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Letter from Melbourne

Since 1994, a monthly public affairs newsletter distilling public policy and government decisions which effect business opportunities in Victoria, Australia and beyond. 2,000,000 words available to search digitally.

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About the publisher

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The firm works with many engineering and information technology firms and other professional association and industry groups on a wide range of issues in Victoria, Canberra and overseas.

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- Two monthly publications
- Events at our offices and elsewhere
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Melbourne/Victorian Infrastructure

After some recent weeks going through the family diaries and photo albums of my family, including my own, I was surprised at some of my own (quality, interesting, out there) prose, and photos and notes involving my good self. Some going back many years and some in more recent times. And I was surprised and delighted at some of what I read and saw of own work. A busy life. Which brings me to the busy life of Dan O’Farrell. As of this date, Thursday 17 April, the editor reckons that he should not have resigned. So many of all types and needs people contacted him after many years of a different type and style of government. He could not have remembered everything. Too hasty. Paranoia. Set-Up. ICAC focus. Clear definitions. Let’s get some crooks into jail. This bottle is not in the space of graft and corruption.

The late Wally Curran was no close mate of mine, though we did swap a few words cross the barricades, in my early extra-curricular career. To me he was the old style union leader who rose from a ruff job to really lead his (men). There was real integrity there for his cause(s), without other distractions. God Bless Him.

The Cover reminds the editor of stories of Melbourne in the eighteen-seventies when the concern was that the growth of the City and associated transport would lead to horse manure being five storeys high! Another favourite transport story of the editor focuses on the 1958 Hire Purchase Act of Victoria, and similar in other states, whereby the purchaser of a car, or perhaps a washing machine, need only pay 20 per cent on delivery and pay off the rest over the next many years. This consumer opportunity had a strong effect on the busy-ness of Flinders Street Station.

Happy Reading.

— Alistair Urquhart

He could not have remembered everything. Too hasty. Paranoia. Set-Up. ICAC focus. Clear definitions. Let’s get some crooks into jail.

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State government & politics

Budget, and Infrastructure

Treasurer Michael O’Brien, who is ramping preparations for the May budget, remains adamant Victoria cannot handle building multiple large infrastructure projects simultaneously, claiming too much “overlap” could force up costs by creating labour shortages. In contrast, Dr Naphine argued the government could “walk and chew gum at the same time” by building both the airport rail link and the Metro project simultaneously.

Watch this space

The Victorian government has claimed Labor’s transport plans are not deep enough to keep the budget, revealing the Metro rail link is expected to cost as much as $11.6 billion. According to The Age, in an attempt to redirect the blowtorch back at Labor over financial management, Treasurer Michael O’Brien has told the opposition leader Daniel Andrews’s travel promises are under-funded by nearly $19 billion. The opposition election pitch, Project 10,000, includes promises to eliminate 50 level crossings, build the Melbourne metro rail tunnel, improve Hoddle Street and remove 5,000 trucks a day from the Westgate Bridge. Labor’s own figures suggest the package would cost as much as $17.9 billion to deliver, mostly over two terms. But it has been vague about how it would be paid for, with a proposal to set up an infrastructure fund by leasing the Port of Melbourne, probably for up to 99 years.

East-West poll

The Victorian government is heading to an election with its key priorities in doubt, as most voters remain unconvinced about the east-west project and more than a quarter of its safety is getting worse. Despite countless hours and millions of dollars spent marketing the $8 billion road project, the latest Age/Nielsen poll has found that only one in four Victorians believe the tunnel should be the highest infrastructure priority to ease congestion and improve liveability. Instead, most people want the government to build the Metro Rail Capacity Project – a nine-kilometre underground train line through the city that would allow another 20,000 passengers to use the network during peak hours.

Watchdog lacks teeth

According to The Age ‘an eminent lawyer who advised the Victorian government on its anti-corruption framework has lashed out at the system backed by the Coalition and warned against diminishing the role of the Ombudsman. Former High Court Appeal judge Stephen Charles QC has intensified his criticism of the integrity system, warning the ombudsman’s role is vital because the $170m Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission is deficient’.

Protest bill

New laws designed to move on protesters, which the Victorian government admits will limit free speech and the right to peaceful protest, are set to pass State Parliament in early March. The government’s Summary Offences Bill will probably pass the upper house, extending police powers to move protestors who block access to buildings or cause others to “have a reasonable fear of violence”. According to The Age, anyone who ignores a “move-on” order could be arrested and face a $720 fine. Legal, community and civil rights groups have raised serious concerns about the laws, which will also let police ask a court for exclusion orders banning a person from a public space for up to 12 months – with those breaching a ban facing up to two years in jail. Watch this space.

Wig available


Not Yet

According to the Herald Sun, former premier Ted Baillieu has turned down two requests to sit for a portrait that would complete a historic collection of former premier paintings in Parliament House. Mr Baillieu has given no indication of when, or if, he would be willing to have his portrait painted.

Cluster

The Australian reports that an independent inquiry will investigate whether a cancer cluster exists at the 160-year-old Victorian parliament building due to MPs and staff being exposed to carcinogens or other environmental toxins. The panel will be chaired by Monash University epidemiology and preventive medicine head John McNeil with the support of other eminent doctors.

This follows calls for an investigation by MPs who have been diagnosed with cancer and are concerned about a possible cluster. Air-quality and surface tests at Victoria’s decaying Parliament House may be extended.

Liberals

Resigned

Liberal Member for Eastern Victorian Philip Davis recently visited the Governor and formally resigned. Andrew Ronalds was pre-selected to fill the upper house seat. Davis has had many years in the Victorian Parliament, having come to that place following some serious interface with unions and others over industrial relations issues in the 1980’s, including his involvement as a farmer and community leader in the shearing of sheep ‘wide combs dispute.’

Mary’s good seat

Victorian Premier Denis Napthine’s election campaign avoided an embarrassing blow, with senior minister Mary Wooldridge losing pre-selection for the state seat of Kew, after her seat of Doncaster was abolished in last year’s redistribution. Dr Naphine wrote to every local branch member pleading with them to vote for cabinet Ms Wooldridge, warning “I need her skills and expertise by my side’. Her political future has now been secured with a move to the top spot in the upper house sealed after an incumbent decided not to contest her spot. Jan Kronberg was the third-placed Liberal on the party’s Eastern Metropolitan region ticket behind former Baillieu minister Richard Dalla-Riva and upper house president Bruce Atkinson.

The news provided much relief for the government after weeks of distractions during the search for a new seat.

Labor

Ex-Labor minister calls for reform

Theo Theophanous, a Labor minister in the Kirner, Bracks and Brumby governments, writing in The Age, argues that ‘if Labor is to reform itself it needs to listen to more than a narrow, middle-class cultural elite’. He also argues that the Labor women’s group organised to get more women into parliament ‘tends to promote mainly professional women from the dominant culture’.

Breaking own rule

State Labor’s election strategy has suffered a major blow with a tribunal ruling the party broke its own affirmative action rules in its choice of Victorian upper house candidates. According to a report in The Age, Victorian Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews is now under pressure to reopen preselections after the party’s appeal tribunal, including former sex discrimination commissioner Sue Walpole, found a factional deal he backed had failed to endorse enough female candidates for this year’s state election. A confidential copy of Ms Walpole’s report reveals her calling on the party’s powerful national executive to overturn its earlier support for the Victorian branch’s controversial preselection intervention that triggered an angry reaction from candidates and rank-and-file members in late 2013.

Labor’s Bayside campaign

Labor is launching a pre-emptive strike to woo voters in a string of marginal south-eastern seats blamed for derailing its 2010 election campaign. In an early set of promises more than eight months ahead of the November 29 poll, state Labor will promise almost $20 million of grants for schools and community facilities benefiting the ‘sandbelt’ seats of Mordialloc, Carrum and Frankston. The electorates stretching around the eastern shore of Port Phillip Bay swing
Federal

GST carve-up
Victoria and Western Australia are the big losers in a $670m proposed reshaping of the GST carve-up that will reignite the debate over how the tax is shared between the states, the Financial Review reports. Victoria will likely have its share of the GST pool cut from 90 cents for every dollar of GST raised within its borders to 88 cents. That will cost the Victorian government $300m more than if it had maintained its share.

Napthine warns PM
Premier Napthine has warned Tony Abbott that almost $1b worth of programs for hospitals, homelessness and kindergartens are at risk – and could jeopardise the state budget – without ongoing federal support, reported The Age.

Which comes first?
The Age carries a story headlined ‘Infrastructure risks as promises delayed’ and reads ‘Victoria faces an election-year budget headache as the Abbott government has been sluggish in clarifying funding for key infrastructure projects, including the second stage of the East West Link….. Treasurer Michael O’Brien said it should be the last time the state budget takes place before the federal budget, warning that delays and uncertainty had made the task of forecasting “more difficult than it needs to be”.

Diversity
The outgoing multicultural affairs minister in the Victorian government has accused his federal colleagues of ‘fearing cultural diversity’. Bulleen MP Nick Korsiras, who retired from this role in March and was replaced by Matthew Guy who is already planning minister, regrets failing to convince successive federal governments to follow Victoria’s lead and introduce special legislation recognising multiculturalism.

Following on
New Victorian multicultural affairs minister Matthew Guy has taken issue with the federal attorney-general George Brandis for his suggestion in federal parliament that people have the right to be bigoted. Speaking in the Victorian parliament, he said that the Victorian Coalition government would make a submission to the Commonwealth on the proposed changes and raise concerns about the repeal of section 18C. ‘I am concerned there may be some harmful and unintended impacts upon our community should the exposure draft [of the federal attorney-general], as it stands, be enacted’.

