Letter from Melbourne

A monthly public affairs bulletin, a simple précis, distilling and interpreting public policy and government decisions, which affect business opportunities in Victoria and Australia.

Every month for twenty-two years.

The Tough Year Edition

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- CFMEU
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Since 1994. A monthly public affairs newsletter distilling public policy and government decisions which affect business opportunities in Victoria, Australia and beyond. 2,500,000 words available to search digitally.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR—ALISTAIR URQUHART, BA LLB

Alistair Urquhart graduated from the Australian National University in Canberra, in Law, History and Politics. He may even hold the record for miles rowed on Lake Burley Griffin.

He was admitted as a barrister and solicitor to the Supreme Court of Victoria, and remains a (non-practicing) member of the Law Institute of Victoria. Previously, he graduated from high school in Bethesda, Maryland, and had many opportunities to become aware of the workings of Washington D.C.

For 30 years, he listened every Sunday evening to the late Alistair Cooke and his Letter from America. Alistair’s early career was mostly in the coal industry, where he became involved with energy, environmental and water issues, and later in the SME finance sector.

He found time to be involved in a range of community activities where he came to understand some of the practical aspects of dealing with government and meeting people across the political spectrum.

He now chairs a large disability employment service, including its British operations.

Coffee at the Barwon Heads StarFish. A very busy coffee place most days. The proprietor strongly supports young baristas people as they develop their studies. On this occasion I was discussing Peter Singer’s book on Ethics with a couple of clever heads. So cleverly edited. A good basis for a discussion.
EDITORIAL: EDUCATION.
OOPS, EDUCATION

Later last year, your Editor attended a talk on ‘Why Wars in Africa are Different’, presented by a wise, retired British Army colonel, who had spent many years in Africa. He commenced with the Tsetse fly and its effect on horses and cattle, which limited the ability or capacity of these animals to carry supplies and armaments for soldiers in the field, as the various warring tribes fought each other. Particularly in the Equatorial region. So local people were marshaled to do these logistical tasks.

Later he spoke of health and how wonderful donors in Europe and other places provided extensive medical supplies and gear, though much of this in fact did not do the job that it was meant to do, for example provide oxygen facilities at hospitals out in the middle of no where. In fact, the horse delivery method as had already existed was a more reliable service.

The final point and feature of the speech presentation was that a better future for this part of Africa would in the first instance be based on education. Education. The basis of so much.

Victoria needs to focus on Education at all levels. Let’s get in some minds and activists from the other side of the public service and its agencies fence. Let us have some really good, appropriate education. First. The Victorian Police force and any organization and all of us who are involved in education. Education. The basis of so much.

The Editorial might be a little serious as we start 2017. This will be a serious year for many readings.

Cover.

Memorial to Burke and Wills, Leaders of the Victorian Exploring Expedition. There is evidently a bit of a tiff about what to do with the monument for the next few/five years while the Metro Link Rail is being constructed. Perhaps to put it in a ware-house for that time and polish it up. Or even to put it in another place where it could be appreciated and respected.

Down the road a little, where Swanston Street merges into or becomes St Kilda Road, it seems that many civil servants, planners and others want to ignore the history of the Road, the Boar War memorial and other memorials and all that Road stands for, let alone most of the Trees, and just put it to the shovel, in the cause of the next generation rail line. Tom Harley, Barry Jones. Josh Frydenburg MP. Lets get some more Historian Leaders and Others involved. Not protest marchers.

INSIDE

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STOP PRESS

Taxi licences

The Victorian Government is about to remove taxi license requirements, without complete or sufficient remuneration calculated for taxi ownership holders. Perhaps up to 100,000 dollars for some license holders and many times that for other licence holders. Your editor spent ten years as a financier to the small to medium end of town. Many of us will watch the progress with great detail. Ethics is involved.

Perhaps on the way out

Homeless people. And camps, might be affected by new City of Melbourne rules,

FEATURE ITEMS

Drug Reform Needed

The alarming and preventable spate of overdoses caused by a batch of MDMA, known as ecstasy, in one of Melbourne’s club districts, is further evidence, not that any was needed, that Australia’s drug policies are an abject failure. Our lawmakers’ need to publicly recognise that their ‘war on drugs’ ignores evidence that the most effective policies for minimising harm caused by misuse of illicit substances include decriminalisation, regulation, Education (not edukashion) and putting resources into prevention and treatment, rather than trying to apply ridiculous laws, as per The Age.

Figures Do Not Add Up

It was hard to miss the flurry of activity when road toll figures came out showing that 292 Victorians died on the state’s roads in 2016. But another figure seems to slip beneath the radar every year. It’s the number of people who die of drug overdoses. About 1,400 people in Australia die of an overdose every year – four a day. In 2015, 420 Victorians died of an overdose.

There were 252 road deaths in the same year. The state government spends more than double the amount on road safety as it does on services to prevent overdoses, as per The Age.

Mob Murders Investigated

Perhaps related. Police are holding out hope of cracking three unsolved mobster murders. They say they are withholding key evidence from the public because (!!!) it could jeopardise ongoing investigations, per the HERALD SUN.

Alcoa Taxpayer Funded Lifeline

A $200 million rescue package paid for by Victorian taxpayers will be offered to Alcoa in a bid to save thousands of jobs at the aluminium smelter in Portland. The offer to subsidise the smelter is likely to be over five years. But the sum forked out could rise if Alcoa agrees to boost its use of renewable energy sources, such as wind. Industry Minister Wade Noonan and former federal counterpart Greg Hunt flew to New York to meet Alcoa executives and offer the deal, the HERALD SUN reports.

GOVERNMENT IN VICTORIA

Number of Bureaucrats Swells

The latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed the number of public servants in Victoria jumped by 18,700 in the past two years – accounting for more than 80 per cent of bureaucrats hired by state and territory governments since

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2013-14. In the same period, the NSW Government slashed its public service by 8,900 and its wage bill rose by just $256 million with salary increases. Victoria’s hiring spree has added more than $2.5 billion to the taxpayer-funded bill since Labor came to power. Other Labor-led states also increased their bureaucracies in the past two years, as state government wages blew out by $6.6 billion. The latest data comes just days after Victoria was forced to downgrade its predicted budget surplus from $2.9 billion to $1.7 billion amid soaring employee expenses, according to the Herald Sun.

**Farmers Suffer Rate Rort**
The Victorian Government’s 2.5 per cent Fair Go Rates Cap is failing farmers, with rural ratepayers in 27 regional shires lumped with rate hikes of up to 13 per cent. The Victorian Farmers Federation has repeatedly called on the State Government to apply the Fair Go Cap to each rating category – residential, commercial/industrial and rural – rather than an across-the-board average that is open to manipulation.

‘One of the key missing pieces in creating a fair system is putting category caps in place so farmers aren’t burdened with even more of the rates’ VFF president David Jochinke said, as per The Weekly Times.

**Racing Victoria Change Up**
Victorian Racing Minister Martin Pakula said the government would amend an act of Parliament to ensure Racing Victoria directors were chosen in a different manner to the current method under which board members are nominated by racing clubs and other industry participants.

‘It is no longer appropriate for the board of Racing Victoria to be chosen by the people and organisations that it regulates,’ Mr Pakula said.

Although it is one of the most profitable sports organisations in the country, Racing Victoria has seen its past two chairmen step down due to integrity and governance issues and is without a permanent chief executive after a fruitless six-months search for a successor to outgoing incumbent Bernard Saundry, as reported in The Australian.

