



# Beware polities bearing gifts

## Modest Member **Scott Ryan**



**T**he new year is a time for thought and reflection, personally and professionally. For a politician heading into an election year it is particularly so. Having just experienced my first Christmas as the parent of a toddler, I couldn't help but think of the parallels to the coming year.

The lead-up to every Christmas is all about goodies and gifts. Children explain how good they have been and look forward to Father Christmas depositing their wish list.

January is full of stories about credit card debt, paying the bills and children going back to school. After all, who wants to talk about the bills before Christmas?

For those who believe government is the source of wealth or can solve every ill, an election is like the lead-up to Christmas.

Vested interests, often described as "stakeholders", make claims upon the apparently bottomless public purse. These interests range from the genuinely well intended, trying to alleviate real social disadvantage, to the misguided, believing that politicians can suspend or amend the laws of economics, to the malevolent, hiding their own

personal interests behind claims of community or national interest and believing themselves entitled to compulsory gifts of millions of dollars from other Australians.

Of course, there are experts' reports and modelling to justify claims made. These are the equivalent of our children explaining how well behaved they have been.

Those questioning program effectiveness or expense are dismissed as being too narrowly focused on costs rather than the true value of the new program, of dismissing the disadvantage suffered

or the experts quoted.

The media often supports this approach, as those who constantly query expense and effectiveness are accused of being carping, simply repeating questions about how much and who pays. That makes for boring newspapers and radio. But extraordinary claims about the benefits of new spending and programs are good news fodder.

Heading into this election year, the current Labor government would like you to focus on their supposed gifts, rather than the costs. A brightly wrapped Gonski and shiny new National Disability Insurance Scheme are the most oft-quoted. Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her ministers dismiss questions about whether \$5 billion is the best way to improve our schools or queries regarding the implementation of the

NDIS, the largest social program since Medicare, as if they are illegitimate or the questioner somehow doesn't care about education or assistance as much as they do.

However, unlike my toddler son's Christmas surprise, Santa doesn't bring gifts to voters. We all have to pay for them through taxes, either now or in the future. Just like every household and family in January, we need to pay the bill for Christmas at some point. Just as if we run up too

much debt ourselves, we must make savings elsewhere. If the budget is not sustainable, there will eventually be cuts. The financial reckoning cannot be put off, it can only be delayed. If a program is vital, then questions about how it will be paid for are just as important.

Yet unlike most of us in the lead-up to each Christmas, this government has not been putting away a little each week to cover the expenses of the new programs it is

bragging about. It has actually been doing the opposite, running up debt.

And here is where another important Christmas lesson comes in. Trust. Unlike Christmas, while

the election might be the gift-promising season, the gifts don't arrive until afterwards. You are required to take politicians on trust that the gifts will arrive.

So when making an assessment about whether to believe the promises of gifts in the years ahead, a hard-nosed assessment of the record of the person promising is astute. I am therefore a little mystified by the Labor government seeking to make promises the core of its bid for the public trust.

After all, I don't recall asking for a carbon tax at the last election. I distinctly recall a very explicit promise that I wouldn't get one.

And we are still missing our long-promised budget surplus, which I remember being told only weeks ago was still guaranteed. Then again, Treasurer Wayne Swan did say that we weren't getting a surplus this year as we hadn't paid enough tax. Maybe we were all naughty in that sense.

So in the lead-up to the election, be sceptical about a government with a record of not delivering the gifts it promises, and how it will pay the bills or simply run up the credit card bill even higher. In the end, programs and gifts have to be paid for. Eventually, we all have to stop believing in Father Christmas (just don't tell my son yet please).

■ *Senator Scott Ryan is opposition parliamentary secretary for small business and fair competition.*

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