Trade deals and jobs
The expected flow-on of the PM’s recent trip to North Asia and the two signed trade pacts, with Japan and South Korea, is cheaper imports and Aussie jobs. The Korean deal alone is expected to create 1,000 jobs a year. Forty per cent of those jobs will be in Victoria, the rest in NSW. South Korea has already signed similar deals with the US and the EU. Failure to reach this deal would have seen a slump in Aussie exports.

Agriculture

Hunters
According to the Department of Environment and Primary Industries, the new Ducks in Sight video will be used as an education tool for the Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT), which all hunters are required to pass before they get a licence to hunt in Victoria. Agriculture (and Water) Minister Peter Walsh said most hunters obeyed the law and only a small number of offences had taken place since the latest season opened.

Good job

A model turnaround
According to The Age, the socio-economically disadvantaged Sunshine Secondary College, was highlighted as a case study in a Grattan Institute report released titled Turning Around Schools: It Can be Done. When principal Tim Blunt took over at Sunshine in 2006, about two-thirds of the students in years 7 to 11 were barely achieving primary school levels of literacy. The school was in crisis. Confronting the issue began in 2007 with a “whole-school approach” that started with the simple allotment of extra class periods for literacy, even at the expense of other subjects. The school is still slightly below the national average on most measures, but when compared with schools facing similar disadvantage, Sunshine has gone from the bottom ten per cent to the top ten per cent.

Religious instruction
According to The Age, the main provider of Christian instruction in Victorian government schools contacted primary principals this week in an attempt to assert its right to deliver religious education. Faced with general declining interest in special religious instruction, leading chaplaincy organisation Access Ministries sent a “clarification” email to all schools offering the program, while disputing its decline in popularity.

Christian details
In The Age, columnist Wendy Squires wrote: ‘when it was revealed hundreds of primary school principals in Victoria have stopped offering weekly religious education, despite an Education Department guideline to run classes where a teacher was available. Such was the panic State legislation allows government school teachers to teach general religious education as part of the curriculum - that is, the main forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian and other societies. However, it is rarely taught in government schools. Instead, more than 120,000 Victorian schoolchildren receive instruction solely in Christianity. One of the many problems with this is who's doing the teaching. About 80 per cent of religious education is administered by volunteers of the Christian group, Access Ministries. Fairness in Religions in School, a parent-driven grassroots campaign committed to the belief that churches have no right to set curriculum policy, believes these volunteers see themselves as modern-day missionaries with an assignment to convert children.’

Details
The main provider of religious instruction in Victorian state schools is under financial pressure and currently being propped up by the federal and state governments. Financial statements from Access Ministries, the chaplaincy organisation that also delivers 81 per cent of religious instruction in primary schools, show that they received almost $20 million in government grants between 2009 and 2012.

School councils plan
According to a report in The Age, plans to give school councils far greater influence over what is taught in classrooms have hit a roadblock with Victoria’s curriculum authority backing away from the proposal. The recommendation, contained in a Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority draft discussion paper, could have handed much more control to parents who hold many council positions.
Trainee exodus
Almost 100,000 Victorian youths have dropped out of apprenticeships and traineeships in the past decade, a stinging Auditor-General’s report has revealed. According to the Herald Sun, and despite a 37 per cent increase in government investment over that time, the number of Victorians enrolling in training placements remains almost exactly the same. Auditor-General John Doyle said the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development had a “poor grasp” of the reasons why people weren’t completing their placements and there were “notable gaps” in their efforts to help youths finish their training.

Red
The Age published on its front page, a story noting that Victoria’s higher-education sector is going deeper into the red, with the financial watchdog revealing half of the state’s TAFEs are running at a loss after savage government funding cuts. A leaked assessment by the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office has found seven out of 14 public TAFEs are in deficit, including two whose future is uncertain.

La Trobe
La Trobe University said it would shed the equivalent of 350 full-time staff from its workforce of 2666 people this year. According to The Age, the university community has known since July last year that it needed to cut spending by about $65 million due to a range of factors, but the impact on staff was unknown until now.

Kindness
According to the Herald Sun, kindness is to be taught at Victorian schools in what is seen as a return to the importance of traditional values. The campaign, launched to coincide with today’s National Day of Action against Bullying and Violence, includes a student-produced video and teaching materials to be available at all secondary schools. The video encourages students to make “positive connections” with isolated or bullied peers by sitting with them, getting them to be part of games or simply opening a door.

Childcare centres
According to the Herald Sun, almost 300 Victorian childcare centres are failing to meet minimum standards under the strict new federal rating system. Eighteen months into the three-year grading process, less than two in every 10 centres are earning an “excellent” rating. This compares with the national average of 59 per cent.

Reading Challenge
The Premier’s Reading Challenge, now in its third year, runs from March until September and promotes the importance of reading to children. It is open for participants from birth to year 10. To register or find out more, go to education.vic.gov.au/pre.

Good job
RMIT is looking for a Vice-Chancellor and President. Call Amrop Cordiner King on 9620 2800.

Energy
Plant closure
A 45-year-old brown-coal power plant and open-cut mine at Anglesea, which was built to power the soon-to-close Point Henry aluminium smelter, could still find a buyer and continue to stay open, energy analysts say. But local activists have called for the Anglesea plant to be shut down rather than sold, citing health concerns from its higher-than-average sulphur dioxide emissions and its close proximity to the town and a school. Alcoa has announced it will seek buyers for The Ageing power plant and mine, built in the 1960s to supply electricity to Point Henry. All up, it supplies 40 per cent of the smelter’s power, generating a relatively small 160 megawatts.

Bush fires
More than nine kilometres of bare overhead power lines at the foot of Mount Dandenong will soon be pulled down and put underground or replaced with insulated cable, in a landmark program to reduce the risk of bushfire for thousands of residents in some of the state’s most vulnerable communities. The two projects on Melbourne’s eastern fringe are the first among six high-voltage power line replacement projects to be undertaken this financial year - at a cost of $8.7 million. Four of the projects will be in the Otways, where other communities face serious risk of bushfire. The works will be funded by the state government’s $200 million power line replacement fund, which is part of a wider $750 million program to reduce the risk of power lines starting bushfires.

Cutting power
The Environment and Resource Efficiency Plans program required major companies to identify ways in which they could reduce power and water consumption at large industrial sites they own and then implement the measures. According to a report in The Age, about 250 companies that used 100 terajoules of power or 120 million litres of water a year, or both, were required to take part. In February last year the state government informed the Environment Protection Authority, which ran the scheme, the program would be “sunsetted” well ahead of its due end date of December 31, 2014, meaning it has been voluntary for almost a year. A 2013 consultants’ review found ending the scheme early would save $3.5-$4.7 million in avoided business costs. The Victorian government has vowed to cut “red tape” by 25 per cent. The 2013 review also said the program duplicated federal schemes including Energy Efficiency Opportunities and the national carbon price. The federal government has since cut funding to the Opportunities scheme and is pushing to repeal the carbon tax.

Disagreement
Victoria’s environment commissioner has quit and hit out at the Victorian government’s attitude on climate change, saying bureaucrats told her they were directed to refrain from even using the term. Professor Kate Auty, the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability since 2008, said the government’s lack of leadership on the issue was illustrated by the phrase “climate variability” often being used when climate change was meant. Climate change refers to warming of the planet by human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases. “Climate variability” commonly describes natural fluctuations.

Wind farm
According to the Herald Sun, power giant Origin Energy will delay a $900 million wind farm development near Ballarat if the federal government changes in the renewable energy target. Origin boss Grant King said the company, Australia’s biggest electricity retailer, would push back the project by three years if the target was effectively scaled back. The group has planning permission for 157 wind turbines at the Stockyard Hill project, west of Ballarat, earmarked to be running by 2017.
Million dollar CFMEU fine sends right message

The decision of the Supreme Court imposing fines totalling $1.25 million on the Victorian CFMEU for contempt of court is welcomed by VECCI. It vindicates the decision of Grocon and the State Government to take the CFMEU to court to demonstrate there is no place for intimidation and harassment at work, no place for unlawful attacks on an employer’s right to decide who it wants to employ and no place for contempt of our courts.

The decision of the Supreme Court is noteworthy not just for the fines it imposed. The CFMEU was found to be in criminal contempt of the Court on 5 different occasions.

His Honour, Justice Cavanough, stated that the conduct of the CFMEU “amounted to ‘perverse and obstinate resistance to authority’”, involved “deliberate defiance” and was “for the most part, highly visible to the general public”. He also noted that almost immediately having been served with some of the court orders, the CFMEU “began to breach them. It breached them not just once, but repeatedly.”

It was conceded by the CFMEU that court orders had been made that were clear and capable of being complied with, that the Union fully understood them and that it nonetheless chose to disobey them.

His Honour, described the CFMEU’s repeated defiance of the orders as “very troubling” and the contempts as “exceptionally serious” warranting explicit classification as criminal contempts “perhaps for the first time in the Australian industrial context.” He also noted that having initially ignored the Court, the CFMEU made no apology and did not claim remorse.

His Honour indicated that the notion that compliance with Court orders is optional must not be tolerated. He added that “the imposition of a penalty for contempt of court should not be viewed as simply an anticipated cost of industrial action” and agreed with the proposition that “few things could be more destructive to the authority of the Court and to the rule of law than the idea that fines or similar punishment are akin to a tax that, once budgeted for, enable the use of unlawful conduct to achieve industrial outcomes.”