Six years ago, the Brumby government warned Alcoa would not be getting any more public cash when a long-standing contract supplying cheap power to its Portland smelter ended in 2016. Successive governments had tipped in billions of dollars under a generous subsidy arrangement brokered by the Cain government in 1982. The problem was that handouts were linked to the price of aluminium, which had been heading south, The Age reports.

**Landlord Reform**
Victorian landlords fear growing risks may force them to sell their retirement nest eggs as the State Government moves to overhaul renting laws. Flagged changes include removing ‘not pet’ clauses, adopting five-year leases, introducing minimum standards and restricting rental increases to once a year.

The proposed reform has been welcomed by tenants and industry groups. However, investors fear the move could leave them on the hook for thousands of dollars in maintenance costs and remove safeguards against dodgy tenants, according to the Herald Sun.

**FEDERAL**

**New Pension Asset Threshold**
About 25,000 Victorians will be stripped of discounts on rates, car registrations and train travel courtesy of a ‘double hit’ from changes to the Commonwealth pension scheme. New analysis of the revised pension assets test found Victorians who have their part pension axed will also lose out on key state and local government concessions.

Those affected will no longer be eligible for a 50 per cent reduction on council rates, the $50 fire services levy reduction, a 50 per cent reduction on the transport accident charge and a free V/Line voucher. These concessions are made available only through the pensioner concession card, not the Health Care Card or Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, for which affected pensioners will remain eligible.

About 91,000 people nation-wide will lose access to a part pension because their assets exceed the new limits – more than $816,000 combined for a couple who own their home or $542,500 for a single home owner, according to the Herald Sun.

**Clean Energy Fund for Gas?**
The Turnbull government is backing Alcoa Australia’s push to have the Clean Energy Finance Corporation fund a new gas-fired power plant in Victoria, as it attempts to save the company’s crippled Portland smelter. However, an energy expert has questioned the proposal as a ‘bizarre’ confusion of climate and industry policy that can mean even greater subsidies for Alcoa due to high gas prices, as per The Australian Financial Review.

**Piping at Camperdown Races with a Dancer**
**AGRICULTURE**

**Curtain Call for Pig Auctions**

Victoria’s last regular pig auction has closed. Landmark’s acquisition of Crawford Dowling has led to the closure of the fortnightly pig market at Ballarat. The sale regularly yarded about 250 pigs from across Victoria and South Australia’s South East. ‘Our last sale the top was $121 for a 30kg spilt’ said former auctioneer Grant Daniell.

In December 2015, when pig auctions stopped at Bendigo, Victorian Farmers Federation pig group president John Bourke said 95 per cent of producers did not sell through saleyards, reports the Herald Sun.

**Backpacker Tax Deterrent**

Backpacker numbers in Victoria are still well below average for the Christmas-New Year period as fallout from the backpacker tax debate continues. But farmers remain hopeful the labour situation will pick up in 2017, with the 15 per cent tax rate on working holidaymakers now in effect, as per The Weekly Times.

**Sheep Grants in Limited Supply**

As few as 250 of Victoria’s 28,000 registered sheep producers are likely to receive $3000 grants to assist with the introduction of mandatory electronic tagging. The Victorian Government has capped producer grants at $750,000, as part of a $17 million EID assistance package.

The grants cover wand and panel readers, weighing equipment, lamb marking cradles and manual drafting crates – all with EID reader fittings – and software to collect and manage data. Wands cost $1200. The Weekly Times understands the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources recently sent a letter to all Victorian sheep producers notifying them of the support.

Applications must be made before December 31 2017 but will close once the ‘funding allocation is exhausted’. Victorian Farmers Federation president David Jochinke called on the Government to make more funding available if the $3000 grants were oversubscribed.

**Rabbit Killing Virus To Be Distributed**

The latest strain of the Rabbit-killing calicivirus to be released across Australia could soon arrive in Victorian farmers’ mailboxes. The postal system is being considered as a way to distribute the Korean strain of calicivirus to landholders across Victoria. A nationwide effort to curb rabbit numbers will see RHDV-K3 released at 640 sites across the country—including 150 in Victoria—from February 25 to March 6, according to the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre, as per The Weekly Times.

**Grain Blockade**

Southwest Victorian grain growers are angry they have been blocked from delivering wheat to Geelong’s GrainCorp port terminal for up to three weeks. GrainCorp media and government relations’ director Angus Trigg said an unusually large harvest and ships being pushed back had combined to limit road delivery.

Anake grower David Gillett said GrainCorp took deliveries from Wangaratta, Beulah, Streatham and Westmere in early January. ‘It’s unfair they are allowing wheat from up country and not taking it from here’ Mr Gillett said to The Weekly Times.

**ENVIRONMENT, AND ENERGY**

**Downpour Affects Bay Water Quality**

Swimmers were urged to stay away from some of Melbourne’s most popular beaches after a one-in-100-year downpour caused sewage and built-up pollution to stream into Port Phillip Bay. The Environmental Protection Authority deemed tourist hotspot St Kilda beach unsafe to swim in. Other beaches around Williamstown, Elwood, Brighton, Frankston and Werribee South were also harbouring dangerous bacteria after the downpour caved in ceilings and flooded homes, as per The Age.

**Desal Plant to Complete June Order**

A faulty power cable has disrupted plans to start up Victoria’s $3.5 billion desalination plant so it can deliver its first water order. However, Water Minister Lisa Neville promised that the 50 gigalitres of water – about a tenth of Sydney Harbour’s capacity – that is contractually due to be delivered by June 30 will still arrive on time.

The desalination plant has sat idle since it was finished in December 2012, but the Andrews government placed its first water order on March 6. Melbourne’s water storage is currently around 70 per cent. Melburnians are using 182 litres per day per person, per The Age.

**Tales of Bureaucracy**

A crackdown on farmers ploughing firebreaks along roadsides is causing concern in Buloke Shire where vegetation is towering above fence lines due to high rainfall over winter. Richard Reilly of Corack, said he had been told he could no longer put in a firebreak along the council-managed road to his home off the Donald-Swan Hill road – even though his family had done this every summer for generations.

‘I believe the rules changed a few years ago but they are only now starting to really enforce it’ he said. ‘That’s OK but boy, it’s just such a fire hazard, particularly in a year like this’. He said he could put the firebreak beside his boundary but couldn’t see the logic of it.

A spokesman for Buloke Shire said the Roadside Vegetation Management Plan 2015-2019, ploughing or grading and putting in firebreaks was prohibited, even if the activity had gone on before. He said slashing could also not occur on roadsides without council permission, reports the Herald Sun.

**Energy Price Hike Nears**

The power outage in early December coincided with major financial challenges to Alcoa, including the conclusion of a generous contract struck with the Cain government 30 years ago, and the announcement of the closure of the Hazelwood power station in the Latrobe Valley, which is expected to lead to higher power prices. Alcoa is Victoria’s single biggest exporter and consumer of Victoria’s electricity and uses about 10 per cent of the state’s power, The Age reports.

**Wet Spring and Hot Autumn for Victoria**

Last year was likely to be Victoria’s wettest since 2011 and it’s fifth warmest on record, according to the Bureau of Meteorology. 2016 was a year, which Victorian Farmers Federation president David Jochinke said would be remembered because ‘we had a year with a spring for once’. The BOM’s Annual Climate Statement will be released tomorrow, but it has reported that Victoria experienced its warmest autumn on record and second-wettest September, reports The Weekly Times.
The report warned that compared to other 1970s and early ‘80s, as reported in The Age, the risk of harm to health or the environment.

