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BBQ stopper of the century

There were big warning signs in the Victorian election. A Labor opposition harnessed pockets of discontent to throw a passable government out of office in just one term. The federal Liberals didn't help. All through the state campaign they advocated a \$7 GP co-payment — a policy with no hope of passing the senate — which they dumped once the election was over.

Following the defeat in Victoria, the Liberal high command let it be known that there were no implications for the federal government.

Now we have Queensland. A good state government smashed — losing more than 30 seats — by an economically irresponsible opposition. The Queensland LNP had its problems — the Premier seemed to pick fights with everyone from bikies to judges — but they were mangled by the federal Liberals, who thought a \$20 medical co-payment would be a good idea, then flirted with all sorts of ways to increase the GST. Finally the Liberal government decided to plonk a knighthood on Prince Philip in the last week of the campaign.

The junior woodchucks of the Coalition were sent out on the airwaves to say that since the knighthood cost no money, and no one died as a result then it didn't really matter.

Well, lives are precious and money is scarce but I'll tell you one thing that is in shorter supply than money and that is respect. I wouldn't be wasting any of that if I were looking to be re-elected.

Australia Day is the biggest day of the year for a local MP, apart from Anzac Day. MPs spend the day mixing with new



citizens and community groups celebrating, with pride, what it means to be Australian. The rest of the public is gathering around the barbecue. Knighting Prince Philip was the barbecue stopper of the century. It completely hijacked Australia Day. Rarely have I heard such ridicule.

In welcome news, Tony Abbott shelved his "signature" paid parental leave plan yesterday. Five years ago I first argued this was not a Liberal policy, that Australia could not afford it, and it was bad value for money. Since then I have

never met a Liberal, apart from Abbott, who supported it in private. The ambitious woodchucks eager for promotion who have been extolling its virtues to the public now say it is right to drop it. It's one thing to change your mind on principle. It's another to spin on the head of a coin for the sake of advancement. Respect is hard won but easily lost in politics.

Now there is controversy over Abbott's staff. In my view that is a matter for him and them. Staff are not elected. They should not be making decisions. They should not be

doing media interviews. They do not need a public profile. If they gather a profile it is a mark of failure, not success.

When Rupert Murdoch tweeted against one of them recently he guaranteed she would not be sacked. That should have been the end of it. But for some unfathomable reason senior cabinet ministers, and the junior woodchucks, decided to get out in the media to defend the chief of staff. They did it with such enthusiasm an outsider could have been forgiven for thinking their jobs depended on it. If

they think that, it's a topsy-turvy world.

Cabinet ministers owe their jobs to constituents who voted them into parliament and their colleagues. They were able to win the trust of a majority of voters in the swinging seats. If they are thrown out it will be because significant sections of those voters have turned against them. They don't owe their jobs to unelected staffers.

In our system the voters decide the fate of MPs, ministers and governments. MPs account to voters, not staffers.

That's called democracy.

The tradition of the Liberal Party is views are passed up, not handed down. The views of the membership filter up via MPs and the party room to the cabinet and the leadership. The membership will give a lot of latitude to MPs but it won't work for policies that fly in the face of Liberal values. You can't expect a Liberal to support higher taxes and bigger government for the sake of state-sponsored benefits like PPL. The Liberal Party is not a command and control operation.

If the PPL had ever been discussed in the party room, before it was announced, it would never have become policy. If the idea of knighthoods for royals had been floated with a representative group of grassroots MPs, the leadership would have been saved from embarrassing itself. The command and control model is not helping the Liberal Party, it is strangling it.

MPs who conscientiously listen to their electorates and think about policy are assets, not inconveniences. They are worth a lot more than those who toady up to the media with the latest line approved by the leadership and reflect back what they think it wants to hear. All summer the government has distracted itself with things that the electorate doesn't care about, like staff and reshuffles and knighthoods. The public is dying to hear someone with answers to the issues that concern them, like coping with the cost of living and financing a better future for their children.

The public is quite prepared to change government after one term. If the government does not change, the public will forcibly change it.

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