



# Developing and Implementing Educational Policy in a Hung Parliament: the Tasmanian Green- Labor Accord (2011), and Kingdon's Agendas

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This paper details how educational policy is developed in an educational authority in a political environment of a hung parliament. The paper begins by looking briefly at the difficulties facing educational policy rollout in Tasmania during the years 2000-2011, and then details how an educational policy dealing with school closures was reshaped in the face of intense political pressure, as it came under pressure from a multitude of interest groups. Analysis is provided through the lens of Kingdon's Agendas.

## Introduction

A visitor to the Tasmanian Lower Midlands during the winter of 2011 may well have wondered about the huge sign made from large painted-white rocks on a steep hill to the west of the village of Kempton. The sign read *Thanks Nick*. A wedding? A birth? The town has long been bye-passed by the Midlands Highway, so a drive off the highway and a visit to one of the local shops was in order. Here, a shopkeeper revealed in fact the sign was meant to thank the Tasmanian Minister of Education, Nick McKim, for saving the local school from immediate closure. The huge sign on the side of the steep hill was as much a public reminder to McKim of his (alleged) promise to keep Kempton Primary School open, as

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it was a thankyou for his role in allowing it to continue as an operating school.

But was Kempton Primary School and the other nineteen – mostly rural – schools really saved by McKim, saved from his government’s own education policy? On Saturday 6 August, the *Mercury on Saturday* story was headed: ‘New Schools Scare’. The story revealed ‘small Tasmanian schools are preparing for another fight for survival amid fears the State Government is questioning the viability of more than 50 schools around the state’ (Mather, 2011). Indeed, rural schools were ‘joining forces and forming a network as they braced themselves for another government attempt to close their doors’ (Mather, 2011). Mather (2011) was quoting the Australian Education Union – Tasmania Branch (AEU) state president, Leanne Wright, who declared ‘the “general view is that schools are not safe” ’ (Mather, 2011).

Clearly, there was much political advantage here for the Tasmanian Liberal Party Opposition, who Mather (2011) quoted as insisting there were ‘as many as 57 schools still in the firing line’ (Mather, 2011). Indeed, ‘ “the fact is the Government is still intent on shutting schools down,” Opposition education spokesman Michael Ferguson said’ (Mather, 2011). Ferguson then reminded Tasmanians ‘Premier Lara Giddings recently admitted in Parliament the Government fumbled in its process of closing schools, but the policy remained’ (Mather, 2011). According to the Mather (2011) *Mercury* article, Ferguson claimed ‘Ms Giddings told Parliament that “the process we embarked on was wrong, but the policy behind the decisions stands” ’. Moreover, ‘Mr Ferguson said this meant “no school is safe” ’ (Mather, 2011). According to Ferguson ‘as well as the original 20 schools on the Government’s hit list, a further 37 did not meet the Government’s enrolment criteria’ (Mather, 2011). For Ferguson, many school communities ‘ “must be feeling extremely nervous about their future” ’ (Mather, 2011). Ferguson claimed ‘Education Minister

Nick McKim still needed to close schools to meet the education budget' (Mather, 2011).

But the Mather (2011) *Mercury* article stated 'Mr McKim responded by saying the Liberals were causing unnecessary alarm and anxiety for parents and students. McKim flagged he was establishing a reference group to ' "consult broadly with the community" ', and ' "no schools identified for closure" '.

According to the Mather (2011) *Mercury* article 'Wright said action was being taken by some rural schools in preparation for another attack. Wright was reported as stating ' "rural schools are forming a network to ensure they can't be closed off one at a time, they realise that last time their collective efforts helped them" ' (Mather, 2011).

The Mather (2011) *Mercury* article reported during the winter months of 2011 many Tasmanian school communities lived in a state of heightened anxiety as they waited for news from the government about their future.

### **The Purpose Of This Paper**

This paper will seek to demonstrate the fate of the Tasmanian Green-Labor government's policy of school closure depended on a variety of actants, or stakeholders: the government, the AEU, political parties, school communities, including principals, teachers, parents' and friends' associations, ancillary staff, parents, local government bodies, various members of school communities with a stake in the continued operation of the local school. Of course, there were many more. This paper seeks to explore the strength of the Green-Labor Tasmanian government in the development and implementation of educational policy. The government operates in a hung parliament, where virtually every decision is tightly fought. How effective are minority governments in developing and implementing educational policy? And how does John Kingdon's *Agendas, Alternative and Public Policy* (2<sup>nd</sup>

ed.) (2003) explain the politics of policy development and implementation in a hung parliament.