The report warned that compared to other jurisdictions Victoria’s EPA tended to launch ‘relatively few’ prosecutions and secured few enforceable undertakings. Governments are seeking to free up former industrial ‘brownfield’ sites for urban renewal, while outer suburban expansion is pushing housing estates up against risky sites, such as former rubbish tips and factories.

Even more troublesome are the contamination hotspots governments don’t know about: historic landfill, petrol stations, dry cleaners, factories—including asbestos manufacturers—that opened and closed before Victoria’s limited environmental protection laws were introduced in the late 1970s and early ‘80s, as reported in The Age.

**Ban Will Drive Up Prices, Shell Says**

Oil and gas giant Shell has weighed in on Victoria’s plan to ban fracking and stop conventional onshore gas exploration and extraction until 2020. Shell, which does not produce gas in Victoria and did not provide a submission to the parliamentary inquiry that led to the Australian-first ban, said the Government’s policy would drive up gas prices, according to The Weekly Times.

**Further Coal Closures Not Likely**

The likelihood of further closures of Victoria’s brown coal power stations has sharply reduced after the decision to extend the life of Alcoa’s Portland aluminium smelter, which raises expectations of tighter supply and higher electricity prices, according to The Australian Financial Review.

**Melbourne Water Land Sale**

Melbourne Water is trying to rezone four Melbourne sites for sale, despite three of them—in Reservoir, Rosebud and Brunswick West—being used as parkland by residents. The fourth is a 2.8 hectares space in South Morang. The four sites Melbourne Water wants to sell are zoned for public use.

However, they have already been declared surplus by the water authority, meaning they will be prepared for sale unless a government minister steps in or local council offers to buy the land. Melbourne Water’s manager of property, Peter Morison, said the agency had a duty to regularly review land holdings not crucial to its operation, according to The Age.

**Industrial Action Hurting Energy Supply**

Energy giant AGL has claimed workers at its Loy Yang A plant are taking covert industrial action that is risking the state’s power supply, as part of an alleged backlash against the axing of their long-standing union agreement. An AGL spokesman said staff action included increased absenteeism and overtimes bans, resulting in two of its four generating units staying offline over a weekend in January, according to The Australian Financial Review.

**EVENTS**

**Falls Stampede Blamed on Poor Planning**

WorkSafe has already blamed the Falls Festival stampede on bottlenecks at exits and unstable ground. More than 60 people were injured and 19 hospitalised during a human crush as fans left one stage to rush to another to see a headline act. Whether or not the organisers of the Falls Festival thought through the fact that a huge group of fast-moving, excitable young people would want to get out of one area through small, limited exits and into another, en masse, is unknown, as reports in The Age.

**You’ve Scet to Be There**

If you couldn’t get to Edinburgh for its famous New Year’s celebrations, Maryborough in western Victoria was the next best thing. Locals held the 156th annual Maryborough Highland Gathering, an event that consumes the town for 12 hours. The Gathering doubles as an athletic carnival, including the men’s 120m Maryborough Gift, and a women’s 120m sprint, The Herald.

Central Goldfields Shire mayor Geoff Lovett said the Gathering was a huge day for Maryborough, with up to 4000 visitors from Victoria and interstate adding to the 8000 population, as per The Age.

**Bring the Mints**

On February 18, Meeniyan, population 681, where the sweet ABC drama Bed of Roses was shot, will host what organised claim is Victoria’s first garlic festival. About 10 garlic growers will bring their freshly harvested bulbs but the whole town is pitching in. Football club members will serve garlic calamari and fries, the Country Women’s Association and Red Cross will serve garlic scones and cricketers will sell garlic beer.

The Meeniyan Store will serve garlic ice cream. There is not, as yet, a peppermint stall. There will be 80 stalls from local food producers and artists, and bands, cooking classes and garlic planting workshops, as reported in The Age.

**More than Pasta**

The Age has headlined, page 2, and The Herald Sun to a lesser degree, that St Kilda Restaurant Di Stasio, has been ordered by the Fair Work Ombudsman to repay staff after it had underpaid six overseas workers. The Editor stands tall for Mr Di Stasio, and has so for decades. Without knowing all the details, Di Stasio is a good man and he runs a great restaurant throughout the maze of bureaucracy, which limits our hospitality trade as it does in our great City.

**A Necessity**

There are plans for a beehive in the window of a new shop selling honey in the Block Arcade. Tourists will soon marvel at the live bees making honey and beehives for Beechworth Honey. Managing director Grant Cohen said the Arcade gets 100,000 visitors a week and in 2016 was ranked Trip Advisor’s fifth top Australian landmark, according to The Age.

**EDUCATION**

**Unschooling Uptake**

Sue Wight, Home Education Network co-ordinator, says a 2015 survey of the network’s 700 members showed that 20 per cent were unschooling. An Education Department spokesman says families practicing unschooling are expected to register with the Victorian Qualification and Regulations Authority and required to meet the same standards as home schoolers, reports The Age.

**New Look Safe Schools**

The Victorian government will overhaul the Safe Schools program and cut ties with its former founder Roz Ward amid a public backlash that was set to intensify ahead of the Victorian election. In a bid to protect the anti-bullying initiative, the Education Department will be in charge of
delivering Safe Schools from next year, ensuring the government is solely responsible for rolling it out to every state secondary school by 2018.

The move is a significant shift for a program that was co-founded by Ms Ward almost seven years ago and has been delivered through her employer, La Trobe University ever since. But in recent months, Safe Schools has come under sustained attack by critics who claim it promotes ‘radical gender theory’ or believe Ms Ward’s history as a hardline Marxist is too extreme.

Victorian Education Minister James Merlino, who wrote to La Trobe to inform the university its contract would be terminated six months early. ‘But Safe Schools has always been about more than just one person, it’s about stopping the bullying and harassment of young people who are same-sex attracted and gender diverse. We know it works – and we know it saves lives.’

The Safe Schools Coalition began as a trial under the Brumby government in 2010 after teachers asked for a specific set of resources to help them support students who were ‘coming out’ as same-sex attracted or gender diverse. Under the new structure, teachers will continue to have access to the same lesson plans to support SAFE Students, but the department will have the scope to review and enhance the material if required in future. ‘This is about making it better and stronger’ Mr Merlino said, according to The Age.

Andrews Attacked
Premier Andrews progressive credentials have come under fire from supporters of Safe Schools founder Roz Ward, who has accused the Premier of caving in to ‘right-wing bigotry’ by cutting ties with the controversial academic. The National Union of Students also lashed out, accusing the Premier of throwing Safe Schools ‘under the bus’.

Others, however, took a different view. Dale Park, co-convener of the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby said the government’s changes showed an ongoing commitment to Safe Schools and LGBTQI students. The Safe Schools revamp is a major shake-up for a once-uncontroversial program devised off the back of La Trobe research, which found that schools were hotbeds for homophobia and bullying against same-sex attracted youth, writes Farrah Tomazin for The Age.

State Schooling Becoming Pricey
By the time a baby born in 2017 graduates from a government school in Victoria, its parents would have spent $77,000 on its education, new figures show, according to The Age.

Victorian College for the Gifted
The smartest state school students in Victoria could board for the first time, with the government considering building an academy for gifted children next to Melbourne High School.

The institution would provide much-needed services for gifted students from regional Victoria, and could include a state-funded residential college for students at the state’s four select entry high schools – Melbourne High School, MacRobertson Girls’ High School, Nossal High School and Suzanne Cory High School.

The idea has been in the pipeline for years, and was given a significant boost following a 2012 parliamentary inquiry into gifted education. The Education Department has appointed Ernst and Young to investigate the funding, construction and governance of the academy, as reported in The Age.

