



Politics Federal

Political pedigree behind Tasmanian premiership contender

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Some 20 years ago, a young Will Hodgman needed somewhere to crash in Boston. He called long-term friend James Groom to arrange a couple nights on the floor.

A month later Hodgman finally left. Groom, still one of Hodgman's closest friends, says this tells you plenty about the man who will likely be Tasmanian premier after Saturday's election.

"He was just so enthusiastic about meeting people, about experiencing that part of life, he just embraced it, made great friends quickly... he has got a winning personality and people just warm to him on a personal level," Groom says.



Premiership aspirant Will Hodgman, sometimes known as 'Young Will'. Photo: Peter Mathew

Hodgman has certainly settled in as opposition leader. For eight long years he has led the Liberal Party. Groom backs the usual assessment of Hodgman as a moderate or small "l" liberal. Hodgman himself has previously said he held polar

opposite views to his father, who was a federal and state MP, on some issues such as the republic (which the would-be premier favours).

He also publicly references working on child abuse cases as a lawyer in Britain as being a potent moment in the awakening of his own political ambition. Yet this personal more progressive element to his politics has been tempered by political reality. Hodgman refused to grant his MPs a conscience vote on a gay marriage bill that many suspect he may have otherwise supported.

"It was all part of an over-arching strategy of 'let's keep the focus on the government, let's try to avoid controversy to the greatest possible extent,'" says Richard Ecclestone, a professor of political science at the University of Tasmania.

Labor claims this is evidence that Hodgman will dance to the tune of more conservative party figures such as Senator Eric Abetz.

No 'plaything' of the right

Groom has no time for these criticisms. "He is a moderate person. This perception that is trotted out by his opponents that a Will Hodgman-led government will be a plaything of the conservative right is simply not accurate," he says.

Supporters and opponents alike agree Hodgman presents well as a respectable, middle-class family man.

He is a fit married father of three, backs the Geelong football team, plays the guitar and has an apparent penchant for cookbooks as well as a more predictable obsession with political biographies.

Groom says he is also extremely hard-working. "He is a highly disciplined person. That has come through in the way he has managed the role of opposition leader, it is a bloody hard job," he says.

There is also a dynastic edge to his candidacy. Hodgman's father Michael, who died last year, was a state and federal MP. His grandfather and uncle both sat in state parliament. Older members of the establishment still affectionately call the 44-year-old "Young Will". It is believed that voters still respond well to the name

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THE LIBERALS HAVE BEEN PRAGMATIC AND CAUTIOUS, HE SAYS.

Eye to eye with Labor

Eccleston says that on many points the Liberals are in "lock step" with Labor. This gels with the assessment of Labor hard-heads that the best thing Hodgman has going for him is that he is not Labor candidate. Labor tacticians also believe this has caused some unease, pointing to polling showing some voters feel, even after eight years watching the opposition leader, they don't really know what Hodgman stands for.

One prominent point of difference is Hodgman's insistence that he will tear up the forestry "peace deal" brokered between the Gillard Labor government, the Lara Giddings-led Labor-Green government, environmentalists and the industry.

Hodgman insists there is a market for logs that could deliver jobs to the state. Underlining this part of his pitch were official figures out on Thursday again showing Tasmania leading the nation on unemployment. That figure sits at 7.3 per cent.

Another signature policy is that Hodgman has pledged to cut a net figure of 500 public service jobs.

This has prompted the predictable howls from Labor but has allowed Hodgman to point to at least one hard decision he will take in an attempt to drag a very weak budget position back to surplus.

Despite these policies Eccleston says he detects little of a Jeff Kennett-style reformist push which some commentators suggest is necessary.

Hodgman, for example, has ruled out other measures that might provide immediate boost such as the sale of Tasmanian Hydro.

Even Groom says he detects a difference between the Hodgman he sees on the television and the one with whom he shares dinners (often cooked by Hodgman of course). Groom notes that Hodgman makes little play in public of his keen and

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Groom's final word is that Hodgman would be a "bloody good premier". No doubt he hopes to outstay that invitation too.

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