How depressing it is that in national politics the "new paradigm" of parliamentary governance has turned out to be more disappointing than the "old paradigm" ever was. The cynical voices of those who insist that "political ethics" is an oxymoron appear to have contemporary political practice on their side. As one who has devoted years to the task of researching and advocating "political ethics" in Queensland in the wake of the Fitzgerald Inquiry in the late 80s perhaps I should have listened more carefully to Machiavelli, that medieval practitioner of the art of politics, who observed in *The Prince*:

> It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new.

Wayne Goss once told me: "politics is a morally ambiguous activity". My retort then, as now, is that this is all the more reason to fashion an integrity regime which potentially encourages propriety in public office. Of course, ethics and integrity measures will not prevent those determined to be corrupt and dishonest from their nefarious deeds, to wit recently, one Gordon Nuttall in Queensland. It is also obvious that the culture of the major political parties in Australia has, by and large, remained immune to ethical reform and has bedevilled attempts to develop integrity in various jurisdictions – a fact most evident currently in Canberra.

Granted, parliamentary ethics and ethics in government will always be mediated through politics. The tension between regarding these measures as a 'political fix' and as 'intrinsically valuable' will remain, a fact which emphasises the critical importance to such processes of leadership and the culture of the entire body politic; in a democracy we all have some responsibility for this.

Regrettably, my own experience is that too many politicians falsely believe that registers of interests, codes of conduct and ethics advisers are likely to entrap them. My claim is that, applied and used appropriately, such measures are protective and supportive in the risky waters of public life, especially if they focus on advice about conflicts of interest along with adequate ethics training and education of elected and unelected public officials.

That structure is now in place in Queensland, though there is scope to develop a more comprehensive and enforceable Ministerial Code of Conduct. The former Premier, Anna Bligh, deserves credit for her government's contribution to this framework. The national Government and Opposition would do well to examine and follow the Queensland approach.

But, as we know, the Bligh government was consumed by a political tsunami, and the magnitude of the loss appears to have been influenced by the excessive ALP campaign virtually charging Campbell Newman and his family associates with corruption. The ALP muddied the ethical waters unacceptably through this strategy, though it was always legitimate to ask whether the Leader of the LNP had practical knowledge and experience about the governance proprieties which are required by the Queensland Parliament. His reluctance to declare his pecuniary interests for a time raised doubts about this.

Last week the new Queensland Parliament met for its first sitting. Noteworthy is the fact that a clear majority of MPs were attending the unicameral legislature as novices, including Premier Campbell Newman himself. A consequence of this reality is that there is little experience, knowledge or memory, let alone wisdom, in the Queensland Parliament about the integrity and ethics regime which has evolved since the 1989 election after the Fitzgerald Inquiry Report.

Indeed, only one member of Premier Newman's government has legislative experience dating back to that time, the Minister for Health, Lawrence Springborg, an MP who has a sound appreciation of the importance of the reforms.
aimed at encouraging integrity in Queensland public life. The new Premier would do well to keep a hotline to Mr Springborg when it comes to these questions.

But is that likely?

The Premier has got off to a wobbly start. Within the first week he assumed office former corruption commissioner Tony Fitzgerald AC QC declared publicly that "the gravy train for cronies" had already left the station. He was referring to some instant, senior appointments in government including that of former MP, City Councillor and LNP factional heavy, Michael Caltibiano – a capable individual no doubt, but one viewed with suspicion by some who have seen him operating at close hand.

When it comes to due process in Parliament, the Premier seemed quick to dodge accountability, announcing that at least two comprehensive Bills (one containing amendments to the Constitution Act and another apparently embodying a mish-mash of election promises relating to Queenslanders' costs of living) were to be dealt with urgently bypassing the attention of the Parliamentary Scrutiny of Legislation Committee. The Premier's justification was that the measures in the legislation had been given the tick by the "committee that really matters, the electorate".

To some ears that sounded like Joh-speak, a sign that the long standing tradition of Queensland governments ignoring the scrutiny of Parliament, was well and truly alive under the new government. In the Joh days political opposition within the Parliament was marginalised to an extent that real opposition had to come from outside the parliament.

The question is whether "Premier Can Do" understands what he can't do. Running state government is much more than a series of engineering projects as the Premier surely knows, just as the ethical scrutiny of a government involves more than the process matters discussed in this article. An ethically good government will be about more than the bottom line or opening the way for development at any cost. Questions of social justice, the environment and the arts must remain high on the agenda.

At the end of the day the ethical use of power in our liberal democratic system is tightly tied to public trust. Beyond codes of conduct or integrity commissions will always be the question of moral leadership, the *sine qua non* of public trust and ethical government. It is too early to make the call about moral leadership on the self-styled Can Do Premier in Queensland. In Canberra it may be too late.

Dr Noel Preston is Adjunct Professor in the Griffith University Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance. He is the author of *Understanding Ethics* (2001, Federation Press, Sydney), and several texts on public sector ethics. His web page can be found [here](http://www.griffith.edu.au/ethics/faculty/preston/npreston.html).

Noel Preston's recent book is *Beyond the Boundary: a memoir exploring ethics, politics and spirituality* (Zeus Publications). He is a member of the board of the [Centre for an Ethical Society](http://www.ethicalcentre.org.au/).

© The National Forum and contributors 1999-2012. All rights reserved.