There were some very serious issues at play in this case and the sort of action engaged in by the CFMEU documented in the decision cannot be justified. VECCI applauds Grocon for having the courage to stand up to the CFMEU and pursue it through the court system.

Not many businesses have the resources to do what Grocon has been able to do and no other business should have to go through what it has endured. It was a heavy load to bear during both the illegal blockades and the ensuing court proceedings.

VECCI also congratulates the Victorian Government for standing shoulder to shoulder with Grocon, thereby demonstrating it will not tolerate the rule of law being so flagrantly ignored. Its support for a business confronted with such unlawful behaviour and its recent ‘Move-on’ laws that will protect businesses from unlawful picket and protest activity have both been welcomed by Victorian business.

Federally, it is time for the Opposition and the Greens to stop blocking legislation in the Senate that will restore the Australian Building & Construction Commission (ABCC) with a full suite of powers, including the power to fully prosecute parties who do not comply with the law.

As VECCI has maintained from the outset, Victoria cannot afford the economic and reputational damage that results from the sort of behaviour of the CFMEU on the Grocon Blockade in 2012 and Victorians simply won’t get the infrastructure they need without a framework that delivers it safely, harmoniously, productively and in accordance with the law. To those who think we protest too much, imagine the outcry if a business was to act in criminal contempt of the Supreme Court of Victoria.

— VECCI Chief Executive, Mark Stone
Environment & conservation

Game manager

The Game Management Authority of the Department of Environment and Primary Industries seeks a chief executive officer and board members of the Authority. Contact Kathryn Harper, Melbourne@hortoninternational.com.au or on 9650 2555. Expressions until 22 April.

Fire health risk (1)

The Victorian government has rejected accusations that it is failing to protect the Morwell community against health risks from the coal-mine fire that has enveloped the Latrobe Valley city in smoke and air pollution. Visibility in the surrounding area has been reduced markedly. The Greens called for a state of emergency, claiming bureaucratic infighting had put lives at risk.

Urged to leave (2)

According to The Age, Morwell South residents in vulnerable or at-risk health groups were early advised to leave town and escape the air pollution that has plagued the community for nearly three weeks. Those aged over 65, under five, those who are pregnant, and people with heart or lung conditions who live or work in Morwell South were advised by the state’s Chief Health Officer to leave. The area, just a few hundred metres from the burning coalmine, includes a nursing home.

Falling ill (3)

Nineteen fire fighters have been hospitalised after falling ill or becoming concerned about elevated carbon monoxide levels while at the three-kilometre fire roaring through an open-cut coal mine at the Hazelwood Power Station.

Morwell fire (5)

A government inquiry is needed to “get to the bottom” of the causes and consequences of the Hazelwood coal mine fire disaster, according to Deputy Premier Peter Ryan. “We need to get to the bottom of why it has developed in the first place and all the contributing factors to it and we need to learn from this,” he said in Morwell.

Deliberate? (6)

Police believe an arsonist, or arsonists, lit ‘test’ fires south-west of Morwell before deliberately igniting a fire near the Strzelecki Highway which eventually spread into the Hazelwood open-cut coalmine.

Teague to lead the probe (7)

Former Supreme Court judge Bernard Teague, who headed the Black Saturday royal commission will lead an independent inquiry into the Hazelwood mine fire, which has been burning for more than a month.

Safe (8)

Morwell residents may still see puffs of smoke from hot spots but after 45 days of fire fighting, the long-running blaze in the Hazelwood open-cut coalmine has been declared safe. According to The Age, Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley said with the fire officially declared safe, management of the mine would be handed back to operator GDF Suez.

Marine parks

Some of Victoria’s marine national parks would be opened up for fishing under a trial that is being pushed by the state’s lead recreational angling group. VRFish says it is designing a three-year trial that would test the impacts of “environmentally friendly recreational fishing methods” in areas that have been ruled out of bounds for anglers for a decade to protect marine biodiversity and breeding sites.

Events

For the Diary

The Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show completed its 19th year in March, The Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens again played host.

Melbourne Magazine

A twenty page bi-monthly hard copy, What’s going on in Melbourne, published by the City of Melbourne. It’s worth getting!

Gaming

Pokies tax

The state government’s plan to raise an extra $287 million in revenue from poker machines is under attack from balance-of-power MP Geoff Shaw, who is lobbying on behalf of several gaming venues in his Frankston electorate. Treasurer Michael O’Brien announced in his December budget update that pubs and clubs would pay higher taxes on poker machine revenue, and the amount returned to players would fall from $87c to 85c in the dollar.

Addiction

According to the Herald Sun, Gaming Regulation Minister Edward O’Donohue said the government had worked to reduce problem gambling by overseeing an ATM ban from venues, creating the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation and legislating to introduce voluntary pre-commitment by 2015. Latest figures show that almost $1.3 billion was blown on poker machines from July to December last year, compared with $1.19 lost from January to June.

Out there

Pubs and clubs in country Victoria, including Bendigo and Ballarat, are going largely unchecked by liquor and gaming inspectors because of cuts to the state’s alcohol and gaming authority.

Dedicated rural-based liquor and gaming inspectors were scrapped last year in the merger of liquor and gambling regulators. According to The Age, sources in the new Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation have said that since rural inspectors were scrapped - all inspectors are now based in Richmond - there have been few venue audits in country Victoria, with complaints left unchecked for months.

Health

Who shall live

The Age reports that the issue of abortion became a contentious issue (again) as Denis Napthine supported cabinet minister Mary Wooldridge’s position while distancing himself from the defiant anti-abortion position of Liberal backbencher MP Bernie Finn. In another linked story in The Age, Frankston independent MP Geoff Shaw who presently holds the balance of power in state parliament threw his support behind Liberal Bernie Finn on the abortion issue. In an opinion piece Josh Gordon, The Age’s state political editor argued that ‘it doesn’t take a genius to work out that revisiting the abortion debate but most know that in a deadlocked Parliament Shaw has a tendency to get what he wants. With the Coalition’s election-year budget coming up in May - and Napthine reliant on him to guarantee supply - who knows what might happen? It’s hard to believe one individual could wind back a hard-fought law on the basis of his religious beliefs rather than the rights of women or the desires of the broader community. But then again, this is Victoria, a state where the government’s fate rests largely in the hands of an unpredictable MP who loves calling the shots.’

Peter Mac’s ‘new hotel’

The Herald Sun reports that Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre will add a private hospital to a $1b new specialist public cancer hospital after getting the green light from the State and Federal governments. Peter Mac Private will have up to 60 beds in the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre in a move it hopes will attract and retain some of the world’s leading cancer specialists. Construction of the Parkville hospital is well under way, and there will be no extra space. But Peter Mac chief executive officer Dale Fisher promised there would be no loss of public beds to make way for paying patients.

RCH Blitz

Doctors are calling for a $444 million elective surgery blitz to cut Victoria’s waiting list and say more paediatric surgery should be done outside the new $1b billion Royal Children’s Hospital because it is not coping with demand. The Victorian branch of the Australian Medical Association has asked the Victorian government to double its elective surgery “blitz” funding announced in last year’s budget to include another $420 million over the next four years. In its pre-budget submission, the AMA said Victoria’s paediatric system was under “immense pressure”, with more than 1600 children a year missing out on surgery within clinically recommended times.

Improvements

Significant improvements in timely transfers of patients from ambulances to hospital emergency departments are among the improved performance results for Victorian hospitals.

Alcohol ban

According to The Age, discount coupons for alcohol on supermarket receipts, loyalty programs, and gifts that might encourage people to buy and drink more booze should be banned, doctors say. In a submission to the Victorian Government, the state branch of the Australian Medical Association said the proliferation of alcohol advertising, reward schemes and
promotions such as free cricket paraphernalia in liquor stores could be influencing the type and amount of alcohol people buy.

Smoke laws
According to the Herald Sun, four of Victoria’s leading health groups are demanding a ban on cigarette vending machines and tobacco price boards at shops. Quit, the Cancer Council, the Heart Foundation and the Australian Medical Association are also calling for the abolition of exemptions to a ban on the retail display of cigarettes for the state’s 145 specialist tobacco retailers.

Health call
Victoria should follow New South Wales’ lead by introducing 3am last drinks in pubs and clubs and a statewide ban on the sale of takeaway alcohol after 10pm, health groups say. According to The Age, a coalition of health groups, including state branches of the Australian Medical Association, Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and the Cancer Council of Australia, say the reforms are needed to reduce growing harm from alcohol abuse, including assaults. Cancer Council Victoria chief executive Todd Harper said excessive alcohol consumption was also causing longer-term harm, with about 5000 cases of cancer in Australia each year attributed to long-term chronic use of alcohol.

Serious tiff
A much-needed $14.2 million health facility that includes 22 new beds for mentally ill patients has sat quiet since construction was completed almost seven months ago. The Community Care Unit at Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital was completed last August and Austin Health expected it would be open by November. Management blamed the delay on a protracted industrial dispute with the Health and Community Services Union over staffing arrangements, and said the facility would open on April 22.

Veggies
Aussie kids would be paid by schools to eat their greens under an ambitious plan to fight childhood obesity. According to the Herald Sun, the proposal to pay children 25c a day to eat fruit and vegetables has the backing of leading dietitian Dr Rosemary Stanton, who advised the government on national food guidelines.

Our housing
The Age reports that spending on social housing in Victoria fell by almost half, or $247m, last financial year, as 34,000 vulnerable people are still on the state’s public housing lists. Victoria is also the lowest funder of social housing per head of population, spending just $74 per person, compared to $165 in NSW, as revealed in the Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services. The Age also reports that ‘housing shortages for low-income families have become so severe that an extra $200m a year will be needed as an investment to keep pace with demand’. A recent report of seven community groups found that social housing made up only 3.4% of homes in Victoria, by far the lowest rate in Australia and one of the lowest in the Western world.

