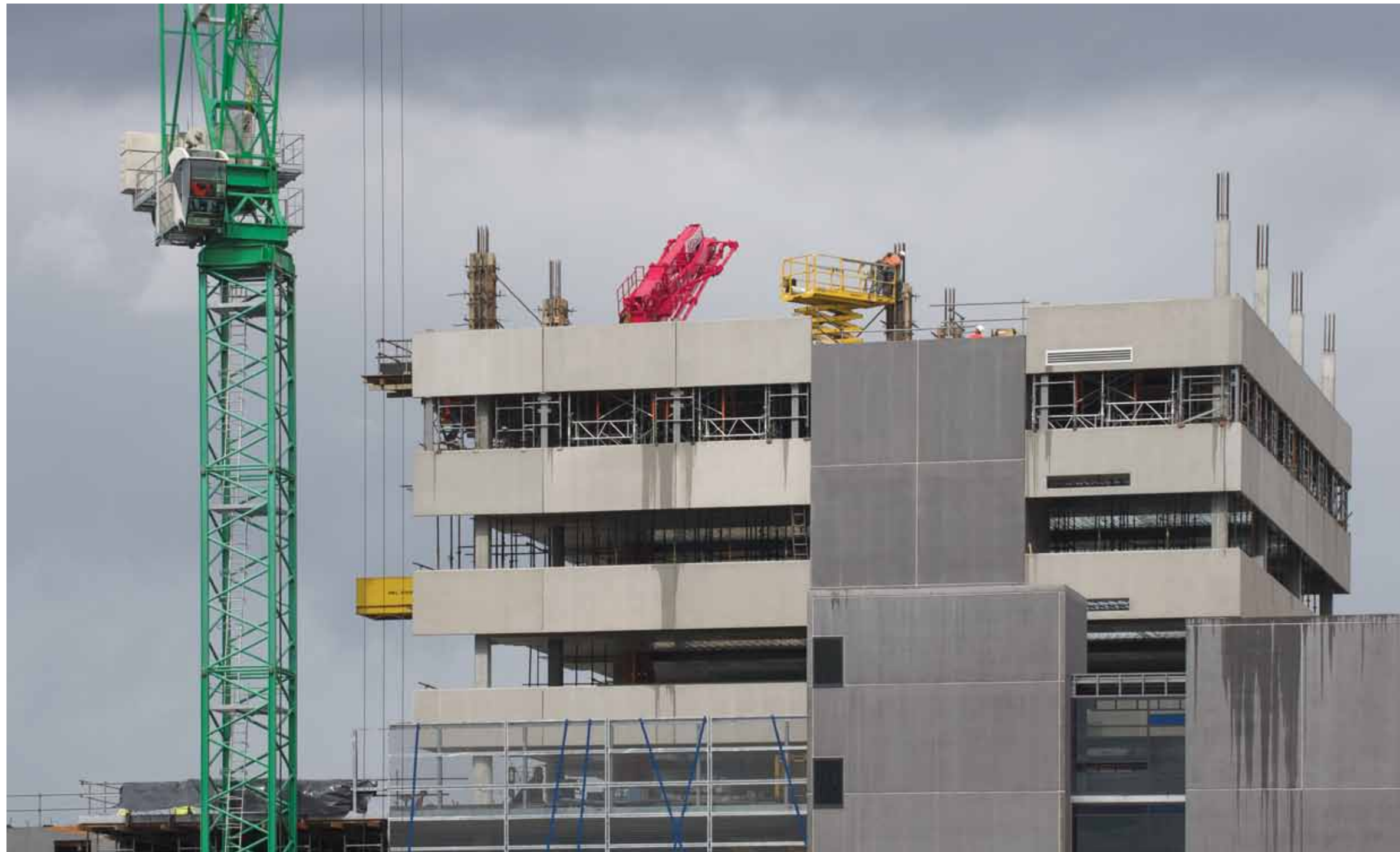
After talking directly, intimately and confidentially to 63 people who are currently running Tasmanian industries and commercial operations, he was struck by how many of them found it difficult to speak their mind openly for fear of ruffling feathers. Now that he works for himself and shares no such qualms, Julian Amos is able to give his findings clearly and boldly. Following an Introduction and Overview (economic, demographic, budget), there are sections on Government Effectiveness (parliamentary reform, accountability, human resources, government solidarity), The Need for a Vision (governing to a plan, areas of economic engagement), Barriers to Effectiveness (budget matters, planning, and disruptive protest action), Provision of Infrastructure, Sectoral Considerations (picking winners, sustainable competitive advantage, promoting the Brand), Specific Industry Sectors (irrigation and agriculture, aquaculture, forestry, tourism, manufacturing, health IT and renewable energy). Thorough and wide-ranging, it's a report enriched by a lifetime of experience and insider knowledge, along with a prodding insistence that Tasmania's economic future deserves our full and proper attention.

Unlike forestry protesters who chain themselves to machinery or drape themselves over old-growth trees, Julian Amos has chosen the more civil vehicle of a published report to express his consternation at the present state of our economy. However this report isn't simply a vehicle for his current concerns. Its power comes from the 63 conversations he had prior to writing it - with people in industry, acquaintances from emerging markets, along with older colleagues from the forestry, agriculture and energy sectors. The resulting document is long and rich, at one moment incensed with a particular detail, at the next an eagle-eyed sweep of Tasmania's future as informed by its economic past.