### **What The Research Says About School Closures**

Much of the research literature on school closures focuses on the emotional affect that closures have on the various stakeholders, particularly, teachers, parents and students (for example, Bathgate, 2007; Churchill & Carrington (2000)). However, other researchers have looked to the administrative measures that need to be put in place to close schools.

The Peabody Journal of Education (1983) with Michael A. Berger as editor, is devoted entirely to issues associated with school closures, Berger (1983) concludes ‘in many instances, due to falling enrolments, and budget crises ... school closure was inevitable, but research showed ‘selective cuts to enhance efficiency ... increase the likelihood of organization survival (by reallocating precious resources from marginal to more central units/persons)’ (p. 7). Written from the point of view of school administrators and politicians, the Peabody publication affords little assistance to community groups who may wish to find ways to save their school from closure. The publication is all about administrative issues and imperatives associated with implementing school closure policies.

This present article will show this same approach clearly was lacking in the Tasmanian government’s initial response to the budgetary and demographic situation of mid-2011, but when the Tasmanian Government reconsidered its position later in 2011, as in the U.K. example, ‘they require a costly analysis of, and agreement on, which units/persons are most essential to the organizations survival in the long run’ (Berger, 1983, p. 7).

Many of the articles in the 1983 Peabody Journal of Education single edition devoted to this problem dealt with how school administrators and systems administrators might deal with various

issues associated with school closures. Boyd and Wheaton (1983) remind readers of the research concerning the central and critical role of school principals and administrators in conflict management during a period of school closures: ‘minimizing opposition is only one of several goals in retrenchment policymaking’ (p. 25). Moreover, ‘school officials consequently must seek a delicate balance between not entirely compatible objectives: (a) discovering the ‘best’ or at least a desirable and defensible educational solution or adjustment to declining enrollments [sic], which, at the same time, is politically viable’ (p. 25).

The advice administrators provide school boards – or in the case of Tasmania, the Minister of Education – should take into account the vast array of actants in the change process, and their complicated and diverse political interests. Weatherley, Narver and Elmore (1983) argue for administrators managing a wide range of consultation with all actants in the process of school closure (p. 23).

Weatherley, Narver and Elmore (1983) show how ‘conflict and pressure are inescapable parts of any system undergoing change’. Well-informed political negotiations in the process are especially important: ‘communities, other governmental units, and the private sector will play an increasingly important part in providing resources and shaping expectations for the school system (p. 23). Moreover, ‘political negotiations with these new actors in the administration of public schools will take more time and new skills for managers’ (p. 23). However, other researchers have looked to the relationship between social class and school closures.

In research affording more helpful advice for community groups wishing to save their school, Bondi (1988) investigated how social class impacted on school closures in Manchester (U.K.). She concluded social class affects school closure in a number of ways: first, schools in lower socio-economic areas tend to suffer most by

educational authority's school closure policies; and while there is no noticeable distinction in various socio-economic groups in respect to protesting against closure, more affluent districts assert more political clout because they can assemble greater resources and political know-how.

Indeed, political acumen does count. In a study closer to the Tasmanian experience described in this paper, Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) shows how when the trustees of Lakehead District School Board in Ontario voted to close down a community school in Thunder Bay the community members mobilized legal, political and financial resources for a confrontation with the school board. Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) also describes how a community in Barrie, Ontario, engaged in a legal battle with the Simcoe County School Board over its decision to close down an elementary school.

Vis-à-vis managing change, what could Tasmanian state school administrators and politicians learn from Tasmanian's immediate past experiences in managing system-wide educational change? Particularly, how can this experience inform community groups who may look for ways to save their school?

### **Tasmania's Immediate Past History Of Failed Educational Policy**

Other than the School Closure Bill (2011), from 2000 onwards, various Tasmanian Ministers of Education have attempted to implement two other major, system-wide educational initiatives, both ending disastrously – one being dumped following the 2006 state election, and the other policy following the 2010 state election. Both policies generally were regarded as being instrumental in the political demise of the incumbent Minister of Education.

