

# Too much 'Yes, Prime Minister'

**T**ONY Abbott will now be thinking about the lessons his Government should draw from the downfall of Bronwyn Bishop. At the outset, he should note who showed judgment in the whole affair and who did not. The first group of people are his best advisers.

The expenses affair led to Bishop's resignation 18 days after they were first published. That's 18 days of public anger and political pain. With Bishop's ham-fisted attempts to justify herself the matter was only going to finish one way. But could it have been avoided?

For starters, Bishop could have shown some judgment by doing what everyone else does and driving from Melbourne to Geelong. Once this ridiculous extravagance had been exposed she could have cut the flimsy excuses and apologised. She showed bad judgment to get into



**PETER COSTELLO**

this situation and no judgment about how to get out of it.

Then there were the ambitious members of the Government, woodchucks desperate for advancement. They repeat everything, real or imagined, they think will please the Prime Minister. These people are now busily burying the transcripts where they predicted the whole thing was just a storm in a teacup. They are useful in carrying a line but no help making a decision.

Then there were the senior colleagues who gently, within the bounds of loyalty, suggested Bishop should go. These included

Julie Bishop, who suggested Bishop should consider her position, Scott Morrison, who suggested she consult with her colleagues, and Joe Hockey, who suggested this would not pass the "sniff test".

All these showed judgment. A leader's best advisers are the ones prepared to tell him what he doesn't want to hear.

Our system of government is Cabinet government. We are not a presidency where decision-making rests in the hands of one person. Our constitutional theory is that better decisions come from the collective view of senior ministers.

The directors of both political parties should file a copy of Bronwyn's press conference of July 18 where she tried to defend herself. It was a train wreck. The video should warn new MPs. It is a lesson in what not to do.

If Bishop had a chance of surviving before it, she had no chance afterwards.



Perhaps she thought it was clever to call a Saturday afternoon press conference so the senior Canberra journalists were not there. But she was fied by the junior ones. She began by telling us she had come from an important football game, as if to say the press conference was of minor comparative importance and quite an interruption to her busy schedule. She was unable to explain how her helicopter ride was within her entitlement (the whole point of the conference) but she refused to apologise for it.

The public saw a woman who was hopelessly out of touch. She wouldn't apologise because deep down she thought she was entitled to a helicopter to travel from Melbourne to Geelong.

Once the public saw the arrogance of it all her career was over. No amount of effort from any of her colleagues would have been able to save it. Bronwyn Bishop

isn't the only person in the Parliament who has stretched her entitlements. But when she was challenged, she had no defence. That's why she had to go.

In the Howard government's first term, three ministers were sacked over irregularities on travel allowances. Howard even sacked his chief-of-staff, caught in the fallout.

Labor only stopped when the scrutiny was thrown back on it. Abbott might reflect on this. He needs someone who can counter-attack on his behalf. In the past he has led the negative campaign for the Coalition. Now he is PM it would help his image if someone shouldered this burden for him.

Labor no doubt feels that it has evened the score. The Coalition brought down its Speaker, Peter Slipper. The Coalition's Speaker suffered the same fate. History will probably pair them in disgrace. But Slipper's fall was over some truly

offensive remarks about women. He was defended by the feminist Julia Gillard, who tried to turn the tables on Abbott with the (in)famous speech against misogyny.

It's weird how politics works. A man who insulted women was defended on the grounds that the campaign to remove him was "anti-women". In this case a man, Bill Shorten, leads a campaign against a woman and no one cries sexism. At least Bishop didn't stoop to play the feminist card.

Bishop rose and fell on her merits, as did Slipper, as did Gillard. After a career that went on too long she lost touch. The lesson is to treat the public with respect.

If you can't do that then it is time to retire from public life, which would be best for Bronwyn and her party at the next election.

**PETER COSTELLO IS A FORMER FEDERAL TREASURER**