

Andrew Barr and Canberra Labor's ministry little more than a retread

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Editorial

With one minister out of contention and just two backbenchers left to draw on to fill an expanded cabinet of seven (the other having declared herself unavailable for higher duties) Andrew Barr's options for ministerial renewal ahead of an election year were always limited. So the main point of interest in Friday's reshuffle was not in who would be joining the frontbench (Meegan Fitzharris and Chris Bourke being the only candidates) but in what jobs would be given to whom.

In the event, the most striking aspect of the reshuffle is the prominence of the portfolios handed to Ms Fitzharris, a former staffer in Mr Barr's office. At the relatively young age of 44 and with just over a year's service in the Legislative Assembly, the Molonglo MLA will become the Minister for Transport and Municipal Services, and the Minister for Higher Education, Training and Research. On July 1, when Transport Canberra (the new agency tasked with the co-ordination of public transport) comes into being, Ms Fitzharris will effectively have charge of the issue which might well determine whether Labor retains power or not – light rail. In a further sign of Mr Barr's confidence in Ms Fitzharris' abilities (and his belief perhaps that she might replace the soon-to-depart Simon Corbell as Health Minister), Ms Fitzharris has been appointed his assistant, with responsibility for, among other things, community health services.

For the other "newcomer", Chris Bourke (he served on Katy Gallagher's frontbench before making way for the inclusion of Greens MLA Shane Rattenbury as a minister in 2012) the portfolio responsibilities are more modest – Children and Young People, Disability, Small Business and the Arts, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

Shane Rattenbury, having being "deprived" of municipal services to Ms Fitzharris and sport to Yvette Berry, might be considered to have been the reshuffle's biggest loser. But he has picked up the key education portfolio held by Joy Burch until her recent resignation. His diligence, industry and leadership should prove valuable in addressing some of the issues left untended during Ms Burch's troubled tenure.

Mr Barr's presence in the ministry looms large – as it has done since he succeeded former chief minister Katy Gallagher in December 2014, and perhaps even before. He has retained the key treasury, economic development and urban renewal roles, and has signalled he will be closely involved in "a range of initiatives in 2016", including CTP insurance system reforms. He's also indicated that that "jobs, tax reform and economic diversification will be a major focus for me in 2016".

That Mr Barr hopes to occupy this ground when the election campaign starts to gather pace mid-year is unsurprising. These are difficult and trying economic times for the territory, and the risk for Labor is that voters will tune out if they perceive the party is not paying sufficient attention to bread and butter issues. Indeed, it may well be that jobs and the economy rather than the traditional territory election issues of health and education, dominate the campaign.

The dilemma for the Barr government, however, is that its light rail proposal threatens to undermine any claims it may have to superior economic management. In fairness to Labor, the private-public partnership model it's proposed will limit the cost impact on the public purse, initially at least. Unfortunately for Mr Barr, the project's much touted \$800 million price tag is now firmly fixed in the public's mind as the bill which it will be required to settle, and at time when cost of living pressures are mounting. And if details of the PPP contract do alleviate concerns, Labor is still on weak ground in regards to why it's chosen to invest heavily in light rail when the Productivity Commission and Infrastructure Australia, among others, have either disputed the business case for light rail or said that buses represent an equally efficient but cheaper public transport option.

The message implicit in Ms Fitzharris' elevation to prominence in the Barr government is that Labor's energy, enthusiasm and vigour remains undiluted after nearly 15 years in government. Closer examination, however, reveals a team that's little different to its predecessor, with some ministers exhibiting unmistakable signs of intellectual tiredness and/or pedestrian administrative abilities.

An expanded Assembly offers greater potential for Labor renewal. But for the moment, this retread promises voters little other than reinforcing public perceptions that Mr Barr is firmly in charge and that he has the government's destiny entirely in his hands.