

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Gladys powers up the centre

WHEN Premier Gladys Berejiklian finalised her newly expanded 24-strong Cabinet last weekend, there appeared to be more winners than losers.

However, the detail that followed suggested all but eight ministers had been given the equivalent of a booby prize — a ministerial title, but no department.

The others — many of her closest confidantes — were put in charge of eight newly merged “super-ministries”.

Gone are agencies such as Local Government, Environment and Department of Primary Industries, all of which have been swallowed up the Planning And Industry Department in one of the biggest shake-ups of the bureaucracy in the past decade.

The Premier says her move is designed to make for a more efficient and streamlined government.

Cynics say the move is designed to fast-track the approval of infrastructure projects without bureaucrats in Environment putting up obstacles such as flora and fauna protection.

Not that the concept of a super-ministry is anything new. For years, senior bureaucrats have pushed for fewer departments and bringing power closer to the centre as a more effective means of running government and eliminating overlap and turf warfare.

Those against the centralisation model have argued that it is a recipe for disaster as ministers without departments are forced to work with their more senior minister instead of their own department to achieve their policy objectives.

It all works in theory, but relies heavily on the goodwill of all involved.

The previous Labor government attempted a version of it — merging water with environment among others — before realising it was unworkable given the conflicting objectives of each department.

As one senior public servant quipped about the Planning super-ministry encompassing an agency charged with looking after the environment and another advocating for farmers last week: “The Premier has put the poacher in with the gamekeeper.”

The other argument against a super-ministry is that it is simply less transparent.

Where ministers in the past put up Cabinet minutes to be debated among their colleagues, some say issues are now more likely to be sorted out internally with the lead minister to have the final say.

This is all well and good if everyone is getting along, which as we know is rare in politics.

But what happens when plans are put up for a major infrastructure project or road on prime agricultural land? Will Agriculture Minister Adam Marshall have as loud a voice as his predecessor in Niall Blair did now that he does not have a department and instead has to report to Planning Minister Rob Stokes about farmer concerns?

The same goes for Environment Minister Matt Kean, should it apply to a national park.

And will the public servants within each of the “clusters” still be able to give the frank and honest advice their patch deserves?

Unsurprisingly, the make-up of the super-ministries makes it clear that infrastructure and industry remains the focus of the Berejiklian government over the next four years.

That’s exactly where the Premier’s focus should be — and having won the election emphatically, she has every right to shape the state as she sees fit.

But it would be a shame to ignore the other elements that make NSW a great place to live.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ELECTION COMMENT TAKEN BY THE
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