

# Brumby solid in first quarter but some risky signs

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Building on the Bracks policy base, he has tidied up some loose ends.

He is consolidating Labor's position as the natural government in a business-friendly state.

In doing so, Mr Brumby is gradually sucking up the oxygen that the Liberals need to differentiate their product in an electorally competitive fashion.

He has signalled a go-ahead on channel dredging in Port Phillip Bay, ensuring Melbourne retains its standing as a world-class port.

He has indicated he will lift the embargo on genetically-modified crops. This has been denying new technology to farmers and gradually reducing Australian agricultural competitiveness.

Brumby has hinted at an acceleration of road building. This should re-weight existing priorities whereby 80 per cent of spending is on public transport which is responsible for only 8 per cent of trips.

He is challenging the state school teachers to lift their game. This requires comparative assessments of schools, a procedure the school teachers have vigorously resisted.

He has even set up a water inquiry, creating an option to cancel the Desalination White Elephant if he has the stomach to confront the green fanatics.

Once he became premier, Mr Brumby immediately implemented important administrative changes. He took away the planning portfolio from Rob Hulls and gave it expanded responsibilities under a dedicated minister, Justin Madden.

As planning minister from 2005, Mr Hulls had presided over a decline in new housing starts.

By the first half of 2007 sluggish approval activity led to the average cost of a housing block rising to \$130,000, up from around \$65,000 in 1999. Victoria's relatively cheap housing was gradually disappearing.

Mr Brumby has also put pro-development and business-friendly ministers into the key portfolios of energy, roads, and water.

Conservatives remain in control of the key expenditure-restraining treasury and finance portfolios, and he proved willing to take on key public sector employees like nurses who were threatening to blow the wages budget.

Risks remain, however. The ALP too often places its favoured sons and daughters in key roles where they can do little immediate damage. But often these roles have major long-term impacts.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the police force.

Danger signs are also clear in judicial appointments. Attorney-General Hulls has scant respect for

traditionally administered justice and has been stacking the courts with fellow sceptics, most recently human rights advocate Lex Lasry and former ACTU official Iain Ross.

Most people just want courts that protect them and their property, not judges on a mission who endlessly search for underlying causes to excuse criminals' actions.

The administration of justice and policing are essential functions for state governments. Getting things wrong by being soft on crime can undermine society's law-abiding nature. That's bad for business and a dreadful prospect for the community as a whole.

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