Detailed welfare
The Herald Sun reports that child protection workers are cutting corners to meet key targets, but say their crushing workload is the problem. Workers in the Preston branch of the Child Protection Service say high-risk children are missing out on potentially lifesaving visits because of a crippling overload. Recently eight workers issued formal notices to the Department of Human Services about their working conditions. The notice included warnings that: Children go unsighted for months; Instead of visiting children staff sometimes call teachers, doctors or maternal and child health services to check on them; Staff have also resorted to ‘diary doorknocks’ – visiting a home to sight a child, but not entering.

Kids in crisis
The Department of Human Services quarterly report, obtained by the Herald Sun, reveals more than 300 children and teenagers in care disappeared last year in dangerous circumstances. According to the Herald Sun, the explosive report, which will put Community Services Minister Mary Wooldridge under increasing pressure, also reveals that DHS is failing to meet its targets in allocating child protection cases, and almost a third of non-emergency cases of suspected child abuse are going uninvestigated for more than two weeks.

Business & investment
Victoria the choice
Victoria is the destination of choice for cashed-up foreigners seeking to fast-track residency by investing $5 million, official figures reveal. According to the Herald Sun, the state accounts for more than half of all Significant Investor Visas issued in the first 13 months of the controversial program. Some 88 visas were issued from late November, 2012, when the program was introduced, to last December. A breakdown of government figures shows Victoria accounted for 49 of them. NSW was the next most popular state, accounting for 26. Nine out of ten visas nationally went to rich Chinese investors. The program fast-tracks the path to permanent residency for foreigners who park $5 million in state government bonds or selected property projects.

Media report...
According to The Age, internal tension is mounting over the management and direction of the 160-year-old Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry amid concerns that a once-potent lobby is now an uncritical supporter of the government it relies on. More next month.

New grant
Federal industry minister Ian Macfarlane and Premier Napthine announced a $5 million government grant for Geelong’s Carbon Revolution to develop a $23.8 million carbon well manufacturing facility.

No love lost
In an extraordinary attack, the then and now also post election premier of South Australia Jay Weatherill, accused premier Denis Napthine of being ‘asleep at the wheel’ over the future of the car industry and of refusing to acknowledge, in private conversations, the looming closures of Holden and Toyota, saying Napthine dismissed his warnings as ‘unlikely’, reports The Age. The comments came after Dr Napthine accused South Australia of being ‘absolutely recalcitrant’ for failing to contribute to a $100m salvage package for redundant car industry workers announced by the prime minister in mid-December.

SPC
In the Weekly Times, Minister Peter Ryan wrote: ‘The Goulburn Valley community and the workers and growers of SPC Ardmona fully deserved the support they received from the Victorian Government. The looks on the locals’
faces said it all when I visited the community last week. SPC has contributed $78 million into this overhaul and the Victorian Government has invested $22 million, making this a genuine co-investment. The money from the Government will be phased over three years and comes from existing government programs and funds, so there is no impact on the budget. It will go into infrastructure as SPC moves to a model that better caters for the tastes of today’s consumer. If employee numbers fall below 500, or the company shuts down within five years, the money will be repaid.’

Industrial relations

Passing of the ‘old guard’

A symbol of old labour finally laid down his tools recently, Wally Curran died at 82 and as the Herald Sun’s columnist Shaun Carney put it, ‘from the 1960s until well into the 1990s he was a fixture in the media, courtesy of his role in the Victorian branch of the meat workers’ union. He was assistant secretary for 18 years and state secretary for 24... Curran was no saint, but nor did he try to pretend otherwise. Nor did he believe that if he helped someone he owned them’.

Dimmeys sheds workers

Workers at department store chain Dimmeys have been laid off as trouble-prone owner Doug Zappelli gives up power over the business. The chain employs 500 people across 45 stores, with headquarters in West Footscray and stores across Melbourne, Geelong and regional Victoria. The stores have been taken over by Zappelli’s children. The company is being renamed ‘Cool Breeze’.

Fiery dispute

The Herald Sun reports that a former deputy chief officer and veteran of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Keith Adamson, says Victorians’ safety is at risk because the fire-fighters’ union refused to be more active in trying to prevent fires is putting its own interests ahead of those of rank-and-file fire-fighters and the public.

Trucking jobs

About 540 jobs will be axed from Cootes Transport after its parent, McAleeese, decided to half the size of the beleaguered fuel-haulage business after what it described as unprecedented government scrutiny. McAleeese will sell about half of the trucks and trailers in the Cootes fleet after losing contracts with Shell and BP, and withdrawing from supplying 7-Eleven in several states. The vehicles to be put up for sale include 190 prime movers and 286 tankers. McAleeese said the 540 jobs - the majority of which will be in Victoria and NSW - would be axed over the next six months as contracts ended. The company has set aside about $13 million for redundancies.

Geelong

According to The Age, Deakin University is a key player in the future of the area, with the school providing much of the push for technology innovation. Vice-chancellor Jane den Hollander said it had been a “difficult day in what has been an extremely difficult year for Geelong”. But Professor den Hollander said Geelong would reinvent itself for “the jobs of the future, as uncertain as that may seem today”. She compared the exodus of global companies such as Alcoa and Ford with the decline of the wool era, after which the city reinvented itself as a manufacturing town, “Over the past 40 years we have begun to grow a university in Geelong,” she said, and this would help the region innovate and educate. Geelong mayor Darryn Lyons said governments had for too long relied on “Band-Aid solutions” to keep manufacturing going in Australia. “The Band-Aids that have been stuck on to prop up industry in this country are now coming off, and this is a sign of it.’

FIFO

Faced with an exodus of manufacturing jobs, Geelong is developing a bold plan to export redundant labour by transforming the nearby Avalon Airport into a hub for fly-in, fly-out workers, as well as freight and logistics. A proposal to supply fly-in, fly-out workers on site to fill skill shortages across Australia and the region is being championed by Geelong’s peak business group as part of its response to Alcoa’s decision to close its Point Henry aluminium smelter and rolling mill.

Shell saved

Almost 500 Shell employees at Geelong’s oil refinery (finally) found relief when their jobs were saved by sellling the 60-year-old plant to Dutch-owned oil trader Vitol.

Employmennt crisis

The number of young Australians out of work reached “crisis point”, as more 15 to 24-year-olds struggle to find jobs in the ripples of the global financial crisis. According to The Age, the number of young people being employed in Australia is significantly worse than official unemployment rates show. The Age, welfare group the Brotherhood of St Laurence has identified new data that shows national youth unemployment grew by more than 3 per cent in six years to 12.4 per cent in the year to January.

Bikies

According to The Age, hundreds of Chinese workers are being exploited by some of Australia’s largest building firms in a lucrative rort that has seen criminal figures and outlaw motorcycle gangs infiltrate Victoria’s platering industry. Union officials have also been implicated in the scandal, which includes allegations of stand-over tactics, immigration fraud and sham contracting.

Geelong boost

According to the Herald Sun, electricity and gas company Energy Australia, with a co-investment from the Victorian government, will establish a new national contact centre in Geelong by year’s end, creating 300 full-time jobs. Premier Denis Naphine said it was a ‘modest’ investment to help with infrastructure and training.

TAC cuts

According to the Herald Sun, the Transport Accident Commission will axe 70 jobs at its Geelong office. The Victorian government organisation says the positions are associated with projects that are ending.

City exodus

According to a report in the Herald Sun, soaring property values are seeing the working class flee capital cities for the suburban fringes. Numbers of police, nurses, teachers and emergency workers and tradies have plummeted in areas where they once traditionally lived, according to a comparison of Census figures between 2006 and 2011.

Justice & police

New parole law

Criminals are not being charged with the new offence of breaching parole, almost six months after the state government expected it would become law, but police deny it is because of the failings of their IT system. According to The Age, it is believed the delay in parole breaches becoming law is because of police concerns with the IT system, including whether officers can rely on obtaining the parole conditions of offenders while in the field. An act must be proclaimed before it becomes law, which is generally routine after it has been passed.

Cleared

An Office of Police Integrity report into misconduct allegations against former deputy police commissioner Ken Jones was too defective and unbalanced to be tabled in parliament and contained scant evidence, omissions, exaggerations, misunderstandings and misrepresentations, Victoria’s ombudsman warned.

Corruption body rules

The Victorian government is considering changes to its controversial anti-corruption regime after the state’s financial watchdog raised concerns about excessive paperwork. According to The Age, Auditor-General John Doyle said the new integrity regime had created unnecessary, time-consuming paperwork and threatened the independence of his office. He expressed concern about the “time and effort” he spent analysing hundreds of pieces of information from agencies which he was then required to pass on to the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission. “I would like to see consideration of how we can make this integrity system work well and properly.”
Attorney-General and Finance Minister Robert Clark said the government was looking at whether reporting arrangements could be improved for its signature corruption-fighting body, which has been operating for just over a year.

**Child sex abuse**

The Victorian government introduced proposed legislation that, if passed, would mean anyone who knows or believes a child has been sexually abused, could face up to three years’ jail if they fail to provide information to police. It would also be a crime for people in positions of responsibility in organisations caring for children to fail to act against known child abusers. This would carry a maximum penalty of five years’ jail.

**Bike seats**

Parents who tow their children on the back of their bicycles are often using carriers that have not been tested to any official safety standards. The current Standards Australia guidelines - which only covers baby seats behind the rider - require carriers to have five harness points, strapped foot rests and that the child weigh less than 22 kilograms. “The last review done was in 1995 and most of these products weren’t available when,” says Peter Bourke, general manager of Bicycle Industries Australia.

