

# FINANCIAL REVIEW

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Crossbench Mathew Dunckley and Mark Ludlow on the fresh faces.

The Senate fruit salad is about to be served. The new-look crossbench, whose members will take their seats on July 1, includes free marketeers, first-class populists, pro-welfarists and, of course, one motoring enthusiast. From this group of eight, Prime Minister Tony Abbott will need six votes to pass bills opposed by Labor and the Greens.

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As debate lines are being drawn up for the year in the shadow of the government's first budget, The Australian Financial Review canvassed views from the new crossbenchers on what makes them tick.

They can be split broadly into two categories. In the first group are the neophytes: Palmer United Party trio Glenn Lazarus, Jacqui Lambie and Dio Wang, and the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party's Ricky Muir. This is also a declared voting bloc following a deal between PUP founder Clive Palmer and the AMEP to agree on important votes. Abbott will need this bloc every time he wants to pass a bill opposed by Labor and the Greens.

These senators, plucked from diverse backgrounds, admit to feeling daunted at the prospect of the learning curve ahead of them and they have been working hard to prepare.

"So I'm off my Ls and I'm on my Ps," Lambie says.

The second group are four politicians who have thought deeply about policy. The new entrants in this club are a libertarian from the Liberal Democratic Party, David Leyonhjelm, and Family First's Bob Day. They join crossbenchers, independent Senator Nick Xenophon and Democratic Labor Party Senator John Madigan.

When Abbott secures the support of the PUP bloc, he will still need two votes from this group to pass legislation.

The incoming senators from both groups are mostly happy to talk about their hopes and opinions. The exception is the reclusive Muir, whose party says the father of five is too busy. Heated debate ahead

"I've been sick of waiting for a while, but as I get closer I get more nervous," says Lazarus, a former rugby league international.

"I don't see myself as a politician now. It's going to take a bit of getting used to. But I'm looking forward to the responsibility."

Lazarus says he is well aware the national spotlight will be on the new group.

"I'm not taking it lightly at all. That's where the nervousness comes from. The worry is Tony Abbott is going to want us to have to deal with the carbon tax and the mining tax straight away."

"It doesn't give us much time. We're sort of non-existent until the first of July," he says.

Although a Queensland senator, Lazarus is a local, having grown up in Queanbeyan near Canberra. One of his first jobs was in the Government Printing Office where he helped print hansard ("I dreaded it because it was a lot of work!"). He will live with his mother-in-law during sitting weeks.

As a bona fide rugby league legend – he is the only player to win a premiership with three clubs – Lazarus is aware the PUP senators appreciate "we'll get a lot more done if we stick together".

He admits there will still be some "heated debate" in the PUP party room because they hold some differing views, and hopes his background will help break the ice with MPs from other parties.

"I think they will relate to me because there is a connection there because of the footy. But once I'm in the chamber they will treat me like a politician and they'll want me to be a responsible politician from day one.

"People are saying we want to get in there and be a rabble and disrupt everything. That's the last thing we want to do. What we want to do is get some decisions made because nothing is being done at the moment, because once Liberals put up legislation Labor and the Greens vote it down."

Fellow PUP Senator-elect Lambie is shaping up as a cult political figure. An outing on the ABC's Q&A panel show had viewers cringing and cheering at once. There is a charm to the unpolished, fair dinkum, sincerity of her passions – Tasmania, veterans and the unemployed – even if there is an obvious narrowness in her policy grasp.

The passion was born of a decade-long fight with the Defence Department over a back injury she says was sustained during her time in the army.

She is adamant that she is her own woman. She stole the show on Q&A with a suggestion that national service could be a good option for young unemployed people but had not first discussed that policy with her party colleagues.

Lambie says she will not be bound by party room decisions.

"It is state first. If the majority of my Tasmanians say no and my party says yes, I have to stand my ground. I have to stand with Tasmania," she says.

All the same, Lambie says the party has worked well together and that Palmer is happy to adapt his views. She is less thrilled with her treatment from the government, having written to Abbott eight times since her election without a single reply. The Liberal Party came at her hard during the recent state election too.

"That has made me bigger and stronger," she says.