The dramatic 2006 failed statewide policy initiative involved the K-10 Essential Learnings (ELs) curriculum. Its implementation ran smoothly until about eighteen months before the 2006 election, when its opponents began to organise themselves for a campaign to have it abandoned. Following the 2006 election, with the incumbent Minister for Education only being returned in her seat of Franklin by a few preference votes, a new minister was appointed and the curriculum ditched. Various factors have been attributed to the demise of ELs. These include: an Education Department bureaucracy lacking a solid research base, with a demonstrated inability to advise the minister through coherent policy on emerging imperatives of system curriculum innovation; a lack of appreciation of the various interests of the many, and emerging, stakeholders; a complete failure to bring any influence over an increasingly partisan media, allowing it to drive public discourse; and compliant and non-critical academics in the tertiary sector. The cost of the failed initiative has been estimated to be in the vicinity of \$80 million (Rodwell, 2008, 2009, 2010).

With David Bartlett, the new Minister of Education, in 2008 the returned Paul Lennon Labor Government embarked upon another statewide educational policy initiative – *Tasmania Tomorrow*. This was an attempt to improve Tasmania’s performance in post-secondary retention rates – the nation’s lowest. This involved a restricting of Tasmania’s post-secondary colleges and its Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. The many opponents of *Tasmania Tomorrow* organised themselves in much the same way as did the opponents of ELs, gaining support from the Greens and the Liberals, and various other groups, principally the AEU, and increasingly held public demonstrations in the lead-up to the March 2010 state elections. A minority Labor government was returned, only surviving because of an accord with the Greens. *Tasmania Tomorrow* joined ELs in the rubbish bin of failed educational policy. The factors leading to its demise were much the same as those which contributed to the demise of ELs. The cost of *Tasmania Tomorrow* has been estimated to be in the vicinity of \$70 million (Rodwell, 2010).

Was the Tasmanian Department of Education and Labor government policy-makers capable of learning from these mistakes? Moreover, how were Tasmanian community groups able to build on these experiences to save their schools?

### **The Tasmanian Political Compromise Of A Hung Parliament: The Intricacies Of A Green-Labor Alliance**

With a statewide imbroglio surrounding the Labor government's policy on restructuring post-secondary education as an issue, the Tasmanian 20 March 2010 election 'went down to the wire' (Rodwell, 2011). Antony Green, the national election commentator, reported how 'the 2010 Tasmanian election will go down in history as having produced one of the most dramatic turnovers of House of Assembly membership.' Indeed, 'both the governing Labor Party and opposition Liberal Party won 10 seats, but the Liberal Party had a lead of 2.1% in the total primary vote (Antony Green's Election Blog, 2010). Ominously, for the two major parties, the Greens held the other five seats in the Lower House.

However, only days after the declaration of the polls, with a hung parliament, and Tasmanians waiting for Peter Underwood, the Governor of Tasmania, to announce a Hodgman Liberal government for the next four years, McKim, the Green leader, put his support behind Labor. In a move that surprised many Tasmanians, Underwood asked David Bartlett, the incumbent Labor Leader to form a new government, and in the words of a *Mercury* editorial, Labor was 'back in business' (*Mercury*, 2010).

Michael Field well understood the pressures on a minority government in Tasmania. He had been the premier of a Green-Labor minority government (1989-1992). There also had been a Liberal-Green minority government in Tasmania. Field addressed



the national conference of the constitutional law and public policy organisation, the Samuel Griffith Society in Hobart on 27 August 2011, and decried the pressures on Tasmanian Labor politicians in the Lara Giddings Labor minority government. The current alliance with the Greens was proving difficult for many Labor members, who for political reasons in their own electorates were chaffing under the demands of government solidarity (Richards, 2011). The crisis over school closures was a critical example. Clearly, Labor members had to demonstrated publicly solidarity with the government, but at the same time there were massive pressures in their electorates for them to side with those people demonstrating to keep their local school open.