Good Job
Xavier College seeks a new Principal, 2,100 students.

HEALTH
Hospitals Cooking the Books
An unprecedented investigation has been ordered into Victoria’s major public hospitals amid fears of deliberate manipulation of waiting lists to boost performance records. The Herald Sun reports that 11 hospitals have failed to record 943 plastic and reconstructive surgery patients on their official elective surgery waiting list.

The State Government has blamed the cases uncovered so far on an ‘administrative bungle’ by the hospitals, but has ordered an independent audit of all Victorian health services to uncover any evidence of deliberately manipulated data. If evidence of intentional action is found, the government has vowed to refer the matter to authorities including Victoria Police and the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission.

The majority of the cases uncovered so far have been confined to four hospitals – Monash, Health, Peninsula Health, Eastern Health and Austin Health. But they have been cleared of deliberate wrongdoing, avoiding penalties. Seven other hospitals have also been implicated. Health Minister Jill Hennessy moved to close a loophole allowing hospitals to incorrectly code patients having cosmetic-type procedures in a way that meant they did not appear to a publicly reported waiting list.

Furry Friends
At the new Monash Children’s Hospital, alongside state-of-the-art medical equipment, Victoria’s new paediatric hospital features a specially designed pet park. It allows patients to spend time with their animals while undergoing treatment, the Herald Sun reports.

Stroke Ambulance to Save Lives
A four-year trial of Australia’s first ‘stroke ambulance’, aiming to bring time-critical treatment to more people sooner, will begin this year. From March, a mobile CT unit will give brain scans to people suspected of stroke, saving up to an hour. They can then be given lifesaving clot-busting drugs. The State Government will spend $7.5 million on the trial, with donations from Melbourne business leaders, as per the Herald Sun.

Bad Batch Leads to Overdoses
Officers say hospitals were flooded with people after a bad batch of ecstasy was distributed along the Chapel Street precinct. Detective acting Senior Sargent Dave Newman said the spate of overdoses was unexpected and raises fears for the rest of the summer festival season, as per The Age.

Doctor Prescribes Lethal Drug
A Melbourne doctor who has given scores of sick people a lethal drug has won a fight against the medical board, with a tribunal ruling his practice is consistent with other forms of palliative care. In a decision that could set a precedent for other doctors wanting to help patients die, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal has ruled Dr Rodney Syme does not pose a risk to the public, even though he gave about 170 people a drug that could end their lives.

In January, the Medical Board of Australia took urgent action against Dr Syme after it was told he was planning to give Nembutal to a 71-year-old man who was dying of tongue and lung cancer. The man sought Dr Syme’s help because he wanted to die at home and have control over his own death, according to The Age.

BUSINESS & INVESTMENT
Alcoa Threat Puts Portland Workforce at Risk
Prime Minister Turnbull’s office has weighed into the high stakes negotiations between aluminium giant Alcoa and power supplier AGL as political anxiety grows around the future of Alcoa’s crippled smelter in Victoria. Alcoa has refused to commit to a future in Portland following a major power outage in December that damaged its 50-year old plant and has cost the company about $1 million a day since.

The intervention of Turnbull’s office also comes as Portland’s second biggest employer Keppel Prince, warned that it would likely be closed down if Alcoa goes. Keppel Prince told The Age that of 300 employees, 200 are devoted to mechanical and electrical maintenance for the smelter. Like two-thirds of the Alcoa workforce, those 200 Keppel Prince employees are now on unscheduled leave due to lack of work.

Big Loss for MMA
Melbourne Market Authority made a loss in its first year operating the wholesale fruit and vegetable market at Epping. In its first annual report since relocating from Footscray in August 2015, the MMA showed the market had gone from generating a $7.6 million profit in 2014-15 to a $1.6 million loss in 2015-16, as reported in The Weekly Times.

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS
Watchdog for CFA Enterprise Deal
The bitter workplace dispute between the CFA and the militant United Firefighters’ Union has hit another flashpoint, in the midst of bushfire season, with the CFA asking the federal workplace authority to again intervene in the stoush. ‘Given we have reached an in-principle agreement with the UFU on the contents of the operational
enterprise agreement, we feel the most appropriate mechanism to resolve any outstanding issues is through the commission, as opposed to industrial action’ CFA chief executive Frances Diver said.

But UFU branch secretary Peter Marshall laughed off the idea the two organisations had reached an agreement. ‘There’s no in-principle agreement; there was an in-principle agreement, before the federal legislation, and now there’s not,’ he said. Both the CFA and UFU have been locked in battles over their new enterprise bargaining agreements for more than three years, reports The Age.

UFU Demanded Millions From CFA
The United Firefighters Union demanded millions of dollars from the Country Fire Authority for legal costs, a former CFA chief has confirmed to a parliamentary inquiry. Former acting CFA chief executive Michael Wootten said he authorised a payment of about $484,000 to the union after deciding to go into arbitration over the UFU’s ‘ambit claim for costs’.

He said the UFU had demanded the money in a letter accusing the CFA of ‘not abiding by its obligations in relation to the model litigant rules for public sector agencies’. The original figure was in the millions and that’s when we (began) to try and seek a resolution’, he said. He had been ‘deeply concerned’ about the allegation made against the CFA by the union. After the Herald Sun revealed the existence of the payment last year, UFU secretary Peter Marshall said ‘the seeking and awarding of legal costs is a standard practice in matters of litigation’.

CFMEU Shooting
The head of the CFMEU says a ‘long and distinguished’ list of people are suspected of opening fire on the union’s Carlton headquarters. Windows at the front of the Swanston Street building were shattered after up to five shots were fired at about 3am, in December, according to The Age.

JUSTICE & POLICE

Some Formalities
The Victorian Government recently released Ending Family Violence: Victoria’s Plan for change - a 10-year Family Violence Action Plan to create a future free from violence for all Victorians. The Action Plan will ensure all 227 recommendations from the Royal Commission into Family Violence are put into action.

It will change our systems and services to make sure victims are safe, to ensure perpetrators are accountable and to ensure children are given the best possible support when they need it most.

PSO Predators
Protective Services Officers have been caught taking note of the identities of women they meet on duty so as to contact them later on social media. An Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission probe found 76 cases of such predatory behaviour, but said it was likely the problem was under-reported.

Ron Iddles, the secretary of the Police Association, said the IBAC report misrepresented the scale of any problem because it failed to exclude those allegations that had been found to be unsubstantiated. While acknowledging a rise in PSO numbers, the report also did not properly place the tenfold rise in transit PSO numbers over the period examined, Mr Iddles said. The 88 officers in 2012 had grown to 940 by June 2015, according to the Herald Sun.

Protected Train Predator
When Victorian railway sex predator Robert Whitehead died in jail last year, he took a big secret with him. That secret was the identity of a small but powerful group of Victorian men who, according to his victims, ran what amounted to a protection racket for Whitehead, and whose influence allowed him to abuse train-loving boys, whenever he wanted, for at least three decades.

But even though Whitehead was first convicted and jailed for abducting and abusing a child in 1959, the Victorian government’s railways department – his employer – gave him long-term leases on old railway buildings at Brighton Beach and Taradale in country Victoria. He used Taradale to sexually assault boys and it is highly likely he did the same at Brighton Beach.

There are also allegations that at least one man who retains a senior position within Victoria’s volunteer railway community was aware of Whitehead’s offending. There is also an apparent lack of police records about Whitehead’s activities at North Williamstown’s Australian Railway Historical Society in 1976 and Puffing Billy a decade later.

