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Mr B and the A Team

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With Parliament resuming next week and an election looming later this year, we assess the performance of the Brumby cabinet.

IN A perfect world, a crack team of ministers would run Victoria. Every cabinet member would be blessed with talent and intelligence, each minister would be a pragmatic problem-solver. The proverbial hard basket would be tackled with can-do verve. Public servants would be dazzled by the ministerial panache of the government's executive wing.

But in the real world, state government is not like that. Victoria is actually run by a small crew of strong and steady politicians. These men are the stars of the show; the rest of cabinet make up the chorus line, important but very much back near the curtain, singing and high-kicking in time to John Brumby's tune.

THE A TEAM

John Brumby must be the envy of his interstate colleagues. He commands the party's deep loyalty and captains a tight ship. The Opposition has bothered him like fleas on an elephant: a source of low-level irritation. Not many people, particularly lawyers, like his strong-arm deputy, **Rob Hulls**, but the Attorney-General has been true to his vision of a fairer justice system. His is a quiet revolution of reform, unheralded lest the people think the Government has gone soft on crime. **John Lenders**, the self-confessed lover of spreadsheets, has mastered his crucial treasury portfolio and is valued in Government for his strategic and tactical thinking. Meanwhile, **Tim Pallas** has gone from Steve Bracks' chief-of-staff to ministerial surprise packet, impressing industry with his can-do approach to roads, ports and major projects.

GOT TALENT, BUT ALSO SOME ISSUES

He got lost in the snow last year, but **Tim Holding** knows exactly where he is going in politics: to the top. Those within the industries he oversees - finance, tourism, major events and water - marvel at his attention to, and memory of, detail and his ability to make engaging, off-the-cuff speeches. He's smart, works hard and gets things done, but he's had trouble selling the Government's controversial water agenda to voters. He will also have to walk over the dead body of **Daniel Andrews** to one day be premier. The Health Minister, widely seen as the Labor Left's future leadership rival to Holding, has performed strongly in health, bar some serious data scandals. He is sharp and shrewd, direct and confident. He can also be quite ruthless when needed, Labor types say. But he's a frustrating media performer, fond of woolly sentences and meaningless bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo. Quite Ruddesque and just as boring. His fellow Left factional leader, **Gavin Jennings**, is also talented and effective, but was temporarily sidelined late last year with health issues. As Environment Minister, he is often on the wrong side of cabinet's green-brown divide (under Brumby's watch, brown trumps green more frequently than during the Bracks years). **Bronwyn Pike** is widely seen as a good education minister, but the possibility of losing her seat of Melbourne to the Greens this year is a big distraction.

HAS POTENTIAL, COULD DO MORE

Industry likes and trusts **Jacinta Allan**, who has taken on big reforms in her skills portfolio. But there's a sense that she has yet to fully exercise her talents. In Wednesday's cabinet reshuffle, Brumby handed her that chance, charging his young minister with an economic development super portfolio. Unfortunately this comes as she fights for her political life this November. Her seat of Bendigo East could be difficult for Labor to hold. In a similar situation is Children and Early Childhood Development Minister **Maxine Morand**, who will be lucky to hold her marginal seat of Mount Waverley. This is a shame, as the former nurse is a warm and natural politician with great promise as a

potential leader. When **Martin Pakula** took over public transport last week, pundits said he had inherited a poisoned chalice. But it was a savvy move for the former union boss and the Government. The hyperactive Pakula, whose potential was not fully realised in the industry and trade portfolio, now has a high-profile chance to prove himself (and at 41 is young enough to recover from the damage sustained in a tough portfolio). The Government, meanwhile, has replaced the detached and icy approach of Lynne Kosky with one of cabinet's most affable "of-the-people" members. With the system unlikely to improve any time soon, the PR is half the battle: at least Pakula will look as if he's sharing commuters' pain.

THE MINISTERS FOR STUFF-UPS AND INVISIBILITY

There's been talk around for ages that Energy Minister **Peter Batchelor** is likely to retire this year. While he's been a crucial party stalwart and parliamentary warrior, it's difficult to forgive his inaction on transport during his seven years in that portfolio. Community Services Minister **Lisa Neville** is improving but someone must be held accountable for the crisis in child protection: almost 2200 at-risk children with no case workers and tragic pockets of regional neglect, as the Ombudsman found last year. **Justin Madden** is a good bloke and we wish him all the best with his new job explaining the Premier's "respect agenda" to the state's hoon-driving, binge-drinking, disaffected and anti-social youths. But where is the vision and policy cohesion in the planning portfolio? Efforts to charge today's land sellers for future infrastructure were a mess and now he seems to have put the urban fringe expansion on the backburner. Gaming and Consumer Affairs Minister **Tony Robinson** has been jelly-backed in dealing with Crown Casino; the introduction of scratchies company Intralot was mismanaged and the lamentable closure of the rock pub the Tote proves that his liquor-licensing reforms are like an indiscriminate sledgehammer.

Suffering from the invisibility problem are Sports Minister **James Merlino**, Housing Minister **Richard Wynne**, Agriculture Minister **Joe Helper** and Police and Emergency Services Minister **Bob Cameron**. These last two are real problems for the Government. Helper has little traction with farmers, who are fast falling out of love with Labor. And Cameron, who leaves the spotlight of his portfolio to Brumby and chief commissioner Simon Overland, has earned himself the nickname around Spring Street of "Sideshow Bob". Yet this is too generous: it suggests some peripheral activity. "No Show Bob" would be closer to the mark.

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