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"In Support of Progress" Newsletter

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What a week!

Wherever you look, something dramatic is happening!

It has been an extraordinary week on the political front, with much busy-ness and movement. In Canberra, in Victoria, and in Tasmania, and behind all this the acrimony of a YES-NO referendum to be held October 14.

The head of the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs, Michael Pezzullo, has "stood aside" while claims of partisanship are being examined. These claims stem from a leaked series of text messages between him and a Liberal Party heavyweight over time, designed to influence events in his favour/interest (not financial).

Now Pezzullo was instrumental in setting up the Department of Home Affairs, a monolithic creation, driven by his penchant for power and "national security". The irony is that being such a driver for security, his texts were anything but secure. And that lack of security has brought him down. Hoist on his own petard, as one might say.

One suspects the Department will now be fundamentally restructured, and Pezzullo will ride off into the sunset.

The Qantas CEO keeps saying sorry, which makes one feel almost empathy for her, having to clean up a significant financial and PR mess led by her predecessor, and not helped by the continuing presence of the Board's Chair, who has lost the confidence of many of the company's investors, employees and customers.

The veritable albums that have been produced by the Disability Royal Commission are weighty tomes indeed, with over 222 recommendations for reform and restructure. It has been a mammoth effort, but will require enormous fortitude and focus to bring about any change. Hagglng between the States and the Commonwealth has already begun as to who will shoulder the responsibility for reform, and how it will be done.

In Victoria, Premier Dan Andrews has resigned. Suddenly, out of the blue, he called a media conference to announce it. It would seem that only his immediate family knew what was coming. He was at the top of his game, and as he has done so often in the past, his announcement has left critics and supporters alike flabbergasted and struggling to come to terms with it. He was a Premier who attracted much criticism, but was a master operator, who increased his hold on power over time, winning elections with increased majorities – a rare event. Victoria will be different without him.

And in Tasmania, a Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has led to an increased focus on an enormous problem, with the government struggling to come to terms with the situation, saying that it will develop an approach to "fix the problem"

However, it has created a different problem altogether. And an absolute woogy.

After a series of damning text messages from the Attorney General to an as yet anonymous person (presumably a former staffer) were published in the mainstream press, including one which stated "I am sick of victim survivors", the Premier called her in and basically sacked her from Cabinet. In response, the now-MP has announced she will resign from Parliament altogether, with a veritable spray at her colleagues and Party from her and her husband, both of whom have very publicly resigned from the Liberal Party altogether (in disgust).

She says this particular message was taken out of context, and it may well have been, but other text messages were quite brutal in their reflections on her colleagues.

One would think that she has well and truly drawn her "line in the sand" and that there is no coming back from that, however, at the time of publication she had not resigned from Parliament and she could change her mind,

What to make of these events?

Now, no doubt the two incidences of text messages referred to were private and confidential, but here is yet another example to show that text messages are not as private as one might wish them to be. Not only can they be read by others, but people, once friends, can turn. How else do these messages leak?

Both Pezzullo and the Attorney-General are known to be ruthless in their treatment of people, and one suspects their emotional intelligence to be somewhat lacking. How else does one explain the extraordinary turnover of staff in these environments? If you treat people harshly/badly, then what do you expect will happen? You might win battles but you lose wars. As is so often the case, retribution from those damaged can be far more hurtful than the original sleight.

The findings of the various Commissions into public services and the treatment of vulnerable persons, be they the aged, the disabled, the sick or children, would suggest there is something fundamentally wrong in the way these services are provided. We are all shocked when we find out about them through such Inquiries, but they are obviously not one-off and isolated incidents and they are not new to the "insiders" in the system. And yet somehow, they are allowed to occur and re-occur.

So, what is it in the system that allows these behaviours to occur? Is it something systemic? Something bureaucratic process cannot handle? The Tasmanian Commission has even gone so far as to suggest that legal process has inhibited discovery, and if that is true, then it is a blight on the system. And it MUST be acted on.