Both organisations had other paedophiles among their ranks at the same time as Whitehead, and Whitehead’s behaviour was the subject of a number of complaints to police. In an email to Victoria’s police chief commissioner, Graham Ashton, one of Whitehead’s victims Wayne Clarke asked for an explanation as to why sex crimes detectives in 2014 could find no records of any of it. The police commissioner’s office has promised to investigate Clarke’s concerns.

Clarke has been at pains to get answers from the Victorian government about how a convicted child sex abuser was able to secure leases on railway buildings in Brighton and Taradale, which is where he was subjected to a terrifying series of ordeals in 1975. He has been frustrated by a lack of response from various government departments and agencies, writes Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie for The Age.

Young Criminal Concerns
Crime date on every youth offender in Victoria has revealed two 10-year-olds were charged with more than 20 crimes each in the past year, and confirmed police and state government fears that a hardcore group of youngsters is committing a huge number of offences. Statistics released show that a group of 34 boys and girls aged 11 to 18 – the pointy end of the state’s youth crime crisis – committed at least 1000 offences, as reported in The Age.

Falls Face Legal Battle
Organisers of the Falls Festival in Victoria could be sued over a crowd crush. The festival says a ‘confluence of events’ led to a human stampede that marred the Lorne festival on December 30, which left 19 people in hospital, according to The Age.

Coastal Crime Spike
Postcode data released by the Crime Statistics Agency in the year to September 30 reveal thefts in areas including Wallington, Leopold, Queenscliff, Torquay and Anglesea have increased to their highest level in the past five years during the same reporting period, reports the Herald Sun.

Judicial Reform Needed
In Victoria the combination of a weak, desperately out-of-touch judiciary, demoralised police force and increasingly violent criminals has created a culture of fear and mistrust. That mistrust now extends to the police force or, to be precise police command, as exasperated Victorians ask why more isn’t done to protect the community.

IBM Tower, Level 3, 60 City Road, Southbank Vic 3006 (By appointment only)
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and why we hear about terrifying crimes only when victims reach out to the media.

Policing should never be politicised or become an exercise in public relations. It’s clear the crime rate has become the No. 1 issue across the state and that a big part of the problem is the judiciary, which continues to hand out soft sentences to violent and recidivist offenders of all ages, writes Rita Panahi for the Herald Sun.

Beach Box Vandalism
All 11 beach boxes on Point King Beach, Portsea, as well as three jetties, were vandalised over the New Year’s period. Police are investigating. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this before,’ said one holidaymaker, who has spent 30 summers on the Mornington Peninsula with her family. ‘It’s a wanton destruction.’

A party on the beach had attracted hundreds of revellers on New Year’s Eve, said Mr Pleasance, and police were patrolling the beach. ‘The damage took place under their noses’. By the time he left the foreshore at 12.30am, at least four beach boxes—including his—had been vandalised, as reported in The Age.

Police Protect NYE Revellers
Police were out in force in Melbourne’s CBD on New Year’s Eve to curb trouble and show safety in numbers after the thwarted summertime riots on the Mornington Peninsula, with more than 13.5 tonnes of fireworks being lit off 22 city rooftops, as per The Age.

Sad Youth Challenge
Victoria’s Children’s Minister Jenny Mikakos says children are being held in better conditions at a maximum-security adult prison than they could be at other youth justice centres. The Court of Appeal had ordered 12 remaining children to be removed from the prison, ruling Ms Mikakos had not lawfully classified the Grevillea Unit as a youth justice centre, because she had not properly considered the children’s legal rights to things including personal development at the time.

But Mikakos said she expected more to begin to be transferred to the unit after the Andrews government reclassified the unit as a youth justice and remand centre is a way that she said dealt with the court’s initial concerns, reports The Age.

Police Radio Update
Outdated police radio will be replaced after the State Government signed a seven-year contract with Telstra to provide encrypted digital equipment in country Victoria. The new communications system, which will be rolled out from mid-2017, will stop criminals in regional areas taking advantage of the current police radio network, according to the Herald Sun.

Surface Hearing
A bail justice released the Bourke Street mass killer after hearing police submissions. But it was unclear from court papers whether or not police opposed bail for the man who went on to mow down dozens of pedestrians in the CBD six days later, Deputy Chief Magistrate Jelena Popovic said.

He was on bail over charges of speeding on the wrong side of the road, and ignoring a police direction to stop. He was released by bail justice at St Kilda police station on January 14. The details of that hearing, and what was alleged in it, have so far been kept secret. Popovic said the file before her did not disclose whether police had opposed bail.

‘It would indicate that the bail justice was told something by the police officer, which caused the bail justice to take the view that it was appropriate to grant bail.’ The day after the Bourke Street attack, Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton and Premier Andrews told reporters police had opposed bail, as reported in The Age.

Nothing Hollywood About Car Chases
One of Victoria’s police top officers has said pursuits are not like in the movies, and police don’t ram cars and shoot at moving vehicles. In the wake of the Bourke Street tragedy, Deputy Commissioner Andrew Crisp defended the force’s pursuit policy after the leaking of four-month-old internal email on intercepting stolen cars. ‘To ram a car is an extremely dangerous act...it’s not a smart move’ he said, as per The Age.

Bail Reform – Editor to Add
Premier Andrews has promised to make changes where needed to bail laws in the wake of the Bourke Street tragedy, with resources and cost not an issue. But he stopped short of announcing specific changes. The man responsible for killing six innocent people was released by a bail justice despite police opposition on January 14.

Asked specifically about the role of bail justices, the Premier said the state did have some ‘unique’ features of its system. Police Association secretary Ron Iddles called for the voluntary system to be scrapped and for police to be given the power to remand suspects until they can face a magistrate. ‘For too long we’ve done justice on the cheap whilst (bail justices have) filled the void or the gap.’

‘We have modern technology now, we should have magistrates doing all remands,’ Senior Sergeant Iddles said. He said magistrates were already available after-hours to make decisions on search warrant applications from police. Bail judges are volunteers who are called in after-hours, normally to police stations, to conduct hearings on applications for bail or remand in the immediate hours after suspects are arrested and charged.

Senior Sergeant Iddles said there was one man in the eastern suburbs who had been bailed eight times. Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton also expressed frustration over bail laws, The Age reports.

Youths Riot
Seven teens were on the run and 50 terrified staff were in lockdown for four hours after a serious riot broke out at the Malsmbury youth detention facility near Castlemaine. About 15 detainees escaped from Victoria’s troubled Malsmbury Youth Justice centre on Wednesday, stealing cars, ramming other vehicles and promoting police pursuits, according to The Age.

Lack of Youth Law and Order
Premier, youth justice is in crisis. Admit it. The escape of inmates from a ‘secure’ unit at the Malsmbury Youth Justice Centre has plunged the system into further chaos and fuels broader community perceptions that Premier Andrews and his team have lost control of law and order, writes Richard Willingham for The Age.

Youth Detention in Crisis
Corrections officers will take over security at teen jails amid anger from victims and some Labor MPs over the Government’s handling of the youth crime rate. A crisis meeting held by Premier Andrews agreed Corrections Victoria staff should move into Parkville and Malsmbury justice centres to re-establish control. A new supermax youth prison will also be built for the worst teen criminals, reports the Herald Sun.

Support for Bail Justices
Department of Justice community operations and victims support agency director Clare Morton said it would support all 230 bail justices by having the Honorary Justice Officer set up sessions across the state ‘to meet face to face’ to discuss the Bourke Street massacre. ‘I would...like to acknowledge the support that the Honorary Justice Office has received from you during this difficult time, particularly in relation to the support that has been forthcoming for the affected bail justice’, according to the Herald Sun.

