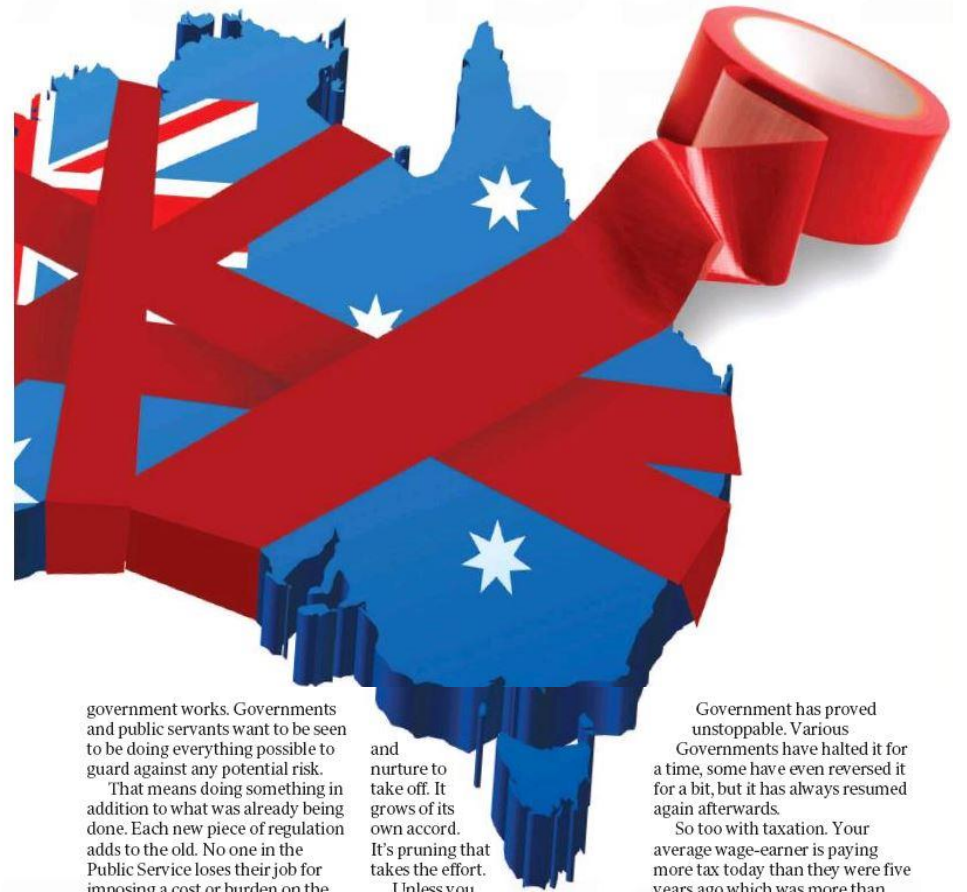
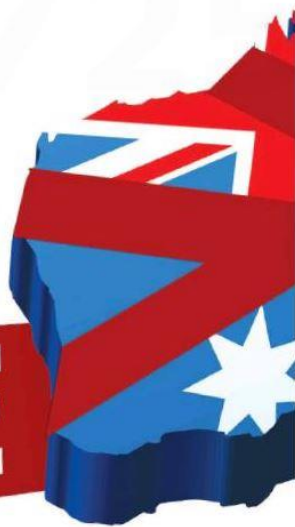


Bad form to have so much

RED TAPE



DON'T mind filling out government forms when I think someone is reading them. But I can't see the point in filling out a form that is never collected or, worse, just thrown away.

When I flew back to Australia on an international flight earlier this month, I was issued with a form about the disease ebola.

Every passenger was instructed to fill it out with their name, address, contact details and even the seat they were sitting in on the plane. I guess if the guy sitting next to me gets ebola they want to be able to track me down and put me in quarantine. We were told the Australian Government required us to fill in these forms and warned of the consequences if we gave false information. Fair enough.

As I came through quarantine on the way out of the airport, I tried to give my completed form to the very polite official who was collecting the Customs Forms.

He wasn't interested. The form is of no use to me, so I asked him what I should do with it. He pointed to a rubbish bin that had



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been helpfully located by the exit. The bin was overflowing with all the other ebola forms that passengers had thrown away after clearing quarantine.

The reason I am getting cross about this is it is the sixth time I have flown into Australia from overseas this year, so it is the sixth time I have been through this rigmarole. I have flown in from Europe, America, China, and Singapore. I have flown in on different airlines. Each time we have been instructed to fill out an ebola form which no one bothers to collect. Now, this is in addition to the standard form everyone entering Australia has to fill out that asks whether you are bringing into the country drugs, firearms, weapons, illegal pornography and a

whole host of other things besides.

Of course, no other country asks arriving passengers to fill out a form so long and comprehensive. But this is Australia. We are world-beaters at regulatory overkill. At least that form is collected. The ebola form isn't. It's just a useless exercise in getting people to provide unnecessary information.

The immediate threat of ebola has passed and we haven't had any fatalities in Australia. So why does the Government still ask people to fill out forms that no one is reading? Lurking in that question is an insight into how modern government works and why it is gradually strangling us.

After the ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, the Australian Government wanted to show it was serious about protecting public health and safety. Of course it could always track arrivals through passenger lists and passport information but it wanted to go further. It ordered the issue and collection of new forms.

Since the outbreak has ended, no one has bothered to terminate that requirement. It's just how

government works. Governments and public servants want to be seen to be doing everything possible to guard against any potential risk.

That means doing something in addition to what was already being done. Each new piece of regulation adds to the old. No one in the Public Service loses their job for imposing a cost or burden on the public that is too high. It is only if they leave something undone that they get into trouble.

BACK in July, the Government announced it would spend more money on biosecurity.

It announced it would enhance food safety and tighten food labelling. It also announced it would cut red tape.

All those are worthy proposals. It's just that doing them all at the same time is tricky.

You can trust the public servants to do well on the new regulation. It's just the reduction in old regulation — "cutting red tape" — where they will have trouble.

Government is like a lush tropical jungle. It doesn't need care

and nurture to take off. It grows of its own accord. It's pruning that takes the effort.

Unless you prune, it will suffocate any productive vegetation that gets in its way.

Forget the inconvenience to travellers and tourists of our over-the-top-bureaucracy and spare a thought for all those small and big businesses that spend hours and hours filling in forms that nobody reads. Every hour takes them away from their business. Now that I think about it, it is probably better that no one is reading those forms. Imagine the cost if we had to employ people to do that!

Anyone working in business will tell you that the amount of regulation today is greater than it was five years ago, which was more than it was 10 years ago and more than it was before that. In modern democracies, the growth of

Government has proved unstoppable. Various Governments have halted it for a time, some have even reversed it for a bit, but it has always resumed again afterwards.

So too with taxation. Your average wage-earner is paying more tax today than they were five years ago which was more than they were five years before that.

Is society better for this higher tax and extra regulation? It hasn't produced much in terms of growth or extra jobs.

Each year the government extends its reach a little bit more, a few extra forms to guard against a new risk, sometimes real and sometimes imagined.

We are taking risk out of our society but do not think that comes without a cost.

Each extra burden takes resources and time away from other things. The cumulative effect is crippling. And those are the people we expect to generate jobs and the taxes to pay for all of this.

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