### **Kingdon's *Agendas* In Analysing The Development And Implementation Of Education Policy In Tasmania**

Working from Strom's (1990) and Moon's (1995) discussion of minority regimes, Crowley (2003) explores the role of minority governments in the Tasmanian context by reviewing the Labor–Green Accord (1989–92) and the Liberal–Green Alliance (1996–98) governments. Crowley (2003) argues these Green-supported minority governments in Tasmania ‘while short-lived and contentious, have had significant positive implications for public policy and the shaping of politics, and for not entirely precluding, in fact for encouraging, reform agendas’ (p. 131). Crowley's (2003) research concludes these two earlier Tasmanian minority governments ‘illustrate Kingdon's notion of policy windows whereby problems, policies and politics come together at critical times, in times of crisis for instance, and facilitate fundamental policy innovation and change’ (p. 131). While Crowley (2003) ‘acknowledges the ideological strain of Greens partnering government, but concludes Green minority government offers significant reform opportunities’ (p. 131). Through examining the legislative achievements of the two earlier Tasmanian Green minority government minority governments, Crowley (2003) concludes there is ‘empirical justification to Strom's and Green–Pedersen's case that minority governments are far from passive

and constrained in terms of governing capacity’ (p. 131). However, an observer of the Tasmanian school closure imbroglio during the winter of 2011 could have understandably been left wondering about the capacity of the Giddings minority Labor government to achieve any of its desired outcomes, particularly as the opinion polls weighed against them.

In his Foreword to John Kingdon’s *Agendas, Alternative and Public Policy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (2003) James A. Thurber writes of the manner in which legislation usually is developed. Kingdon (2003) writes of ‘organised anarchy’. Thurber (2003) in his Forward to Kingdon’s work explains this ‘organised anarchy’ comprises ‘problem recognition – the formulation and refining of policy proposals – and politics’. Thurber’s last sentence in his Foreword to the second edition of *Agendas* underscores the presence of contestation of the politics of policy development and implementation.

There is one central problem with using Kingdon’s *Agendas* as a lens to analyse an educational policy in Tasmania, and that is it was written addressing issues in *federal* politics in the United States. What is its value at a *state* level in another country? Certainly, Brendan Kelly found it to be a useful lens in analysing educational policy development in two states in the United States (Kelly, 2005). Moreover, Rodwell (2011) illustrates the relevance of Kingdon’s *Agendas* in explaining contested policies in Tasmanian Post-secondary Education: 2007-2010.

How could the new Tasmanian Green-Labor Accord respond to educational policy development? Would Crowley’s (2003) conclusions regarding the demonstrated effectiveness of minority governments in other parts of the world stand up with this new Green-Labor accord, particularly during a time of declared budgetary restraint and falling political support?

## **Tensions in Tasmania's Education budget**

Rosemary Bolger (2011a) in the Launceston-based *Examiner* wrote 'Tasmania's health and education departments continued to wildly overspend even after Premier Lara Giddings vowed to rein in the budget'. The Bolger (2011a) article was reporting on the Tasmanian Government's mid-year financial review. Bolger (2011a) wrote 'education spending was driven up sharply when it took responsibility for the former Tasmania Tomorrow entities on January 1 [2011], costing it \$70 million'.

The threatened school closure came at a time of massive budgetary cuts to Tasmanian state education. In the 2011-12 budget the government pushed through spending cuts in the education amounting to \$189 million over the following four-year period. The AEU responded by commissioning a report. Released on 19 August, the report was given considerable space on the Tasmanian media. The report condemned the budget cuts, countering this level of expenditure cuts would have not only a dire effect on the quality of Tasmanian education but also on the state's long-term economic development (Arndt, 2011).

In an obvious move to further the cause of school closures, during the weekend of the annual Parents' and Friends' Conference, the Tasmanian government 'revealed it has lost millions of dollars in Federal funding over the past few years because of plummeting public school enrolments' (Gul, 2011). Clearly, it was critical for the government's survival to convince the electorate of the need for budget cuts, while at the same time maintaining unity it is delicate situation with the Greens in the unity government.

McKim attended his first Parents' and Friends' state conference as Minister for Education in August 2011. He told the conference the state budget has been hit by a drop of 3,000 enrolments in Kindergarten to Grade 10 over the past four years, with a cost to the state of \$4 million a year in federal funding. Yet, McKim told the delegates 'the government is still maintaining the same level of infrastructure it was four years ago', supporting '3,000 students

who are no longer in our government school system’, two-thirds of which ‘have gone to private schools, while the rest has been put down to changes in demographics’ (Gul, 2011).

