

BIC COLUMN – OCTOBER 2008
TURNBULL TURNS TABLES IN CANBERRA

New Leadership: New Directions

After months of speculation the tables have turned on the Liberal party and Federal Opposition leadership with Malcolm Turnbull taking over the reigns from Dr Brendan Nelson.

Mr Turnbull won the leadership vote by 45-41 votes, the same margin in the first leadership contest between Dr Nelson and Turnbull following the Coalition's defeat at the 2007 Federal Election.

What does this mean for Mr Turnbull?

The narrowness of the win means Mr Turnbull must cut through or he will get cut. His leadership, like Dr Nelson's before him, is under the microscope. A failure to claw back ground from the Government in the polls and in the public domain, with a national polling average showing a significant lead to the Government, will destabilise his leadership.

Early signs in the media and the polls have been good, but not astounding for Mr Turnbull and in order to make any impact with Australian voters, who are notorious for their reluctance to oust first term Governments, the Opposition Leader needs to show some real leadership and vision as we head towards times of economic uncertainty.

Since the last Federal Election the BIC has argued that Federal Government investment and leadership in public transport is a real avenue to display forward vision to the electorate and deliver real benefits to Australians.

The BIC has met with Mr Turnbull during his time in Parliament and through discussions with him, as well as public statements he has made, have found him willing to break away from the Coalition's traditional unwillingness to get involved in public transport at a Federal level.

In a recent interview with Ed Blakey, Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Sydney, Mr Turnbull outlined his belief in the importance of public transport:

"...they've all got cars; the roads aren't big enough – its congestion, congestion, congestion. The only way to support higher density of development is to have better public transport. You've got to get people out of their cars."

Not only in word does Mr Turnbull support public transport, but also in deed! He has taken public transport to the city from his electorate office throughout his time as a Parliamentarian. In the same interview he had this to say about his use of public transport:

"People seem to be fascinated that as a politician I catch buses and trains. Some people think I do this as some kind of heroic martyr for the virtues of public transport but where my office is you cannot park and you get caught in traffic. This morning I went to the city for a meeting. I walked a block to the train station, caught a train and got off at Town Hall."

This all bodes well, at the moment, for public transport to become a greater priority for the Coalition.

The announcement of the new Shadow Cabinet was an encouraging first sign from the Coalition that they may seek to develop a positive forward strategy in the public transport and infrastructure area.

Party bigwig and key numbers man, the Hon Andrew Robb MP has been appointed to a new super shadow portfolio of Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and COAG and Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader on Emissions Trading Design.

What this long title means in practice is yet to be determined, but it's a heartening sign that the Coalition is looking to hold the Government to account on their undertakings about supporting urban infrastructure and focusing on COAG, which has a strong focus on addressing urban congestion and climate change and identifies public transport as part of the solution.

The development of sustainable cities is a key element of urban infrastructure improvement and to that end Mr Turnbull has named former Howard Government Minister, the Hon Bruce Billson MP, as the Shadow Minister for Sustainable Development and Cities.

Mr Billson has a long record of excellent performance as a Minister and a Parliamentary Secretary and the BIC will be speaking to him.

The BIC's messages on the role of public transport in sustainable urban growth was outlined in our 2003 submission into the Inquiry on Sustainable Cities and we will continue to highlight those points to Mr Billson and the Minister's office.

The recognition of urban infrastructure and sustainable urban development from both sides is a sign that the major parties are starting to recognise the interconnection between transport and other areas of social and economic policy; how the way Australians move around our cities, regions and remote areas is fundamental to our productivity and well being as individuals and as a nation.

In the months ahead the BIC will continue to work with the Government and Opposition to convert a lot of the enthusiasm we have seen from both sides about the Federal Government taking a role in public transport from rhetoric to reality.

With the budgeting process for the 2009 Federal Budget about to kick off and a Senate that has demonstrated a willingness to be hostile, the closer we get to a bi-partisan position on investment in public transport, the more likely we are to see positive outcomes for public transport infrastructure projects throughout Australia.

The BIC has already engaged with Mr Turnbull as opposition leader and we have invited him to speak at the BIC National Conference to outline the new Opposition's vision for the Federal Government's role in public transport.

We wait to see if Mr Turnbull can make it, but regardless of whether he can he will be hearing about the policy outcomes from the Conference in the months ahead.

At the same time we have sought meetings with Senators Xenophon, Fielding and the Greens during October to ensure that the Senate, if push comes to shove, will have the support of the Senators with the balance of power.

BIC National Conference

National issues and the goings on at a Federal level will be a key focus of sessions at the National Conference.

The theme for this year's Conference is Moving People – A National Plan, and focuses on our efforts to see a National Moving People Strategy developed for Australia with Federal Government involvement and support.

One of our lead sessions will focus on the “National Transport Agenda under the Rudd Government”, and will feature Leslie Riggs, Executive Director of the National Transport Strategy division at the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government and Nick Dimopoulos, CEO of the National Transport Commission.

The session is a key to the future focus by the Federal Government. The Federal Department has been restructured to have a focus on issues like better cities, urban congestion and public transport for the first time.

At the same time the NTC had been tasked by Minister Albanese to co-ordinate the development of a National Transport Plan, which for the first time has a focus on public transport, not just freight. This session is a “looking glass” into where we are headed as an industry.

This will follow a Keynote address from the Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia, the Hon Gary Gray OAM.

The Parliamentary Secretary will be representing the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon Anthony Albanese MP, who will be overseas at the time.

The keynote address will take a focus on Infrastructure Australia and the Building Australia fund and what this means for the role of the Federal Government in public transport.

A highlight of the Conference will be a presentation from International Guest Speaker Art Guzzetti, Vice President of Policy at the American Public Transport Association. Mr Guzzetti will outline the 2050 visioning process for public transport that is taking place in the United States and hopefully provide some ideas for our own Governments.

The 2008 BIC National Conference Brochure is available on the home page of the Ozebus website to download the brochure go to www.ozebus.com.au and follow the links on the website.

There may be some real surprises in store so I encourage you to attend and get informed about the future direction of the industry under the new Government and how it will affect your bottom line.

On top of all the informative sessions, we have an excellent social program with the Mercedes and Scania Gala Dinners, and the Iveco Big Arvo Out and Bus Auction.

The location, timing and program for this year's Conference make it the perfect opportunity to bring the wife and kids and make this a family holiday as well as a working event.

So register now, plan your trip, get in early for accommodation and flights and show your support for the industry. I'll see you there.

To register for the Conference go to the Ozebus website www.ozebus.com.au