**Hello, Hello.**

Confusion about Melbourne’s ill-defined network of bike lanes is putting cyclists in harm’s way, Victoria’s most senior bicycle police officer says. According to The Age, two days after a woman uploaded to UTube footage of a man opening a taxi door into her path on Collins Street and knocking her off her bicycle, state bicycle operation co-ordinator Sergeant Arty Lavos said white lines and bike symbols painted on the road were lulling cyclists into a “false sense of security”.

**So sad**

Michael Wong, a respected neurosurgeon who worked across three Victorian hospitals – reportedly suffered multiple stab wounds after an attack in the foyer of Western Hospital in Footscray.

**Prisoners on the move**

The Herald Sun reports that ‘Victorians are paying more than $38m to move prisoners around the state’. And despite the increasing use of technology such as court video links, prisoner security company G4S is transporting prisoners on the move.

**Top View**

The Herald Sun reports that Victoria’s Attorney-General Robert Clark has told Victoria’s judges it is the government’s job to make laws and the court’s job to enforce them. His statement, accompanied by an opinion piece in the paper, comes in response to a story the previous day in the Herald Sun in which it reported on a strong letter from the state’s Chief Justice Marilyn Warren and the Chief Judge of the County Court Michael Roffen criticising the government’s bill proposing baseline sentences. The Supreme Court has launched an internal investigation into how the Herald Sun obtained the judges’ letter.

**Too lax**

The Sunday Age carried a front page story on how serial abusers get away with it. ‘Victoria’s overcrowded prison system and the politicisation of the court system are not doing enough to protect victims of family violence from hundreds of serial abusers who are repeatedly breaching intervention orders issued by the courts. More than 820 offenders, overwhelmingly men, breached intervention orders at least three times in the past financial year’, according to data provided by Victoria Police.

**Mentor**

The new head of Victoria’s police union, senior sergeant Ron Iddles, says he wants to speak face to face with officers immediately after traumatic events to make sure they know they have support.

**Kennett warned Pell**

Former premier Jeff Kennett has confirmed, according to The Age, that he ‘bluntly warned Cardinal George Pell in the 1990s to resolve allegations of child sexual abuse or possibly face a royal commission’.

**Ethics test**

In an exclusive The Herald Sun have run with a story that ‘a prominent underworld lawyer was recruited by Victoria Police to inform on criminal figures running Melbourne’s drug trade for more than a decade... The [police] force’s biggest secret in turning a high-profile criminal lawyer into an informer brings into question police ethics in cultivating “human sources”, which went spectacularly wrong after the informer became a witness in one of Australia’s biggest criminal investigations’. The Age reports that Victoria’s anti-corruption watchdog has asked police to provide it with information ‘to determine whether there has been any potential police misconduct to protect the case of a lawyer described as “Lawyer X”. Earlier, the Herald Sun was the subject of “extraordinary action” by the Victoria Police seeking a Supreme Court injunction to prevent the paper from publishing any information about “Lawyer X”. The Herald Sun said it had no intention of naming or identifying. The Victoria Police were successful in obtaining the court order. The Age reports that ‘gangland figures represented by a lawyer who reportedly doubled as a registered police informant should seek an immediate review of their convictions, a prominent Melbourne defence lawyer has urged’. George Defteros says that if the reports are true, the conduct of the barrister and the preparedness of the police to use that person as an informant were disgraceful.

**Cat fight**

A Melbourne council’s decision to ban roaming cats from its streets has been met with a fierce backlash, pet owners branding the decision ‘cruel’ and ‘unjust’. The Yarra Ranges council voted for a new policy to require cats to be confined to their owners’ property at all times. The move was supported in a 234-person online poll.

**Tickect tally**

The Age reports that the City of Monash has Melbourne’s most zealous parking enforcement officers, each issuing an average of 16 tickets a day. The council has nine parking officers and they issued 1,602 notices in 2012-13 earning $4.4m in revenue. Drivers have the best chance of escaping a parking fine in Brimbank in Melbourne’s west. Melbourne City reaped the most money with its 86 parking officers collecting $45m in fines. Lonsdale St, Queen St and Elizabeth St attracted the most fines.

**Councils told to build up**

Councils are being asked to prepare for Melbourne’s continuing population boom by easing restrictions on taller buildings. The Herald Sun reports that higher-density housing
– including high-rise buildings up to 13.5 metres tall – is on the Napthine government’s agenda to meet demand. But some councils, especially the affluent eastern suburbs, have locked up vast swathes of land as minimal development ‘neighbourhood residential’ zones. More than a dozen councils have their housing zone proposals referred to a government advisory committee. Planning minister Matthew Guy has hinted that he isn’t happy with many of the plans submitted.

**Media Focus**

The money given to 20 councillors by the Municipal Association of Victoria was in addition to the normal allowances they received from their own local councils. MAV president Cr Bill McArthur was the association’s top earner in 2012-13, getting $91,783 in allowances and expenses, as well being provided with full private vehicle at $28,960. MAV CEO Rob Spence said that the $272,000 paid to board members last year covered payments to councillors, who were finishing their two-year terms and those who were starting new terms. Mr Spence said the board had 12 members, with councillors required to attend meetings and oversee complex businesses such as insurance and procurement, as well as policy areas.

**Fox swim**

Trucking mogul Lindsay Fox’s Portsea expansion plans have suffered a setback in the local council rejecting his bid to deny neighbours beach access through his $30-million cliff-top estate. According to The Age, Mornington Peninsula Shire last week refused the tycoon’s planning permission to remove a long-standing easement from his family property, which allowed neighbours a route to Point King beach.

**Tug of war**

According to the Herald Sun, Local Government Minister Jeanette Powell has announced the appointment of a three person panel to advise on how best to separate Sunbury from Hume, and set new municipal boundaries. A Hume-wide ballot showed sixty per cent of voters were in favour of Sunbury going it alone. Locals will vote in a new council in 2016.

**Rates pay errors**

According to the Herald Sun, Victorians face higher rates after a Victorian government report slammed local councils for mismanaging assets worth $73 billion. The poor management of buildings, parks, roads, drains and other assets was, in some cases, leading to worsening service levels, said the Auditor-General’s report.

**Tender issue**

Council employees have been accused of leaking sensitive commercial data as part of a campaign to undermine a major tender process for new street lighting, according to the Herald Sun. In a summary letter to council CEOs and procurement managers, Municipal Association of Victoria CEO Rob Spence said he was concerned about the release of commercial-in-confidence information relating to suppliers.

**Melbourne**

**Closing forever**

In May one of Melbourne’s most popular music venues, The Palace Theatre at the top end of Bourke St, will close. The owner of the building, China-based Jinshan Investments, wants to turn the 150-year-old theatre into a five-star hotel. An application to tear down the building has been lodged with Melbourne City Council. The Napthine government originally knocked back the controversial hotel and apartment development, claiming it would have dominated Parliament House.

**A growing town**

The Herald Sun report that Melbourne is on track to become the nation’s biggest city, with a population of about 8 million within 40 years. New figures show that Melbourne grew by 95,500 people last year – the largest increase of any capital – to reach 4.35 million, according to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report. The ABS say that given current migration and fertility rates, Melbourne is set to overtake Sydney as Australia’s biggest city by 2053.

**Global and all hours**

Lord Mayor Robert Doyle revealed new agreements with major retail outlets to extend shopping hours throughout the week in what he heralded as fitting for a ‘global 24-hour city’. By the end of April all retailers in and around the Bourke Street Mall, Melbourne Central, Melbourne’s GPO and the new Emporium Melbourne will be trading until at least 7pm every night. Late-night trading will continue on Thursdays and Fridays when shops are open until 9pm.

**Detail can matter**

The Russian community will fiercely oppose a campaign to end Melbourne’s sister-city relationship with St Petersburg, arguing politics have no place in the long-term friendship. According to The Age, Melbourne City Council are set decide the future of the 25-year union, after a petition to end the relationship over St Petersburg’s controversial “gay propaganda laws” received almost 14,000 signatures.

**Beggars Beware**

According to the Herald Sun dozens of people have been rounded up across the city under a new crackdown on beggars. Police charged 24 men and ordered them into a court diversion program on a month-long operation. It comes as Lord Mayor Robert Doyle continues to push for vagrants to be removed from the streets after ongoing complaints about threatening behaviour. He has previously pleaded with Melburnians not to give money to beggars, saying he is sick of citizens, especially women, being threatened.

**Cheap and nasty**

The Herald Sun reports that there is bad blood at Queen Victoria Market among traders over the sale of cheap goods against a backdrop of planning for the market’s $250m makeover. Market management has admitted too many stall holders are selling the same cheap items and that problems have arisen between new and established traders. Melbourne City Council is consulting traders over the proposed redevelopment.

Attempts to fix the market - from knocking it down to building a supermarket over the car park – and the Napthine government’s general cemetery – had faltered. The common factor was the outcry over the threat to the 19th-century icon.

**Melbourne home**

Minister for Technology Gordon Rich-Phillips has announced in Mumbai that Indian company Servion Global Solutions would establish its Australian headquarters in Melbourne. Mr Rich-Phillips said Servion had more than 600 customers in over 60 countries and was an international expert in providing customer interaction management solutions for organisations globally.