Experienced Tasmanian Labor politicians were alive to the many pitfalls confronting the government in its attempts to reign in expenditure through school closure. Dr Julian Amos had been a minister in the Tasmanian Labor government from 1979-82. For many years he had been a consultant and advisor for Tasmanian Labor government. In 2011 he well knew the consequence for the government vis-à-vis any undisciplined behaviour in government ranks. His commissioned report, *Tasmania, Present Prospects, Opportunities and Restraints* (2011), was released in early August 2011, amidst the rising imbroglio concerning school closures. It stated, ‘the Budget has become a document to “manage the moment”, as distinct from being a beacon showing direction and purpose’. Moreover, ‘different political perspectives will provide for strategic imperatives, but they need to be stated’, and reactive policies needed to be avoided (‘State of Change’, 2011).

Closing down Tasmanian state schools in order to reign in a budget deficit potentially could be a process wrought with disastrous political consequences for the Labor-Green government, and should not be one based on ‘knee-jerk’ responses. But that was not the way it began.

### **The Winter Of Our Discontent: Months Of Community Turmoil, 2011**

During the early winter months of 2011, Tasmanian media was blanketed with stories of Tasmanian school communities railing against the government’s proposed closure of twenty schools, with only four weeks for nominated schools to mount to mount a case to remain open. For example, on June 22, *ABC Hobart* reported ‘rowdy scenes’ in the Tasmanian Parliament during Question Time, with the Liberal Opposition claiming the government was

putting Tasmanian community against each other as they prepared their individual cases of why their school should be kept open (*ABC Hobart*, 2011). But the Liberal Opposition probed McKim in parliament.

During budget estimates in parliament, McKim revealed ‘the [twenty] schools earmarked for closure have a combined value of \$26 million’ (*ABC News*, 2011a). This was a strategy to assist in filling ‘a \$1.4 billion black hole’ in the Government’s budget (*ABC News*, 2011i).

Clearly, in a state where public demonstrations concerning educational policy during the last five years, school communities could draw on some tested strategies in opposing the school closure bill.

There was also a report of a threatened closure of Avoca Primary School, in the same region as Ringarooma. At this meeting, reportedly attended by 100 people, was the Labor Federal Member for Lyons, Dick Adams, and the Northern Midlands Mayor, Kim Polley (*ABC News*, 2011c). Another report (*ABC News*, 2011d) described the AEU case, and the view of a member of the local government: ‘“It looks like the criteria have been written after the schools have been targeted,” he [Launceston Alderman Rob Soward] said’ (*ABC News*, 2011d). Another report showed how the Liberal Party Opposition would keep schools open, while achieving greater budget cuts than those proposed by the Government’s school closure bill (*ABC News*, 2011d). Another report described how ‘all of the 20 schools on the list for possible closure received federal grants under the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program, worth more than \$13 million in total’ (*ABC News*, 2011e). Indeed, at the Ringarooma meeting on 26 June Dick Adams demanded ‘the repayment of Commonwealth stimulus funding if any of the 20 schools on the state government’s hit-list are shut’ (*ABC News*, 2011c).

Then there were reports of how the school closure bill was causing severe splits in Tasmanian Labor's ranks, including an account of how the Tasmanian union movement was opposing publicly the move. There was opportunity here for 'wedge politics' by the Liberal Opposition, still reeling against what they believed were their being cheated out of government only a little over twelve months earlier (*ABC News*, 2011f). Other media accounts described McKim running the gauntlet of angry parents at threatened schools as he visited them on fact-finding visits (*ABC News*, 2011g). A variety of Labor, Green and Liberal politicians, including local government politicians attend many of these meetings (*ABC News*, 2011h). The pressure from within the broad Tasmanian Labor movement to abandon the planned school closures was sustained over the following weeks (see, for example, *ABC News*, 2011i).

It was probably inevitable that the Greens would be brought into the imbroglio to bring some pressure on the two Greens in the Tasmanian government. One report described how 'Tasmanian Greens Senator Christine Milne has come under pressure to oppose school closures under the state government's budget cuts' (*ABC News*, 2011j). A turning point in the imbroglio may have been the entry of the Australian Greens Leader, Bob Brown, one-time Tasmanian Greens leader in two Tasmanian minority governments, and mentor to McKim. It was reported Brown would 'speak directly to Tasmanian Greens leader and Education Minister ... McKim about the plan to close schools ... Senator Brown says the Minister needs to ensure that the affected communities are given enough time for debate and consultation' (*ABC News*, 2011k).

