

# Bipartisan, but only when it suits

**T**WO weeks ago Speaker Bronwyn Bishop fell on her sword as a result of overusing her travel entitlements.

It looked like being the start of a long procession. People like Tony Burke, the manager of Opposition business, and his opposite number, Christopher Pyne, were in the gun. Then all of a sudden, in a spirit of bipartisanship, both sides of politics began defending the other.

Travel rorts stories dropped out of the media as quickly as they started. The political caravan moved on. No-one needs to fear losing their position over such matters now. That's all in the past.

You can only marvel at the power of bipartisan politics.

We have moved on to new issues. If you listened to Parliament today or read a newspaper you would think there is no issue of more importance to the Australian people than gay marriage.

Yet back in 2004, when the Coalition government amended the Marriage Act to make it clear

**PETER COSTELLO**



that marriage consists of a union between a man and a woman, Labor's shadow attorney-general, Nicola Roxon, made it clear that Labor, as a party, supported that: "The Bill is something we do not have an objection to," she told the House of Representatives.

The Bill passed without a vote being called. Only three people spoke in the debate. The House of Representatives settled the issue of gay marriage in 25 minutes.

Issues die and flare up again in politics. There was a very determined group that did not accept the 2004 legislation. It is passionate about the issue and won't let it rest until they are successful. Conversely, there is a group that is passionately opposed

to gay marriage. But the majority of people have no personal interest in gay marriage and no strong views about it.

Just imagine if there were a group that was passionate about fighting for the issues that concerned it.

Unemployment is too high in Australia. Parents are legitimately worried that their children graduating from school or university are finding it hard to get jobs. Many people in work are worrying about the long-term future of their jobs.

Imagine a group that refused to accept anything less than the chance of a job for anyone who wants to work. That would be a group worth supporting.

But it's not just the rhetoric that counts here. The advocates for gay marriage have a clear objective and a legislative solution — an amendment to the Marriage Act. What if the advocates for full employment developed a list of all those legislative restrictions that make it hard to employ people?



They could then push for the removal of each and every one of them in a campaign to make jobs available for all.

Imagine we were able to turn bipartisanship to things much more important than travel entitlements?

Both sides of politics say they are committed to a Budget surplus. In its first Budget the Abbott Government made a concerted effort to do something about it.

Some measures could have been better refined but it was trying to solve the problem in a meaningful time frame. The Government was fought to a standstill by Senate obstruction. As a result, balancing the Budget has been put off to about 2020. This means well over a decade of deficits, if the problem is fixed at all. There is now a tacit agreement to put the problem off to the never-never.

Imagine a bipartisan agreement on fixing the problem now. That would really do something for the country.

An economic "narrative" means

identifying our problems, outlining the steps to fix them, laying down a timetable to do it, and explaining the benefits.

The advocates of "marriage equality" have a narrative — it's about discrimination and fixing the problem of same-sex people wanting to marry.

The electorate is ready to listen to any politician who has a credible narrative about how to help those looking for a job, or how to ease the burden for young Australians facing rising government debt, or what to do for average workers who are paying rising taxes on falling incomes.

In a very important interview last week Treasurer Joe Hockey said income tax rates must fall. He is absolutely right.

Average wage earners are paying an increasing percentage of their earnings in tax. This has been going on for six or seven years.

Higher-income earners are paying the highest tax rates for 25 years. Our economy is growing slower than the long-term average.

Letting these average tax rates ratchet up higher and higher is not helping it.

Having identified this tax problem, the next step is to come up with the legislative amendments and the time frame to fix it.

It would be nice to think that just as politicians were able to lay down their weapons for mutual advantage over travel entitlements, they could lay down their weapons and co-operate on behalf of the taxpayer. But it is unlikely.

Ultimately, the only reward for doing the right thing in politics is to win public support.

Single issues flare and die down again. Very rarely do they decide elections. Most of the population looks more to long-term issues.

That is where the narrative comes in.

It means speaking to the issues that people worry about with real and credible solutions.

**PETER COSTELLO IS A FORMER FEDERAL TREASURER**