**Planning**

**Possible conflicts**

The Age reports that ‘awkward links have emerged’ between applicants and government decision-makers for two controversial development sites in the Melbourne CBD. In Bourke Street, plans for a 15-storey, 194-room hotel at the Palace Theatre site by Jinshan Investments will be decided by Melbourne City Council. Until November, Lord Mayor Robert Doyle, the former chief of the Ombudsman, was employed by Jinshan to lobby in support of the development. And in Flinders Street, a proposal from the Marriner family for a 52-story hotel and office complex behind the Forum Theatre would be decided by Planning Minister Matthew Guy. The planning application was lodged by Bill Kusznirczuk of Clement-Stone Town Planners. Mr Kusznirczuk was hand-picked by Mr Guy to be chief commissioner of the Victorian Building Authority and also appointed to the board of the new Metropolitan Planning Authority by the same minister.

**Seeing dogs, blind planners**

The Age reports that after four years of planning and construction Seeing Eye Dogs has just opened its new training centre. The only trouble is the $8m training centre back onto the Moonee Ponds Creek and is situated partially in the proposed path of the government’s East West Link. Watch this space.

**Minister cleared. The detail**

Victoria’s Planning Department provided an inappropriate briefing to planning minister Matthew Guy for a controversial decision to rezone land on Phillip Island, an Ombudsman’s investigation has found. The Herald Sun said that Ombudsman George Brouwer found the department provided two briefings to Mr Guy over rezoning of a 23ha parcel of farming land at Ventnor, valued at more than $2.6m. The first brief recommended Mr Guy should not intervene in a decision not to rezone the land for residential development. But the department submitted a revised briefing to the minister to recommend he should intervene in the rezoning. The Age, a paper that had given great coverage to the story early on, gave the report’s findings front-page coverage but still blamed the government, and by implication the minister, for what the Ombudsman found were failings in the bureaucracy. It wrote: ‘Planning minister Matthew Guy seized on the findings to claim exoneration over his controversial 2011 decision to rezone the land, and his backflip days later that triggered court action and a multimillion dollar compensation payout’. The Age honestly reported the less than friendly relations between the minister and the paper. Mr Guy is quoted as saying, ‘There is no smoke, there is no gun, there is no bullet. The gun wasn’t even loaded. This is a complete heist by the Labor Party and indeed what has clearly
been shown to be the left-wing hate media down at The Age'. The Age's editor-in-chief Andrew Holden said it was absurd to suggest the paper was running a smear campaign: 'This is what real journalists do. They investigate government decisions, they hold those in power up to scrutiny'. The Ombudsman's report concluded 'that the Ventnor saga highlights the danger of bureaucrats feeling directed by ministerial advisers, when such advisers have no legal authority over public servants'.

**Torquay sprawl**

Planning Minister Guy said he had taken the advice of a planning panel report but 'in this one I certainly have'. He said development in the Spring Creek area of Torquay had been a political football since the former Labor government expanded the town boundary. 'Meld it is time to put a full stop on this nonsense', the Mr Guy said he discussed the Torquay rezoning with the Liberal Party member for the marginal seat of South Barwon, Andrew Katros, and Mr Katros supported his decision. Sid Pope, founder of the 2228 Residents Association, said the community was furious with Mr Guy's rezoning and he promised to actively campaign against Mr Katros at the November state election.

**Bush bush**

The Age reports that ‘Victoria’s three largest regional cities are experiencing surging population growth at a faster rate than many Melbourne metropolitan municipalities. Bendigo is now home to more than 105,000 people and aspire to have 200,000 by 2041.

**Back home**

According to The Age, the Victorian government has former Docklands Authority chief John Tabart on $5000 a day to review two faltering projects: E-Gate, the former railway site in West Melbourne, and the much-hyped eastward extension of Federation Square. Tabart was the controversial head of the Docklands Authority and its successors between 1993 and 2006. Tabart is now head of the authority developing inner-city Barangaroo in Sydney. But Fairfax Media has established that he is also working for the Victorian government on a contract valued at more than $100,000. The threshold for competitive tenders is $100,000. A government spokesman confirmed standard procedures were bypassed - as allowed under procurement rules - because the government needed ‘urgent’ specialist advice before the budget.

**Windy at Webb Dock**

Port Melbourne residents fear a perfect storm in traffic congestion from the $1.6 billion Port of Melbourne expansion and the 250-hectare Fisherman's Bend urban renewal plan. The Victorian government is expected to announce by the middle of the year the winning bidder for the big new container facility at Webb Dock.

**Mega-tower**

A $350 million mega-tower proposed for La Trobe Street will be double the size of any other Melbourne apartment building and the third largest in the world by floor area, if approved. The Associated Fishermen's Bend urban renewal plan. The Victorian government is expected to announce by the middle of the year the winning bidder for the big new container facility at Webb Dock.

**Chapel St**

According to The Age, a controversial state government application to turn Chapel Street to approve a 29-storey residential and retail tower and a new five-storey education academy for the gifted linked to Melbourne High School has outranged Stonnington Council. The council said the application for a tower on the 661 Chapel Street site was heading to Victoria’s planning tribunal in April after the council rejected an application last October. Stonnington mayor Adrian Stubbs said he was extremely disappointed and frustrated Planning Minister Matthew Guy had intervened to approve the tower.

**Ugly buildings**

Melbourne’s postwar buildings are at the centre of a new battle over heritage protection, as the city's early office buildings are declared too “ugly” to save. Planning Minister Matthew Guy has made it known he is not a fan of many 1950s and '60s buildings. Floor space in the city has grown by almost five square kilometres between 2006 and 2012, detailed new data released by Melbourne City Council shows. The period also brought more than 76,000 new jobs to the inner-city, as business, hospitality, real estate and construction industries flourish. The era saw Melbourne’s residential population swell by a quarter and the city’s economy expand by almost 40 per cent to $86 billion.

**Five towers**

According to The Age, Planning Minister Matthew Guy has denied the state government has hit the economic “panic button” by approving five major tower projects in the city. Mr Guy recently approved five towers expected to cost $557 million to build and to create more than 2000 apartments and up to 4000 jobs. 'It is a matter of packaging them up, obviously, bringing forward five in one day, which I think is important, because it sends a signal," he said. "It sends a signal to investors and to the construction industry that the city is going to go forward and that we have a pipeline for our construction industry." But the announcement, dubbed ‘Super Tuesday’ by the government, prompted RMIT planning expert Michael Buxton to label the planning minister ‘Melbourne’s greatest-ever vandals’. Professor Buxton said the towers were being approved were not the ones that middle-income Melburnians wanted to buy into. He said young and middle-aged people were more interested in middle-density properties, not small but expensive apartments in the central business district.

**Snotty and arrogant**

According to The Age, Victoria’s senior public servants have been accused of being “snotty, arrogant and offensive” in deliberately blocking a plan for Melbourne’s future development. Internationally renowned urban planning expert Professor Roz Hansen said the allegations as she detailed for the first time how the draft plan was derailed. Professor Hansen headed the ministerial advisory committee on the preparation of Plan Melbourne, which is meant to guide the city’s development until 2050. After it became clear that many of the committee’s recommendations were being watered down or ignored, the group stood down last August after more than a year’s work. Professor Hansen has since become a vocal critic of the government on planning issues, particularly the East West Link project. The Planning Institute of Australia has expressed its disapproval as the committee’s ideas were not supported by the government.

**Mini-city in the West**

It is believed a recount will be paid for the planning committee’s proposal to rezone the West Gate Freeway in Melbourne’s west. Sources say the owners of the old Bradmill denim manufacturer recently struck an exclusive deal to sell 24 hectares to a south-east Asian developer for more than $120 million. According to a report in The Age, it will be the most lucrative inner-city residential land sale in Melbourne's history if it is seen through. The new precinct, dubbed Yarraville Gardens, is likely to have about 1500 houses and a neighbourhood centre including two supermarkets, a restaurant, service station and a medical centre. A master plan by Melbourne architects Peddle Thorp includes two “landmark” towers and a series of apartment buildings with city and bay views. A website spruiking the development says such a significant landholding on the CBD’s doorstep was “unprecedented over the past 50 years” in Melbourne.

**Old Port fades**

In a long two page feature in The Age titled ‘Is old Port sailing into the sunset?’ writer Chris Johnston notes that ‘Port Melbourne has been the gateway to Australia for waves of convicts, settlers and migrants, but what is being called the world’s biggest urban renewal project could see the Port gone forever’. Some striking facts: 'There has been a 444% increase in housing density in Port Melbourne in the past six years... The population, now approaching 15,000, has increased by 88% in 20 years and by 39% in the decade to 2011'.

**Sport**

The Victoria Racing Club has unveiled its $120 million replacement for the historic members grandstand at Flemington Racecourse, and hopes it can open the new facility in time for the 2017 Melbourne Cup. The new grandstand is designed by Bates Smart, the architects behind Federation Square, Crown Melbourne and the State Library. The ‘entertainment venue’ includes three restaurants, eight bars and a rooftop garden, and will be built on the site of the existing stand.

**Oval plan**

Plans of historic Junction Oval being transformed into a boutique stadium that would
Transport – ports

Sold. On similar ideas.

Melbourne's port will be sold by the Victorian Government, delivering a multi-billion-dollar bonanza to bankrupt huge road and rail projects, according to a report in the Herald Sun. Premier Denis Napthine said the months the government would start the sale process. The sale, to be confirmed in the May Budget, would be tied to plans to develop the Port of Hastings as a second container port for Victoria.

The numbers

3,214 ship movements in 2013; 2.15m containers coming in and out in 2013; 37% proportion of Australia’s container trade.