Matthew Denholm (2011a) in *The Australian* reported Brown was strong in his advice to McKim. Denholm (2011a) reported Brown had stated 'Minister McKim's consultation process is a complete farce. School communities are struggling to pull together material to his deadline. This process is disrespectful to their communities'

(Denholm, 2011a). According to Denholm, ‘Federal Labor MPs are pushing Mr McKim to delay any school closures until 2013, and the stance is expected to be a key issue at the August ALP state conference’ (Denholm, 2011a). Denholm reported that ‘Brown said that “as a minimum” Mr McKim should model his approach on the ACT legislation’ (Denholm, 2011a).

Then on 13 July it was all over. Brad Markham from *ABC News* reported how ‘the controversial plan to close up to 20 schools was shelved just 18 days after it was announced as part of a painful state budget’ (Markham, 2011). Tasmanian television news programs ‘night after night’ revealed ‘pictures of angry, placard-wielding parents and students led television news bulletins. ... many parents putting their lives on hold, as they were forced to justify the existence of their schools’ (Markham, 2011). But it was the process that was wrong, not the objectives. *ABC News* (2011k) reported Education Minister, McKim admitting the Government got the process of school closure ‘wrong’ (*ABC News*, 2011j). Now, the government would become more strategic in their planning for school closure; many stakeholders were aware of this.

According to Denholm (2011b), however, the severe budget cuts, including those to Education was causing severe pressure on Tasmanian Green-Labor alliance.

### **A New Strategic Planning For School Closure**

The annual conference of the Tasmanian State School Parents’ and Friends’ Association held over the weekend of 20-21 August was an opportunity for the official body representing state school parents to voice their concerns about being left out of the decision-making to close down schools. Ensuring Tasmanian state school parents never again learnt of school closure ‘through the media’ (Hope, 2011), the conference unanimously passed a motion seeking to enshrine in law the inclusion of their association in any decision-making concerning school closure (Hope, 2011). Moreover, ‘schools that have passed a ‘closure criteria’ will be quarantined from closing for five years’ (Druce, 2011).

The conference also was an opportunity for McKim to apologise once again for causing so much community angst in his previous bungled attempt to close down schools.

### **Towards A Conciliatory Outcome**

It seems McKim was sensitive to the advice offered to him by his mentor, Brown, concerning the adoption of the ACT model for school closure, a model based on consultation and political consensus. But the question remains of why it took advice from McKim's mentor for this to happen? Where was the independent advice from the Department of Education bureaucrats, the experts who should have briefed their minister on the research on school closures?

On 23 August the reference group – the School Viability Reference Group – established by the government to consider school viability met for the first time. Dinah Arndt reported in the *The Examiner* 'Chairman Royce Fairbrother said at today's meeting the group would decide how to best to investigate the viability of the state school system and consult with the wider Tasmanian community' being as 'open and transparent as possible' (Arndt, 2011 b). The group was due to report by 31 January.

Of course, there were instances of disagreement. For example, perhaps expressing its cynicism of the political process, the Public School Alliance called for a name change for the reference group – to public school sustainability (Arndt, 2011b).

The Department of Education's (n.d.) 'School Viability Reference Group' revealed the composition of the group established to guide government policy on school closures. Its membership comprised people from the Tasmanian State School Parents & Friends Association, the Tasmanian Principals Association, Unions Tasmania, the University of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Schools Registration, the Local Government of Association of Tasmania,



Department of Education, and the Tasmania's Social Inclusion Commissioner. Its terms of reference were:

The reference group will consult widely in preparing recommendations to the Minister for Education and Skills on the provision of a viable government school system in Tasmania, including:

the process that should be undertaken to assess a school's ongoing viability, including:

1. the criteria that should be used;
2. the consultation process that should be used to best engage school communities;
3. any transition arrangements required.
4. any legislative amendments if required ; and
5. any other matter that has the potential to affect school viability  
(Department of Education, n.d.)

There is considerable symmetry between the processes and outcome of the reference group and of the ACT legislation for school closures recommended by Brown to McKim (Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2006).

Inter alia, the ACT committee's terms of reference included:

2. The impact of school consolidation and closures with a focus on:
  - Community experiences and attitudes;
  - Student learning experiences; and
  - Financial, social and environmental impacts.
3. Community responses, including:
  - Review of the consultation process, including how public submissions were considered and incorporated into the final reform package;
  - Views on the Education Amendment Bill 2008;
  - Interest expressed by school communities to re-open schools listed for closure; and
  - New uses for school facilities (Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2006, p. ii).

Yet, in Tasmania community anxiety continued, with the constitution of the reference group doing little to alleviate this anxiety.