So
A new Juvenile jail in Werribee South. A building sure, with no local community support and what about keeping discipline within the building. Comments by the editor.

MELBOURNE
Big Smoke Growth
Greater Melbourne grew by 2.06 per cent in 2014-15 – packing an extra 91,593 people, according to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report. But growth rates in regional cities and towns were not so impressive, as the overwhelming
majority of overseas migrants preferred to settle in the big smoke, reports the HERALD SUN.

Buskers Told to Quit the Racket
Loud buskers have been warned to steer clear of families enjoying the Myer Christmas Windows. Relations between buskers and the council have been tense since the council staged a three-month trial to stop the playing of loud music on Swanston St between Flinders Lane and La Trobe St. Council management is considering the issue but Cr Doyle doesn’t favour an ongoing ban, as per the HERALD SUN.

Ode to English Elms
Melburnians who adore our historic and fantastical English elms will no doubt be interested in sharing a little secret. They are not English. They are Italian. Scientists have traced the date of their first appearance in Britain to roughly 2000 years ago. The Romans arrived there with the elms, probably for the purposes of training vines in vineyards and using their leaves as a kind of hay.

The strong resistance of elms to rot also meant that their hollowed logs could be used as pipes for irrigation. So resilient are elms that in European mythology the Ulmus variety are associated with the afterlife and origins of humankind. In recent centuries, elms were typically planted in European cities to celebrate the birth of a republic or a democracy following a revolution.

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The right to be Homeless
This has to be one of the dumbest ideas to have come out of local council of late, and that’s saying something. Melbourne’s lord mayor Robert Doyle announced through the HERALD SUN that he would take to council a scheme to ban people sleeping rough in the CBD. In short, the lord mayor would ban homelessness within his municipal fiefdom.

The Andrews government has pledged more than $600 million for additional housing and homelessness support, and the council has allocated $2 million for outreach and housing services. But trying to tackle the structural problems takes time. The Council for Homeless Persons says the only thing that will fix this is to provide long-term stable, low-cost housing and the support services people need to be able to maintain that housing, writes Bianca Hall for THE AGE.

Metro Tunnel Closes City Streets
Parts of the CBD will remain closed to the public for years on end as construction of Melbourne’s Metro Tunnel kicked off during the middle of January and continues well into the next decade. For the first time, sections of Franklin and A’Beckett streets were closed as early works, including tree removal, began at the site of the new CBD North Station, as reported in THE AGE.

Government Accom for Homeless
Rough sleepers in Melbourne’s CBD will be offered ‘guaranteed’ accommodation by the Victorian government, but soup kitchens and other street services could be cut back in a tougher and more co-ordinated approach to tackling the homelessness crisis, THE AGE reports.

Planning Exemptions to Help Those In Need
Developers will be allowed to build higher apartment complexes if they included social and affordable housing, under a radical plan from the Victorian Council of Social Services. The ‘density bonuses’ along with inclusionary zoning to mandate a percentage of social housing in new developments, are among the social advocacy peak body’s key recommendations to reduce homelessness and mortgage stress.

VCOSS’s wishlist for this year’s state Budget also includes calls for discounted public transport fares, a target to cut prisoner reoffending rates by 15 per cent and increased funding for kindergartens, as per the HERALD SUN.

Politics
The Right to be Homeless
Victoria has underinvested in new transport infrastructure by the equivalent of $60 billion over the past 30 years, compared with the amounts invested in other states by federal and state governments and private firms. Bureau of Statistics data shows that since 1986, spending on new roads, rail and other transport infrastructure in Victoria by far governments has been barely half the average invested in other states, as a share of state economic activity.

The Bureau reported that Victoria accounted for 36 per cent of the nation’s population growth in the year to June. Australia added 337,821 people, of whom 123,317 settled in Victoria — the biggest annual population growth the state has ever had. But the state and federal governments have continued to underspend on Victorian infrastructure relative to what is being spent in other states, according to THE AGE.

Vics Get the Rough End of the Stick
Victoria is set to get just 17% of every $10 handed out by the Commonwealth for infrastructure prompting further claims that the Turnbull government is overlooking Australia’s fastest-growing state. The federal Treasury’s budget update has revealed just $2.05 billion has been set aside for Victorian road, rail and regional projects over the four-year budget period. That represents 2.7 per cent of the national total — well below the state’s one-quarter share of the national population.

Victoria’s Building Crisis
Victoria is facing a crisis of faulty, dangerous and leaking buildings that experts warn is comparable in scale to the scourge of asbestos. Shoddy materials and poor workmanship mean many homes and apartments in Victoria are likely to be outlawed by their owners.

Builders collective of Australia president Phil Dwyer said there would be an ‘endemic failure of the building industry’ in the next 10 years as a consequence of developers chasing profits at the expense of longevity. Veteran building regulation expert Stephen Kip said it was extremely likely lives would be lost in Victoria because of poor building standards, as reported in THE AGE.

Palais Facelift Complete
After two years hidden under scaffolding, the facelift to St Kilda’s historic Palais Theatre has been revealed, with its new paint job restoring the venue to its original yellow hue after decades in white, reports THE AGE.

Private Accom for the Surf Coast
The State’s peak planning tribunal has sought to reassure Bells Beach locals by allowing builders to build small-scale tourist accommodation on their property would not open the ‘floodgates’ to developments at the popular surfing spot. The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal granted Ian and Phillip McNaughton a permit to four people at their property at Bells Beach, overturning Surf Coast Shire’s refusal, as reported in THE AGE.
Experts Split Over Apartment Laws
New laws on Melbourne’s apartments that set minimum bedroom and living sizes are too weak and won’t protect future generations, architects say. But the laws, announced by Planning Minister Richard Wynne, have been welcomed by planners, and the development and property industry. Developers had feared being compelled to build apartments with a minimum floor size, as is the law in Sydney.

This would have dramatically cut profitability. But Mr Wynne has dumped minimum floor sizes across entire apartments – instead specifying that bedrooms must have minimum floor size of between nine and 10.4 square metres, as per The Age.

Fungus Growing From Carpets
Fresh examples have emerged of Melbourne buildings that experts say are ‘too dangerous’ to occupy. It has been revealed that mould, fungus and building collapse has left a six-year-old apartment complex in the South Eastern suburbs virtually uninhabitable. About half the residents of the building have moved out after their units were declared uninhabitable because of mould growth, including fungus ‘mushrooms’ sprouting from the carpet, according to The Age.

Historical House Not Yet a Home
Valetta House, once home to Sir Redmond Barry – the judge who sentenced Ned Kelly to hang – is in a sorry state. The proximity to the Fitzroy Gardens over the road makes Valetta House a genuine gem of Melbourne’s built history. Built in 1856, it is heritage registered as being of architectural, social and historical importance to Victoria. Yet, it has been empty of occupants for well over a decade.

The house’s owner explains that she has current permits and is in the process of renovating the house for her own eventual occupancy, but she has had no help from Heritage Victoria and others, as per The Age.

Historical Pub to be Knocked Down
More than 150 years of continual operation as a pub, an application has been filed to demolish the Great Western Hotel and replace it with an apartment tower. Developer Jin Yi Pty Ltd wants to squeeze 26-storesys onto the tiny site which, at 325 square metres, is smaller than a basketball court.

It can easily be disproved if the AFL comes out and play sports or go to the gym’ Day explained. The pub has been a long-term haunt for barristers and solicitors from the nearby court district, as well as journalists covering courts and the crime beat, although tradies in their fluoro shirts and boots were just as welcome, as reported in The Age.