Libs v Labor

A Liberal lease on the port to a body which will

Transport – air

Monorail

According to the Herald Sun, Victorians are split on a proposal to build a $1 billion monorail from the airport to Melbourne’s CBD, although most feel it is a step in the right direction. The plan to build the monorail high above the Tullamarine Freeway is under way. The Airshuttle proposal is being developed by tourism infrastructure entrepreneur Peter O’Brien, who describes it as a hi-tech alternative to a slow diesel train link that could take years to come online.

Tunnel plan

The long-awaited rail link to Melbourne airport will be included in an expanded Metro rail tunnel plan that Premier Denis Napthine has promised will begin this decade. It is believed the much-discussed airport link plan will be ramped up as part of the “realignled” Metro rail project, following internal research showing the idea remains highly popular. Transport Minister Terry Mulder has confirmed the preferred route will run from the airport boundary via new tracks through a reserved land and freight corridor, before using the existing rail tracks from Sunbury to connect with the Metro tunnel. Mr Mulder has said it would allow people to use the planned Dandenong-Sunshine rail corridor to travel to the airport.

Transport – rail

Free ride

According to the Herald Sun, transport fares for Melbourne commuters will be cheaper regardless of who wins the state election in November. Labor has backed the Napthine Government’s move to cap maximum daily fares at the Zone 1 rate across Melbourne’s entire tram, rail and bus network from January 1. Commuters in Melbourne’s outer suburbs would see the cost of travelling to work by train slashed by up to $1200 a year under sweeping changes proposed by the State Government in the lead-up to the election. A couple who commute from the suburbs to the CBD each weekday using daily myki passes would save about $50 a week.

Tourism and business groups welcomed the move to make tram travel free in the CBD and Docklands.

Age moan

On the announcement that next year tram rides in the CBD and Docklands will be free has been widely welcomed, but The Age has warned there were other options and these were reflected in an editorial that read: “An essential question, does this plan represent the best use of $100m a year of public money? We ask this in the face of government warnings of a tight budget and our present economic climate. Could $100m be better spent on improving the parlous state of public housing?”

Unisex for train drivers

Early last year, The Age reports, the company that runs Melbourne’s rail network, Metro, went on an affirmative action drive to get more female drivers. It was very successful and they now have 49 women in training compared to 47 men, and this in a heavily male dominated workforce where 90% of drivers are male. The only trouble is there were no toilets for women. After many complaints, not least from the union, the company has converted the station staff toilets into unisex facilities.

Rail plan

According to The Australian, the federal government has modelled several new options for improving the inner-city rail network within a reasonable budget, that could have
COFFEE, MINISTER?

Part of the political and government process is to have a discussion or develop a relationship with government ministers, shadow ministers, advisers and public servants.

And sometimes the best way to do that is outside the office. We’ve curated a list of the best meeting places and coffee shops around Victorian Parliament so you can spend less time thinking where to go and more time thinking about the important things.
Surfing on V/Line
The Age reports that V/Line passengers will be able to surf the web while travelling across the state under a $40m state government plan for free Wi-Fi on selected regional trains. The government hopes to have Wi-Fi on some trains by late 2015 on routes between Melbourne and Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Seymour and Traralgon.

Trams
Victorians largely support a growing push to give trams greater priority over cars in a bid to clear up traffic snarls across Melbourne’s suburbs. According to the Herald Sun, sixty-two per cent of respondents to its Survey 2014 say they want trams to be given greater priority over cars. Many motorists and public transport users are welcoming a growing trend to remove kerbside parking, expand clearaways and create dedicated tram lanes that are off-limits to cars to help speed up both tram and car trips. But traders in strip shopping centres along tram lines are up in arms about the loss of kerbside parking for customers, saying it has forced dozens of shop closures.

Going so fast
Freight trains could one day rumble through the heart of Brunswick and Coburg as part of a future expansion of Victoria’s freight rail network. The Linking Melbourne Authority has revealed plans to build two extra railway tracks through Melbourne’s north, directly alongside the Upfield railway line, which has in recent years experienced an apartment boom. According to The Age, the new tracks are planned to run directly to the west of the existing Upfield line, which runs to Campbellfield and passes through North Melbourne, Royal Park, Brunswick, Coburg and Fawkner. Several apartment buildings have gone up in recent years on land next to the railway line, and more housing is planned near stations including Jewell and Batman. It’s not known how many railway properties along the railway line would have to be bought, as reserve exists on many stretches.

East-West Link
On day three of the 30-day planning panel hearing into the $9 billion-$11 billion road project Michael Veitch said because building Metro rail between South Kensington and South Yarra would make little difference to how many motorists used the East West Link, “Metro for the East West Link don’t have an attractive option for public transport across the north of Melbourne, because there isn’t any,” Mr Veitch said. But residents of south-eastern suburbs - potential users of the East West Link - would benefit from the tunnel’s extra capacity on the Dandenong, Pakenham and Cranbourne train lines.

Dandenong disruption
A Transport Department study of the Dandenong rail corridor found that major investment is needed before the end of the decade - including new high-capacity trains and the removal of up to eight level crossings - to cope with forecast growth of about 8000 extra peak-hour passengers a year. According to The Age, the study, completed in early 2012, concluded the $9 billion to $11 billion Metro rail tunnel was the long-term solution to the looming congestion crisis, noting that it could be built by 2021 at the earliest with prompt state and federal government funding. But the project has languished in the two years since then, as the state government pursued the east-west link road project and the Abbott government took a hard line against funding urban rail. In recent weeks, the state government has recast the Metro rail tunnel towards Fishermans Bend, rejecting the original plan to tunnel beneath Swanston Street.

Transport – road
Congestion nightmare
The Victorian government’s own secret traffic modelling reveals hundreds of thousands of motorists face more rather than less congestion as a direct result of the $6 billion to $8 billion project. The detailed forecasts, according to The Age, reveal traffic at the top of Hoddle Street near the Eastern Freeway - already one of Melbourne’s most congested spots - is expected to rise by up to 35 per cent during the morning peak by 2021 because of the project. Traffic on other parts of Hoddle Street closer to the city is expected to improve by up to 9 per cent, but the figures appear to contradict government claims that overall congestion on Hoddle Street will be relieved by the project. The report, prepared by modelling firm Veitch Lister for the Linking Melbourne Authority in July, also shows roads feeding into the Eastern Freeway will carry thousands more cars within the next eight years when the road, connecting the Eastern Freeway to CityLink, is completed.

2031 Traffic on the East West Link in the morning peak is expected to have slowed to 20-30 km/h by 2031 as worsening congestion pushes the road close to capacity just 12 years after it is due to open. The East West Link is forecast to carry 80,000 vehicles a day on opening in 2019, increasing to between 100,000 and 120,000 a day by 2031, modelling show. Speaking at day four of the planning panel hearing into the major project, traffic expert Stephen Pelosi said the toll road would reach morning peak capacity by 2031. The most effective way to ease congestion would be to apply a higher peak-hour toll to reduce the number of discretionary trips. Our transport editor visited the panel hearing one morning to get a sense of how such a hearing takes place.

Tunnel vibes
According to the Herald Sun, residents in Melbourne’s inner north could be forced to leave their homes for weeks during construction of the East West Link tunnel.

Higher peak hour toll
Motorists who use the East West Link in the peak could pay a higher toll than those who drive on the planned road outside rush hour. In what would be a first for Melbourne motorists, a “variable toll” could be set as a way to manage peak-hour traffic flows on the link road, which is ultimately planned to run between the Eastern Freeway and Western Ring Road via the Port of Melbourne. The prospect of higher peak-hour tolls was raised on the first morning of the Victorian government’s 30-day planning panel hearing into the $6 billion-$8 billion project. Planning lawyer Stuart Morris, QC, is representing the Linking Melbourne Authority, the state agency in charge of road projects.

Elizabeth St
According to the Herald Sun, Elizabeth St should be car free and turned into a super shopping mall to revitalise the “shabby” area, says the RACV. Victoria’s peak motoring body wants the inner-city street closed for two blocks from Flinders St to Bourke St to improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists, and reduce car and tram crashes. The concept is backed by Yarra Trams. The City of Melbourne has said it would consider the suggestion.

Truck safety
Major safety defects have been discovered on one in fourteen heavy trucks inspected - including fuel and chemical transporters - during checks on Melbourne streets in the past nine months.

New guy in town
According to the Herald Sun, Cab it will take on the Jobs and Transport minister for the Linking Melbourne Authority in July, also shows roads feeding into the Eastern Freeway will carry thousands more cars within the next eight years when the road, connecting the Eastern Freeway to CityLink, is completed.
industry standards. The new $20 million taxi network will have almost 500 cabs and employ 1500 drivers servicing Melbourne and outer city suburbs. A phone booking app will allow Cab It passengers to track where their taxi is on a map and even call the driver before he or she arrives. The arrival of a third major taxi network comes just months after the State Government announced switching changes to the taxi industry aimed at loosening the grip from the two major booking networks and improving standards and conditions for passengers. Cab It founder Harry Katsiabanis said all the taxis in the network were owned by Cab It, making it solely accountable for customer satisfaction.

Numbers to rise
According to The Age, the number of taxis in Melbourne is set to grow, with the government preparing to release new taxi licences in weeks 1 to squeeze existing licence holders who refuse to lower their prices. The decision to increase the number of licences to operate a taxi in Victoria is a rebuke to some of the industry’s biggest operators, who continue to resist reforms the government says will improve customer service. Taxi Services Commissioner Graeme Samuel said he had lost patience with taxi operators who would not reduce the rate at which they rent their taxi licences, so he would release new, cheaper taxi licences “in the next few weeks”.