### **Continued Community Anxiety**

During the months following McKim's 3 July backdown and the consequent establishment of the School Viability Reference Group, Tasmania's newspapers ran a steady stream of correspondence concerning community concerns about government policy on school closure. For example, Angela Blackwell from the Bracknell Primary School Association wrote, commenting on the government's reference group to assess the viability of Tasmania's government schools: 'Education Minister's School Viability Reference Group certainly adds to the confusion and uncertainty surrounding our schools' (Cresswell, 2011). Moreover, 'simply developing a set of criteria identifying unviable schools will not deal with all issues that were raised during the previous process which was halted in July' (Cresswell, 2011).

Such was the level of community anxiety during the months following the announcement of the establishment of the School Viability Reference Group that its chairperson, Fairbrother went on *ABC Statewide Mornings* radio, hosted by Leon Compton. He assured Tasmanians the group has vowed to meet 'face-to-face with concerned communities' meeting with '23 meetings over a three-week period in October' (*ABC News*, 2011m). He insisted: 'We are keen to consult with all of the schools, all of our local government and any other interested stakeholder out there' ... developing a process for school closure and a set of criteria (*ABC News*, 2011m). Moreover, he insisted 'our job is not to look at which schools should be closed that is certainly not a part of our brief' (*ABC News*, 2011m). Public schools would 'be invited to nominate representatives to meet the reference group' (*ABC News*, 2011m).

In its discussion papers and news releases the reference group prepared the Tasmanian public to the reality facing the government when the group handed down its final report. The group expressed its concerns regarding the high number of out-of-school enrolments in Tasmanian public schools. This was ‘creating a planning nightmare for the Education Department’ *ABC News* (2011n). Apparently ‘30 per cent of public school students do not attend their local school’ (*ABC News* (2011n). This ‘leads to complicated enrolment patterns and unsustainable building programs’, and for Fairbrother ‘the trend needs to be better understood’ *ABC News* (2011n). According to the *ABC News* (2011n) news report, Fairbrother stated ‘ “It obviously has a pretty significant effect on the viability of that school, if you’re measuring it on the number of students attending that school,” ’ *ABC News* (2011n).

Controversy, however, dogged the school review process. The Tasmanian *ABC News* revealed on 19 October how Fairbrother’s company had been awarded a contract to build a new school on the Northwest Coast (*ABC News*, 2011o). Fairbrother denied any conflict of interest. But for some Tasmanians, the man commissioned to oversee the review process also headed the company awarded the contract to build a new Tasmanian state school.

Then there was the report commissioned by the Meander Valley Council in Tasmania’s rural north. The Meander Council area has Deloraine as its chief town. *ABC News* reported ‘its \$15,000 independent report about retaining its seven local schools identify[d] problems with the Government’s school closure criteria’ (*ABC News*, 2011p). The government’s original list of 20 schools for possible closure included four in the northern municipality. The Meander report outlined the effect of school closure in the council district: ‘the consultants’ report includes the results of a community survey that found almost 30 per cent of families would move if their local school closed, while 18 per cent would send their children to a private school (*ABC News*, 2011p).

The council forwarded a copy of the report to the School Viability Reference Group; Rosita Gallasch in her *Examiner* article wrote of what the report revealed about rural families. ‘Almost 30 per cent of families surveyed by the Meander Valley Council would move if the state government closed their child’s school’ (Gallasch, 2011). Indeed, ‘the survey also found 18 per cent of parents would send their child to a private school if their local public one school and more than 70 per cent of students would be expected to travel more than an hour a day (Gallasch, 2011).

Gallasch reported in her *Examiner* article of what Preece considered of the report’s findings. Governments had invested ‘heavily in irrigation pipelines to create jobs and generate growth in the region’, but on the other hand were threatening to close schools and medical facilities – ‘the two things people want if they’re going to move to regional communities’ (Gallasch, 2011). Moreover, the report also criticised in the government’s draft School Closure Policy, stating it lacked transparency, accountability, economic rigour and it is inequitable to regional and rural students and their parents’ (Gallasch, 2011). Ferguson lashed out at the government, claiming the report showed ‘the government’s process had not taken into proper account the needs of regional communities’ (*Examiner*, 2011).

