

Bill Ralston: Utu over, the real work begins

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By Bill Ralston

The Press Gallery held its legendary Christmas party in Parliament last week. The "Gallery do" has a somewhat debauched reputation. Veteran Tom Scott claims back in his day, Bellamy's staff laid canvas on the carpet in anticipation of the mass spillage of alcohol and bodily fluids.

There is also the legend of the Speaker's Chair, where once upon a time, supposedly, naughty journalists would sneak out of the party down to the chamber and commit lewd acts upon the sheepskin-covered throne.

It would have been difficult to have got a leg-over there last Wednesday night as the Speaker was still sitting in it because the House was in a pre-Christmas rush to get rid of its unfinished business, including the vexed Electoral Finance Bill.

National were filibustering in an attempt to drag out the Government's agony over the bill, and I expected the party's atmosphere to be slightly charged by the animosity that has crept into the House over the past few weeks of the draconian legislation's ugly passage into law. However, MPs of all persuasions played well together, happily sipping their drinks and bellowing at each other over a jukebox thundering out old school disco tunes.

There is a convention that "what happens at the 'Gallery do' stays at the 'Gallery do'" and conversations there should not be reported, but I don't think Annette King will mind if I say she was looking remarkably relaxed for someone who has taken a flogging during the recent debates.

The Government has put her "on point", leading the defence of the bill, and King has done a passable imitation of Trevor Mallard's brawling style as she has taken the fight to the enemy with gusto.

We chatted about it and King's adamant the Electoral Finance Bill will not be a deciding election issue next year. I am less sure.

Sure, probably no one will vote against Labour solely because of the bill, but it has gone a long way towards cementing in the public mind an impression of a smug, bossy, "we know best" government that is obstinately deaf to public opinion.

Nothing will deter Helen Clark from passing that bill because it is pure utu. It is payback. Clark has the vengeful memory of a homicidal elephant, and she will never forgive the Exclusive Brethren for what it tried to do to her. The fact the sect bankrolled National is secondary to the dirty tricks campaign it tried to wage on her, and the covert action it took with private eyes. She heard the sleazy rumours that emanated from the conspirators and knew the fruitless sting operations they tried to pull.

The Electoral Finance Bill is punishment for National taking the Brethren's cash, and it is the only penalty she can impose on her enemies as, unfortunately, constitutionally these days she is unable to have them boiled in oil, hung on the rack and have their heads stuck on pikes at the front door of Parliament. I am sure the Prime Minister thinks wistfully of the good old days of the Tudors when Elizabeth I would cheerily disembowel those who plotted against her.



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Christmas

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Come Tuesday, Labour and its pilot fish parties will head for the lobbies, push the law through, and then head for home, content that the year is over and the hard work done.

It has just started.

National is already working on how it can weld together a Government. Despite its healthy overall lead in the polls, no one in that party believes it can get enough votes to govern in its own right.

John Key needs some new buddies after the next election, and National strategists are sounding out New Zealand First and the Maori Party.

Winston Peters' butt must be glowing bright pink from the amount of National party kisses it's received recently. Quite what wily Winston's price will be for supporting National after the next election is yet to be determined, but it will be big. He still hasn't forgiven National for firing him as a minister. Twice.

The Nats will not want to be entirely at Winston's tender mercy, and so they are also quietly courting the Maori Party, probably not as full coalition partners, but I will take bets that they will barter the seabed and fisheries issue in return for an agreement on confidence and supply.

Once the wrathful Clark gets that damn bill out of her system, she better start worrying about the real issue. How to get back in 2008.

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