Taxi lottery
The Taxi Services Commission has released 46 conventional licences and 14 maxi-taxi licences for a 12-month fixed term to force rogue players back into line. According to the Herald Sun, “It is designed to pull the market into shape because some are behaving in an irrational fashion an there appears to be some form of manipulation,” TSC chair Graeme Samuel said. Incumbent taxi operators are continuing to charge $28,000 for licences for a three-year term despite the value dropping to $22,000 from July 1. The Victorian Taxi Association has published the plan and claimed the standard of taxis would decline.

Knowledge
According to a report in the Herald Sun, knowing where the ‘G is basic change calculations and mobile phone laws will be a part of the new ‘Knowledge of Ken’ for drivers who will soon face The test, which will be a licence condition and is part of sweeping taxi industry reforms, will examine everything from geography to customer service.

Process cost
The owners of dozens of new apartments in a converted warehouse in Kensington have implored the Victorian government to buy their homes because their buildings will be just 14 metres from an elevated road forming part of the east-west link. According to The Age, the project boundary for the east-west link runs along the foootpath outside the Kensington Warehouse Apartments on Bent Street but does not touch the property. A similar situation occurred last year regarding the EVO apartments in Parkville, in which the state government agreed to buy every property in the building because a small section of communal land will be acquired for the road.

Oh! Dear!
According to a report in The Age, almost 420,000 Victorians aged over 70 – or ten per cent of all motorists – are still licensed to drive. Of these, 13,000 are over 90 and 58 have celebrated their 100th birthday. While older drivers tend to be over-represented in road fatalities – with the second highest death rate after those aged between 18 and 29 – this doesn’t mean they are more dangerous – just more at risk of injury.

Car licenses
A crucial upgrade of Victoria’s vehicle registration and licensing system has been suspended because of a $100 million budget blowout. The Victorian government has ordered VicRoads to defer development of the system for a year while it is reviewed. The decision follows revelations that the state government will require more than $100 million on top of the $158 million already allocated. The new system will streamline more than 40 current licence and registration systems, making it easier for customers to update registrations and licences.

L’Avenir
According to The Age, Australians could be billed for road use as they are for using electricity, gas and water under a proposal to completely change the way transport projects are funded. Called the universal road-user charge, it has been unanimously backed by the RACV and national motoring groups as an alternative to ever-shrinking tax bases. Roads are paid for by a mix of state-based taxes such as licence and registration fees and the federal fuel excise, which has shrunk by about a third in the past decade with more fuel-efficient cars.

Surfing on V/Line
The Age reports that V/Line passengers will be able to surf the web while travelling across the state under a $40m state government plan for free Wi-Fi on selected regional trains. The government hopes to have Wi-Fi on some trains by late 2015 on routes between Melbourne and Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Seymour and Traralgon.

Utilities
Living Victoria Minister for Water Peter Walsh announced the appointment of Mike Waller as the first permanent Chief Executive Officer of the Office of Living Victoria. “OLV was established by the Victorian Coalition Government to deliver our transformational urban water policy, Living Victoria. Consultants hired by the Coalition in 2011 to develop its water policies had been appointed to public-service positions without the jobs being advertised. Firms associated with the consultants were awarded government contracts relating to the work of the state’s new regulatory water agency, the Office of Living Victoria, reports The Age.

Waves
The organisation charged with revolutionising Melbourne’s water use is involved in another conflict-of-interest controversy. According to The Age, the “independent reviewer and verifier” of a scientific report that led to the establishment of the Victorian government’s new water agency headed the company with business and academic links to the report’s author, Office of Living Victoria chief scientist Dr Peter Coombes. The “Greater Melbourne Systems Model” report, written by Dr Coombes for Mr Walsh’s advisory panel, thanks Dr Michael Barry from BMT WBM for his “technical support”. It also thanks Tony McAlister for performing “his role as the Independent Reviewer and Verifier with integrity and maturity”. That report was instrumental in the 2012 establishment of the Office of Living Victoria, an agency charged with revolutionising Melbourne’s water use by placing a greater emphasis on stormwater collection and recycling, while ignoring Labor’s desalination plant and north-south pipeline.

Leaky live office
The Age reports that the government has commissioned a forensic investigation to identify the sources of public service leaks to The Age about the operations of the Office of Living Victoria. The OLV is the subject of a Victorian Ombudsman’s inquiry into its use of millions of dollars of taxpayer funds to hire former National Party advisers, retired public servants and consultants without public tender processes.

Ombudsman probe
According to The Age, the Victorian Ombudsman has questioned staff and seized files from the state’s new water agency as part of an investigation into multimillion-dollar taxpayer-funded contracts awarded without public tender to former National Party advisers, including former Water Minister for Water Peter Walsh’s office’s payment of former Howard government adviser Simon Want comes as an investigation by The Age has found the Office of Living Victoria has split contracts awarded to more than ten consultants, including former ministerial staff and public servants, in a bid to keep their identities secret and to avoid public tender processes.

Drop by drop details
War Minister Peter Walsh has been drawn into the financial controversy surrounding Victoria’s new water agency after his office made a mysterious payment to a consultant 12 months before it chose him to lead the organisation without advertising the job. The revelation of Walsh’s office’s payment of former Howard government adviser Simon Want comes as an investigation by The Age has found the Office of Living Victoria has split contracts awarded to more than ten consultants, including former ministerial staff and public servants, in a bid to keep their identities secret and to avoid public tender processes.

Troubled waters
In a two page focus in The Age by investigative journalists Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie, “Under the cover of parliamentary privilege, Coobms launched a tirade against Victoria’s water bureaucrats, the heads of its water companies and, in particular, some of his fellow consultants and scientists, whom he accused of writing reports that suited their paymasters. The OLV has adopted water modelling systems developed by Coobms. Backed by Walsh, the OLV is compelling water authorities, councils and companies across the state to implement stormwater capture projects, install rainwater tanks, increase recycling efforts and forget about getting water from the desalination plant or north-south pipeline. The Agency is also charged with ensuring that while all this change occurs, water authorities will still return financial dividends to the government and Victorians will see cuts to their water bills. To
help implement its agenda, the Office of Living Victoria has a $50 million fund to provide grants to councils, water authorities and developers for smart-water-use projects. There is no doubt that the OLV’s initiatives are appealing. Capturing stormwater and increased recycling have economic and environmental sense, particularly on green-field developments. Politically, the OLV’s policies appeal to left-leaning inner-city dwellers as well as country cooks.

Collecting rainwater
New analysis by the Office of Living Victoria shows the amount of rain that hit some homes last year was the equivalent of almost $400 in drinking water if it had come out of the tap, according to the Herald Sun, while not all the water would be able to be recycled, a new campaign to be launched today will show how much water is wasted. "Right Water" aims to make gardeners aware of alternative water sources around their home and garden, helping to reduce the use of drinking water supplies for non-drinking purposes," Mr Walsh said. "Right Water will encourage Victorians to continue using drinking water wisely, while also showing how easy it can be to capture rainwater from the roof to keep your garden green and healthy."

Ballarat water
The Victorian government’s flagship water cycle management project in Ballarat is running months behind schedule, amid claims a large proportion of its $1 million budget has been directed to the Office of Living Victoria’s chief scientist and other consultants. According to a report in The Age, the project, announced in mid-2011, aims to collect, treat and store the 9 billion litres of water the Office of Living Victoria estimates runs off Ballarat’s roofs and water-resistant surfaces each year. Nearly three years after Water Minister Peter Walsh said Ballarat would receive $1 million to begin transforming its water cycle management, the Living Ballarat project has yet to publicly release its stormwater harvesting plans or economic modelling.

Bills
According to the Herald Sun, unpaid water bills totalling more than $27 million are owed by tens of thousands of Victorians. The Age reports that the Salvos’ state budget submission says water price increases of 22.4% over the past year mainly to pay for the unused desalination plant have put already disadvantaged families under greater stress.

Society
Foster parents
Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) modelling shows $6.65 million is needed annually to bridge the gap between reimbursement payments to carers and the cost of looking after vulnerable children. The figures have fanned long-running concerns that Victoria is lagging behind other states and that the financial strain and lack of support is fuelling a steady exodus of foster carers. Julian Pocock, director of public policy and advocacy at Berry Street, said it was becoming harder for carers to meet basic costs such as school uniforms, books and school excursions. "Caring for a foster child involves all of the same costs as caring for other kids," he said. Fiona Hill, who is the sole foster carer of two teenage children, said government payments fell short of covering essential costs by $170 a fortnight per child, or $4420 a year.

Historic Pub
The Port Albert Hotel, one of the oldest pubs in Victoria recently suffered a significant blaze.

Royals not coming
The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince George are headed our way - but unfortunately not all of the way. The official itinerary for the latest royal tour of the country will not include Melbourne. They will visit the Sydney Opera House, of course, but not our Arts Centre. They will tour the bushfire-ravaged Blue Mountains, but not Morwell. They will enjoy a yacht race on Auckland Harbour, but not on Port Phillip Bay. Destinations in five Australian states and territories will get the royal treatment (including Adelaide), but Melbourne is not among them.

H&M come to town
The Herald Sun reports that the global fast fashion giant H&M opened its first Australian store in Melbourne’s iconic GPO building before a glamour VIP crowd. The Financial Review carries a feature on Henry Bucks described as ‘one of Australia’s oldest menswear brands’, its been around for 124 years, which is undertaking a complete revamp of its flagship Melbourne store as it seeks to remain ‘relevant among the wave of luxury brands pouring into the middle and lower reaches of Collins Street.

Vale
We normally read over The Age death notices and obituaries, and pick out names which might be relevant to readers. Also other names appear elsewhere. Some Age obits are well worth the read.


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