The present status of the former Attorney-General; has thrown the government into chaos. As much as those remaining might say of the ship of state "Steady as she goes", it is anything but. And the mantra of strong stable majority government is now a total mirage, as it would seem from the AG's text messages, to have been always thus.

What now? I was surprised when the AG announced, having been stripped of her Cabinet position, that she would resign from Parliament. It was obviously said in a fit of pique, if not outright rage. The old political maxim of "Don't explain, don't complain, and don't resign", has certainly not been followed, and the team has suffered disastrously as a result. Team players are not easy to come by in the political world, where ambitions can rise beyond capacity and opportunity.

Anyway...The government has two former members on the cross bench, placing it in a minority. It is in fact dependent on those two disenchanted former members for its continuing survival. If now-MP Archer stays in parliament, she will not only be a thorn in the side of the government but will actively work to de-stabilise it further, and particularly work against the Premier. Revenge may be sweet, but it is ultimately a very destructive force. And if she leaves parliament altogether, then her likely replacement will not be an ally of the Premier, so either way – troubled waters ahead.

Either way, there is more to come.

Added to which is the position of the Minister for Energy, who will soon be fronting the powerful Parliamentary Privileges Committee, and who knows what is going to happen in that forum.

So, there is no disputing that the government is in trouble. It has been suggested that the Premier prorogue Parliament, allowing him some breathing space to recalibrate and shore up his defences. But it is at its heart a delaying tactic, and thus delaying what is increasingly seen as the inevitable end-game.

Let me draw a parallel from recent history. The comparison is in fact striking.

In the 70's and early 80's, a Labor Government was led by Neilson, then Lowe, and then Holgate. Neilson was popular, but Lowe became even more popular through his stance against Federal interference in State affairs.

However, a proposed infrastructure project (the Gordon-below Franklin hydro development), caused anxiety in the community and rifts in the Labor team, which eventually led to a successful challenge to his leadership.

Together with another, he left the government to sit on the cross bench, placing that government in a minority. Premier Holgate then prorogued parliament, but on its return was forced to the polls.

Now compare that with the Hodgman Gutwein Rockliff governments. Hodgman was popular, but Gutwein became even more popular through his stance on the Covid outbreak.

However, a proposed infrastructure project (a sports and entertainment stadium, or Marinus – take your pick) caused anxiety in the community and rifts in the Liberal team, the pressure of these and other things leading to his retirement.

Premier Rockliff takes over but is faced with an internal rebellion over these projects, losing two members to the crossbench and placing the government in a minority. The Premier now faces the prospect of losing control of Parliament and thus proroguing parliament is now a serious option on offer.

Almost exactly the same.

The state seat of Clark now becomes very interesting. Archer is diligent with an impressive work ethic, a committed and driven politician – she was everywhere in her electorate. Some say she would go the opening of a wound, so often was she in attendance at functions.

Those elected at the last election were:

Archer (big vote winner, now sacked from Cabinet and possibly leaving parliament)

Ogilvie (a former Labor MP, but now a Minister in the Liberal government)

O'Connor (also a vote getter, Greens leader since resigned)

Haddad (not a strong vote winner for Labor)

Johnston (former mayor of Glenorchy – independent and stirring the possum)

So no big vote-getter left. It is wide open. Moving to seven seats per electorate at the next election, other seats will be equally open and volatile.

So, in summary:

Texting is dangerous – be very careful!

Governments have to resolve the provision of public services to the vulnerable. This is a huge task but the present situation is simply unacceptable.

Revenge is a very unattractive attribute, but it is widespread

Minority governments are unstable, by their very nature

History can be a good teacher

The current issues have a fair way to go yet – next week will not be a quiet one!

FIRE

Without wanting to appear overly dramatic about this:

Be ready.

Are your gutters clean?

Have you packed your emergency kit?

What about animals?

If you evacuate, where will you go?