More of the Future out there
The Victorian Planning Authority (MPA) in collaboration with the City of Whittlesea has prepared Amendment C187 to the Whittlesea Planning Scheme. This amendment concerns the preparation of the Wollert Precinct Structure Plan (PSP) and the Wollert Development Contributions Plan (DCP). The MPA and the City of Whittlesea has prepared these plans in consultation with Government agencies and service authorities.

The planned precinct covers an area of 1,434 hectares and is bound by Craigieburn Road East to the south, Summerhill Road in the north, Curly Sedge Creek in the west and the reservation for the future E6 to the east.

Although the hotel is thought to date back to 1864, less than 10 years after the city was founded, the building does not have any heritage protection. When the hotel’s leaseholder, Glenn Day, first acquired the pub it sold up to 42 barrels of beer a week, now it is about 12 to 15.

‘The older generation that used to come and have a b$er at lunch time and have a beer after work are mostly now retired. The young kids now go play sports or go to the gym’ Day explained. The pub has been a long-term haunt for barristers and solicitors from the nearby court district, as well as journalists covering courts and the crime beat, although tradies in their fluoro shirts and boots were just as welcome, as reported in The Age.

SPORTS
Attacks on Hird Must Stop
The Australian’s Patrick Smith, as any casual reader of his columns would know, has built his reputation on denigrating successful sports people and administrators. Remember his unmitting vilification of Lleyton Hewitt, Australia’s most successful tennis player of the last generation? Remember his ongoing persecution of Grant Thomas, the man who put St Kilda on a sound financial and administrative footing? Remember his attacks on Jeff Kennett, who after saving Victoria from bankruptcy went on to put Hawthorn on the trajectory that has made it the most successful football club of this century?

So his latest attack on my son fits his character. Smith is a man with no achievements who makes a living trying to tear down successful people.

But given Jim’s (James Hird) current circumstances, surely even for Smith this is too much? Surely without prompting, he never would have written: ‘Hird sadly drove himself to the intensive care unit calling the directions all the way.’ So what drove him to write that disgusting sentence? I believe he is acting as the AFL’s spokesman. Well that’s my theory. It can easily be disproved if the AFL comes out and dissociates itself from his diatribe, writes James Hird’s father Allan, in a letter to the Herald Sun.

Ticket Rort
Scammers and scalpers from overseas are ripping off fans. The Herald Sun has revealed more than 400 people have been turned away at Melbourne Park after buying fake tickets online. Many more paid way over the odds – seats to the final were being sold online for up to $7970 above face value.

Ground passes to sit outside centre court and watch the match on big screens were advertised for sale on Ticketmaster Resale for more than $113. The same tickets could be purchased through Ticketek for less than $32.60.

TRANSPORT – PORTS
Lots next month

TRANSPORT – RAIL
Timber Sleepers Causing Issues
Mildura’s latest rail speed restrictions can be traced back to the Victorian Government’s 2007 decision to upgrade the line using timber instead of concrete sleepers. The Bracks Government opted for 300,000 red gum sleepers on the Mildura line in 2007-08 despite its own Department of Infrastructure reporting the maintenance costs were nearly three times those of concrete sleepers.

In the week leading up to Boxing day, 137 freight services were affected by heat speed restrictions; 77 could not run between noon and 8pm or 10pm, as per The Weekly Times.

New Tough Targets
Metro Trains will face multimillion-dollar fines if it fails to meet tough new punctuality and reliability targets.

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targets under a proposed seven-year agreement with the state. The company will also be penalised for the controversial practice of skipping stations and will have to do more to keep trains and stations in good condition and better inform passengers of disruptions and delays, as reported in The Age.

**Condition Unknown**  
Melbourne’s passenger rail system is a near $90 billion asset, owned by the public and run by two companies, Metro Trains and Yarra Trams, which transport hundreds of millions of people a year. And yet nobody who oversees the tram and train system can say for sure what physical condition it is, nor whether it is fit to cope with expected increases in demand in coming years.

Such is the troubling finding of Victoria’s Auditor-General in an alarm call of a report about how well the state is managing the performance of the train and tram franchise agreements, two multibillion-dollar deals that see the standards of performance: Metro and Yarra Trams must meet, reports The Age.

**No New South Yarra Station…Yet**  
A new South Yarra railway station will not be built as part of the Melbourne Metro rail tunnel – but the Andrews government has conceded it may be needed in the future, after months of arguing it was not necessary. Planning Minister Richard Wynne announced on Wednesday that he had accepted an expert planning panel’s conclusion that the case for connecting South Yarra to the tunnel is not justified given the high cost.

But the panel also found the tunnel’s final design should not preclude the ability to include such a station as part of the metropolitan network at some time in the future, a recommendation the government has accepted. ‘I encourage the MMRA (Melbourne Metro Rail Authority) and wider government to consider this opportunity when preparing the final design for the project,’ Mr Wynne said, as per The Age.

**Rural Rail Needs Fixing**  
The unsexy rural rail network needs urgent attention. That is the hundreds of kilometres of rail lines beyond the suburbs, the lifeline of our food exports and the economic health of our state. At this time of year millions of tonnes of grain rumble along these lines to ships waiting at Melbourne, Geelong and Portland.

Without them, thousands of extra truck movements would pound roads that struggle with the current traffic load, and the grains industry would miss markets. Yet for years successive governments have ignored the warning signs that the rail system is failing to cope, to the point rail lines are getting close to unusable.

So poor is our state’s rural rail system that in early January V/Line ruled that trains on many lines across NorthWest Victoria – where most of the grain is coming from – could not run on those lines when temperatures hit 33C. As Victorian Farmers Federation grains president Brett Hosking said: ‘our trains are stopping before people have put their jumpers away. I certainly would not describe 33 degrees as high temperature in northwest Victoria,’ writes Ed Cannon for the Herald Sun. Sounds like a tale of bureaucracy.

**Metro Tunnel to Benefit the Nation**  
The multibillion-dollar Melbourne Metro rail project will boost the Australian economy; the nation’s top infrastructure advisers have declared, placing pressure on the Turnbull government to increase funding to Victorian major projects. The business case for the $10.9 billion project to build twin nine-kilometre rail tunnels under the city, linking Kensington to South Yarra, has been assessed by Infrastructure Australia and has been placed among the highest priority projects for the nation category.

The approval by the nation’s independent infrastructure adviser has restarted calls from Victoria for Canberra to contribute more taxpayers’ dollars to projects in the state. Federal infrastructure funding has caused major tension between the Turnbull and Andrews governments, with the state complaining it was being short-changed.

Infrastructure Australia positively assessed the state government’s business case for Metro, which says for every dollar invested there will be a return of $1.10, but when wider economic benefits are considered the return is $1.50. Nearly 60 per cent of the projected benefits are for public transport users, with road users also set to benefit from the project by decreasing their reliance on cars.

Infrastructure Australia chief executive Phillip Davies said there was a clear need for investment in high-capacity, high frequency public transport services, according to The Age.