There is however one thing over which he sweeps again and again before alighting fully on it: our relatively small population. Above all else it's this, he believes, that presents a barrier to our economic progress and enhanced quality of life. Continue as we are and, he reckons, all the indices of economic progress take a dive. Increase or even double our population and the mercury lifts in every area (ie schools start opening rather than closing). 'We should be encouraging a lot more people to come and help us grow', he says, 'it's that simple'. Instead of getting ruthless about cutting State costs and obsessing about income, in his view it's far better to focus on wealth-generating enterprises which combine the fantastic resources Tasmania has to offer with the entrepreneurial spirit that so often drives private enterprise in this State.

There is however a strand of the report that, as a reader, you get the feeling comes directly from Julian Amos. Clearly he's angry about the way the present political system, with its shared balance of power between Labor and the Greens, is working - reserving particular ire for the behaviour of the Greens in Cabinet. Meeting the fundamental needs of Tasmanians and caring for wilderness are both, he's the first to admit, commendable aims. But in his opinion we're fooling ourselves if we think that government can be devoted to the public interest 'while indulging in environmental causes that detract from the public interest'.





The problem with the Labor/Green alliance isn't, in his mind, the fact of sharing power. The problem is that because each party frames its policies according to starkly different paradigms any agreement they do manage to make is inevitably a compromise. Labor's paradigm recognises the right that everyone should share an equality of opportunity and, further, that those who slip through the system deserve a soft landing in a social safety net. The Greens' paradigm, in contrast, puts the welfare of the planet before all else, which in Julian Amos' view means that however much they say they care about laying off 3500 forestry workers, their first loyalty is to nature conservation 'and not to those who derive their living from the development of our natural resources'. Agreeing to lay off 3500 forestry workers is, in Amos' view, an immoral act, 'an act of eco-vanity this State can ill afford and that ultimately achieves nothing'.

One risk of writing a report openly critical of current ways of doing things is that it may be interpreted as negative. But actually Julian Amos is an unqualified optimist. He's convinced that we already have everything we need to make this State work - to make it great, even. Where we fall down is when it comes to vision, a clear and ambitious sense of why we're here and where we're going as a State - a vision of our purpose and identity as Tasmanians, really.

Julian Amos is however decidedly on the offensive in discussing weaknesses arising from our civil service. Many areas of civil service and government are, in his opinion, not very good at implementing policy - at making things happen, at execution. 'What', he asks, 'is the first thing a newly-appointed senior civil servant will do after taking up office?' And answers his own question, 'He appoints an assistant'. Where, he asks, is the follow through?

Having stuck his neck out by writing this report, the real question is whether he's stuck it out far enough. Other ex-politicians like Michael Aird, Paul Lennon and Michael Field exited politics gracefully, assuming that the current 'mob' has the right to get on with things without interference. Dr Amos in contrast, slightly younger and still bullish, is not yet ready to exit left.

And then when things go wrong, with whom does the buck stop? Why, he wants to know, is there not more accountability at the top?

Look at healthcare, he suggests. The big public hospitals have installed not one but three IT systems to service the State. The result? It's still impossible to transport a patient between Launceston and Hobart and, on their arrival, for the specialist to bring up the relevant file on the screen. Confidentiality issues aside, administrators in the big public hospitals aren't talking to each other in ways that might lead to the streamlining of the running of each. And it's not just that they neglect to do so, it's that they protect their own interests by not communicating, by not being transparent. Why else, he asks, would a straight-shooting CEO, recently appointed to the RHH, be so quickly unappointed after making his initial criticisms known?

Or, another example, the bottom falls out of the woodchip market - or so the media would have us believe. But no, says Dr Amos, the market for woodchips - as for veneer and lumber - is still very much there. The Chinese and the Japanese are still buying woodchips from countries like Chile and South Africa, and even other Australian suppliers - just not from Gunns. Why not? According to him Gunns lost their share of the woodchip market out of a failure of sensitivity to cultural differences, plus the strategic lobbying of environmental groups. Losing their share of the Asian market reflects Gunns' failure to respect the unspoken rules that dictate how business is carried out in China and in Japan. Dealing in Asian markets is as much about relationships, Julian Amos points out, as it is about legal niceties such as contracts, and requires something more than blokey salesmanship. It would appear that Gunns, partly due to a series of local takeovers, just hasn't been up to this.

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So far nearly everyone in power in Tasmania who matters has seen this report - and with any luck read it - without any adverse comments. But what does this really mean? Just as he's received no adverse comments, neither has he received an invitation from anyone of consequence to debate his findings further. As he's well aware there's always a danger that, as with any large private report, it will pass over the relevant people's desks before being duly stacked, with all the other important reports, on a side table.

Even five years ago this report would not have been written. Tasmania's prospects looked good, verging on buoyant. Forestry was still in the ascendant, tourism was drawing the crowds, the Australian dollar was in line with other currencies, and the Tasmanian electorate was pretty happy with how things were going. Put another way, five years ago it didn't matter that the State didn't have a long-term vision because things were going pretty well anyway. But now that they're not going so well, Julian Amos is adamant that the State's lack of vision matters a lot.

He has thrown down his gauntlet in the form of this report. But will it be picked up?