During the same week as the Meander school closure report was released, in referring to a current imbroglio facing the Tasmanian timber industry, McKim was reported the difficulties inherent in the Green-Labor Accord. He stating publically, ‘the Labor and Liberals parties would make more natural bedfellows on a policy basis’, a statement that was ‘quickly dismissed by Liberal justice spokesman, Matt Groom’ (Bolger, 2011b). Clearly, policy development in the accord was not always an easy function.

As the clock ticked down to the day of the release of the report, Tasmanians were reminded of that date: 31 January 2012. Moreover, Tasmanians also were reminded of the aim of the

School Viability Reference Group enquiry: ‘to come up with criteria for assessing school viability and a process by which this could be enacted (*Examiner*, 11 January, 2012; see also *Mercury* 11 January 2012).’

Only days before the Fairbrother report was due, the *Mercury* reported Premier Giddings ‘softening’ up the Tasmanians for what it apparently contained. Closing or amalgamating small schools was a way to improve educational outcomes, not just to save money in the Budget, Killick (2012a) reported Giddings stated ‘Ms Giddings said critics of school closures and amalgamation needed to be convinced of the benefits, which included better opportunities for students’ (Killick, 2012a). Clearly with an eye to its political implications, McKim signalled the report would not be released until the Cabinet had considered it (*ABC News* (2012a).

Finally, the report was released on 31 January 2012. In his Note From the Chair, Fairbrother wrote of the positive aspects of the enquiry; and this concerned galvanising communities, community involvement in schools, and long-term concerns ‘to improve the quality of educational outcomes’ (Fairbrother, 2012). Where and when would be the school closures? The weeks ticked by: February and March came and went. Finally, on 3 April 2012. McKim reported ‘No school will be identified for closure before June 2014, and none will close until the end of 2015’ (Killick, 2012b).

The political imperatives of the moment had won through. The polls showing the voting intentions of Tasmanians had the Green-Labor government performing very poorly, but nevertheless, improving. William Bowe from *Crikey*, on 15 February 2012 released the following report on the voting of Tasmanians:

Tasmanian outfit EMRS has published one of its occasional polls of state voting intention, and it continues to show the Liberals in a commanding position: their primary vote is at 52 per cent, down two since November, with Labor up four to 27 per cent and the Greens down two to 18 per cent ... Liberal

leader Will Hodgman leads Premier Lara Giddings as preferred premier by 44 per cent to 24 per cent, with Greens leader ... McKim on 15 per cent (Bowe, 2012).

Three days following the release of the Fairbrother Report, Denholm (2012) commented on the government's decision not to implement its decisions. Given the meagre state of the Green-Labor support according to the opinion polls, the reasons for this were simply: it was all about managing the political occasion, but the future of the threatened schools were safe: 'Given the new timetable, all school communities need to do is keep quiet and wait for a Liberal government'.

### **Conclusions**

Using lessons well learnt during the hurly burly of the history of policy development and implementation during the past decade, Tasmanian community and interest groups won out against a minority government in a hung parliament which sought to close a number of schools due to economic imperatives. Here was a lesson for community groups in saving their schools, and it was all about *realpolitik*.

Kingdon's analysis of the process preparatory to legislation, that of problem recognition – the formulation and refining of policy proposals – and finally the politics of the occasion well explains the failure to implement the recommendations contained in the Fairbrother Report.

First, there was the failed School Closure Bill (2011), and the political scrambling following the public outrage during the winter of 2011, resulting in the Fairbrother School Viability Reference Group. This was all about problem recognition: alleged inefficiencies of small schools in times of severe budgetary restraints. Associated with this were the political imperatives associated with attempting to explain to the public the need for school viability in the face of budget restraints. But the Green-

Labor Government was faced with the political reality of falling community support. It could only legislate for the recommendations contained in the Fairbrother Report at the risk of its own survival. Closing schools hardly was an option during the political climate of the Green-Labor Government.

Whereas Crowley (2003) showed significant policy development during past Tasmanian minority governments, the reality of the politics associated with school closure, despite declared budgetary issues, the policy of closing schools was doomed to failure during the Green-Labor minority government of 2010. Maintaining the twenty or so targeted Tasmanian schools was a political decision. Crowley's (2003) use of Kingdon's notion of policy windows, whereby problems, policies and politics come together at critical times, in times of crisis facilitating fundamental policy innovation and change lacks explanatory credence in this instance, simply because, given the political situation of the Green-Labor Government (2010-), did not afford room to move on the issue of legislating for school closure.

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