On some policy questions Lambie alternates between strong opinions and an open book. For example she says penalty rates are "killing small business" and ripe for reform but is not sure where the troubled Future of Financial Advice proposals should end up, whether the GST should increase or whether the pension age should rise.

She is implacably opposed to a means test on pensions ("For some of these guys that's all they have. That's where all their pennies are."), the sale of Medibank and ABC budget cuts.

"I'm not into cutting the ABC budget at all. I think they are doing a good job," she says.

Public sector savings could be achieved through much more rigorous performance management of staff, she says.

"They need to be treated like it's a business," she says.

The NDIS is also close to her heart and says talk of winding it back while it is still in a trial phase is highly premature.

"There will be no tightening or winding that back," she says. Long wait over

PUP's Western Australian Senator-elect and civil engineer Dio Wang has had to wait eight months through the election rerun to have his place confirmed.

"I am relieved it's all over and I can't wait for it," says **China**-born Wang, who will quit as managing director of Australasian Resources (majority owned by Clive Palmer) to take up his seat. He rejects predictions the bloc will splinter.

"It will be very democratic. I'm sure we can talk through our disagreements, if any, before we come out with our policy or comments on legislation."

At the same time, he echoes Lambie's "state-first" credo.

"Quite simply, I'm representing the people of WA," he says.

Wang admits facing a steep learning curve, having only visited Canberra three times. He says he will simply try his best.

"After all, I'm not a seasoned politician, but I think that's a good thing for the parliament. The more real-life experience the Senate has, the better," he says.

Wang has a passion for agribusinesses.

"We were talking about being the food bowl for the world. We should be working hard towards that goal," he says.

What of Muir? The former Construction, Forestry, **Mining** and **Energy** Union delegate from Gippsland refuses to talk publicly. He won't even take calls from other politicians.

The party's policies must largely be divined from the internet. It is apparent it wants greater infrastructure spending (about 2 per cent of gross domestic product as a minimum), more focus on driver education and consistency in road laws between states. Its stance on many policy questions is unknown. Policy devourers

Leyonhjelm and Day are starkly different creatures to their other newly elected colleagues. They devour policy. They will take convincing, especially as Leyonhjelm's mission is to shift the political pendulum.

"I want the LDP to be to the Liberals what the Greens have become to Labor – to pull them in a liberal direction as Labor has been pulled in a socialist direction by the Greens," he says.

Day, who founded a nationwide housing **company**, and Leyonhjelm, who runs an agribusiness consultancy, look like philosophical soulmates in many ways.

They support lifting of media ownership rules, tearing up industrial rules which they see as hindering employment such as penalty rates and minimum wages, and dismantling the renewable **energy** target.

"We are centre-right crossbenchers. Our natural disposition is to support most of the stuff the government has got on their agenda," Day says.

The pair are big on user pays and where necessary, funding users of services rather than providers. They dislike the Gonski education model and express concern over the national disability insurance scheme, which Day says is "clearly unaffordable". Leyonhjelm says it needs to be restricted.

"The thing is there are some disabled people who deserve support and they are not receiving sufficient support currently. The reason is because too much money is spent on people who don't need support," he says.

Charging more for GP visits, Leyonhjelm describes as a "no brainer".

"Health services have to be rationed. A good way to slow things down is to have a co-payment because it reduces the frivolous use of the services," he says.

There are differences. Day opposes means testing the pension whereas Leyonhjelm thinks it needs better targeting.

"There are far too many people who are receiving pensions who are not poor. All assets including the family home should be considered," Leyonhjelm says.

Day disagrees. He believes prosperity and well-being starts with home ownership.

"If you have got a job and you own your home, you don't need the government," he says.

Day is more cautious than Leyonhjelm on the **sale** of Medibank, saying he would look at it but wants to see the impact.

In terms of dealing with the government, Day insists there is no lingering bad blood over his failed bid to stand as a candidate for the Liberal Party. He has known Abbott for 25 years.

"They did me a favour," he says. "I always felt I would become a politician. There is an old Scottish saying, 'if it's meant for you, it won't go past you'."

Six out of eight votes needed by Tony Abbott to pass bills opposed by Labor and the Greens.

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