**Metro’s Unhappy Workers**  
Massive pay rises have done little to appease Metro staff, with a survey revealing ‘deep-rooted’ concerns. The Rail Tram and Bus Union survey looked at safety, career progression and equality, and the majority of responders were damning. Union boss Luba Grigorovitch has written to Transport Minister Jacinta Allen demanding a meeting to address some issues, reports the Herald Sun.
make the ocean road great again

a surprise $53 million cash package for the great ocean road has been revealed — with sections of the tourist route in desperate need of repair. the funding allocated across the length and breadth of the 240km thoroughfare from torquay to allansford, near warmunbool, the herald sun reports.

a bold bid to cut the road toll would block text messages from victorian drivers' phones. linfox will install the text-blocking devices in its truck fleet as part of a trial this year. and victoria police has indicated the equipment could be used more widely in a way similar to an alcohol interlock device, which aims to curb bad driving behaviour and monitor repeat offenders. but music streaming and navigation functions remain, and hands-free calls will be allowed during the trial, according to the herald sun.

a toll road that premier andrews says will help fix melbourne's transport woes will draw tens of thousands of passengers off trains and into cars, his own advisors say. the $1 billion north-east link will create 'an estimated reduction in train boardings of 25,000 on an average weekday', according to infrastructure victoria.

that is the equivalent of shifting about one in 25 train journeys across melbourne from rail to road. the finding is contained in a report produced for the government by consultants kmpc, arup and jacobs. the andrews government has pledged to start construction on the toll road in 2019 — a decade after labor said it would build it, as per the age.

could a little black box strapped to the back of a bicycle be the key to bringing in new laws in victoria that force motorists to leave at least a one-metre gap when passing? the device, called passbox, is being trialled by a group of bike riders in melbourne are prone to dangerously close passes between cyclists and cars. the volunteer group, melbourne boc, invited the age to test out passbox, on a busy road that might be one of the city's worst for such near misses. st kilda road.

country roads accounted for more than half victoria's road toll in 2016. last year was the worst year for deaths on victorian roads since 2008, with 191 people killed — 39 more than 2015, reports the weekly times.

fifty-five motorcyclists died on the state's roads in 2016. that figure is almost double the amount of lives lost in 2015, when 29 motorcyclists were killed.

almost half of the 55 fatalities were unlicensed drivers or were driving a stolen bike, as per the age.

tourism bump for bellarine fixing road shoulders on the region's major highways will boost cycling tourism to the bellarine peninsula, experts say. a tourism chief and a bike safety advocate have welcomed a multimillion-dollar state government investment into maintaining parts of the geelong-portarlington rd and bellarine highway. they say the $10 million commitment was a step in the right direction but could go further in improving other hazardous routes to portarlington and queenscliff, the weekly times reports.

society cards lack christmas cheer the state's multicultural agency will include christmas in its greeting cards this year after a backlash against it omitting the word in 2016. victorian multicultural commission chairwoman helena kapalos has apologised to anyone who was offended or insulted by the lack of christmas in the message. as revealed by the herald sun, opposition leader matthew guy slammed the vmc's electronic card, which said 'festive greetings' and 'wishing you a peaceful holiday season and a wonderful new year'.

water cut over unpaid bills thousands of victorian households, including concession cardholders, are suffering restrictions to their water supply over unpaid bills. fixed water and sewage charges account for half an average annual bill for yarra valley, south east and city west customers, essential services commission data reveals. this does not include metropolitan drainage and parks charges, which are also unavoidable, as per the herald sun.

bible at work during an otherwise unremarkable meeting at one of the fastest-growing councils in the state, a decision was made that positions the many suburbs of casey as melbourne's new bible belt. the city of casey — known for its firebrand politics, which often veer to the far-right — voted in favour of attempting to extend chaplaincy, or christian teaching, into shopping malls, sporting clubs and community groups.

it used to be that melbourne's bible belt had its buckle in the east, around blackburn, box hill and nunawading. but the belt now runs like a fault line through the south-east from narre warren to cranbourne, taking in berwick, pakenham, endeavour hills, hampton park and hallam. some are worried, however, that the line between church and state is being blurred and that the council is stacked with christian running conservative agendas. religious groups already run chaplaincy programs in many of the area's state schools. casey's most far-right councillor, rosalie crestani, is deputy leader of the anti-immigration, nationalist rise up australia party, according to the age.

letters to the editor the views expressed in these letters are not those of affairs of state, nor do we always agree with them. if you'd like to voice your opinion, please write to australian@affairs.com.au

dear editor,

was in melbourne q&a studio audience and witnessed daniel andrews' offer to work with josh frydenberg re getting illegals' children born in australia detention centres into australia. disingenuous, andrews, knows full well that there is no way of doing so without also releasing the children's parents, once that is done there is little hope of getting them out of australia! and once they're here the taxpayer, by far and away in most cases for years to come, has to pay the price, plus, future family reunion entitlements, etc. then, we'll hordes of pregnant illegals on the way, and swags of illegals getting pregnant in detention?

then, it's not ivory tower enconced daniel andrews; but, the everyday aussie working family taxpayer footing the financial costs, and paying the social upheaval penalties!

yours, howard hutchins

not feeling like christmas since the 1960's there has been a concerted attempt to undermine christian values and christianity itself as some people have worked to create their 'brave new world' with an increasingly post-christian value structure. i think our politically-correct advocates and so-called 'social progressives' who have led the charge to break with our traditional christian values should go back and read aldous huxley's brave new world and george orwell's 1984.

huxley and orwell, with their humanist and socialist backgrounds, observed and learned from communism and nazism and, in those novels, painted frightening pictures of their new worlds where free speech was stifled by those in power who also worked to isolate and indoctrinate those who disagree with them.

the democracy we enjoy today has been hard-won by previous generations, evolving over the centuries in christian europe, despite the efforts of despots to stifle it and of modern dictators, nazi, fascists and communists, to replace it with totalitarianism, according to daryl mclure in the geelong advertiser.

beach now the dog's bollocks the 'clothing optional' status of secluded campbell's cove in werribee south, which has welcomed skinny-dippers since 1986, was revoked in september 2015. now wyndham council has made it an off-lead dog beach, reports the herald sun.

top 10 country bookstores book now bendigo — 1 farmers lane, bendigo barwon book sellers — 2 james street, geelong roz greenwood old and rare books — 107a parker street dunkeld the cog — 12 breed street, traralgon the known world bookshop — 14 sturt street, ballarat bellcourt books — 63 gray street, hamilton the book fossicker — 35 fraser street, clunes

December 2016 to February 2017
VALE

John Berger, the British art critic, leftist intellectual and prodigious author whose pioneering 1972 book and BBC series Ways of Seeing redefined the way a generation saw art. 90.

John Widdiss Leslie OBE, 99. After serving in the army in New Guinea during World War II, John returned home to a role in the family retail business. He was involved in the Scout movement, Rostrum, Sale Presbyterian, Sale Field Naturalists Club, Sale Historical Society, the local Tidy Towns committee and Sale Apex. A foundation member, into the Rotary Club of Sale. In 1958, John became a City of Sale Councillor, serving three terms as Mayor.

TV star Mary Tyler Moore, who died aged 80, was remembered as an inspiration to women. The actor starred in two of the best-loved shows in TV history The Dick Van Dyke Show and The Mary Tyler Moore Show.

Michele Morgan, a French actor who starred with Humphrey Bogart and Frank Sinatra, and won the first best actress at the Cannes Film Festival, has died aged 96. She is known for her roles in The Fallen Idol and the 1946 feature Pastoral Symphony, for which she won the best actress.

ADAMS, Richard – 1920 – 2016. Author of Watership Down, the tale of a band of rabbits searching for a new home. At prep school, Christopher Milne – the original Christopher Robin – was a classmate. Adams was president of the RSPCA from 1980 until 1982. He campaigned against vivisection and the fur industry and publicly favoured legalisation of cannabis.

ALLPORT, Dr Carolyn, First elected National President of the National Tertiary Education Union
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