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Andrews shrugs off ex-IBAC chief's criticism

RACHEL BAXENDALE
VICTORIAN POLITICAL REPORTER

Daniel Andrews has refused to engage with criticism from the recently departed former commissioner of Victoria's anti-corruption watchdog, dismissing Robert Redlich as "a bloke who used to do a job, who's written a letter I haven't seen".

Labor on Thursday shut down opposition attempts, backed by the Greens, to suspend scheduled business in parliament to debate the former IBAC commissioner's allegations, which include accusing the Andrews government of allowing "partisan politics" to intrude into the workings of the parliamentary committee that oversees the watchdog.

The claims were made in a letter published in Thursday's Herald Sun newspaper, which Mr Redlich wrote shortly before his term ended in December. The letter was addressed to Speaker Maree Edwards and Nazih Elasm, whose term as Legislative Council president ended at the November 24 election.

Asked to respond to Mr Redlich's allegations that government MPs directed independent auditors Callista Consulting to "find

dirt on IBAC and data that is not readily publicly available", via parliament's Labor-dominated integrity and oversight committee, Mr Andrews said membership of committees was determined by parliament, not him. "I'm not having a debate with a bloke who used to do a job, who's written a letter I haven't seen," the Premier said.

"I absolutely reject any suggestion by him or anybody else that the government does not behave appropriately. The government does behave appropriately. There are no findings to the contrary."

Mr Andrews said he had "not seen" the letter, and was not aware of whether it had been brought to his office's attention, amid questions from Coalition and Greens MPs about why the presiding officers kept it secret.

"He didn't send the letter to me. It was of such seriousness that it wasn't sent to me, and now you're asking me to take action on something that wasn't even sent to me," he said.

Ms Edwards took on notice a question time point of order from state Opposition Leader John Pesutto asking her to make the letter available to all members of the Legislative Assembly.

Asked to respond to Mr Redlich's call in the letter for reform of

the integrity and oversight committee so it cannot be chaired and controlled by the party of government, Mr Andrews said: "The ex-head of that agency is not a member of parliament, and it's the parliament that will determine these matters. Very simple."

"He's got a view. He's not in the parliament. He didn't stand for election. He's not part of the government, or part of a majority or a member of the house."

"Other people are, and those decisions have already been made. You want to determine parliamentary committee membership? Well, then, get yourself elected."

When Mr Redlich was appointed IBAC commissioner in 2018, the Andrews government described the man who had 30 years' experience as a barrister before serving as a Supreme Court judge for 15 years – including 12 years on the Court of Appeal – as "one of Victoria's most eminent and well-respected jurists".

Mr Redlich's replacement is yet to be appointed, with former deputy Stephen Farrer acting as interim commissioner.

Asked when an appointment would be made, Mr Andrews said the "process is under way". Asked how long the search would last, he said "as long as it takes".

Polling was all talk, no action

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community survey of metropolitan and regional Victoria scheduled for March.

"I am proposing Wangaratta for the regional area (redacted) happy to go with your recommendation however I am seeking your advice – particularly on whether we should screen out individuals that were impacted in a major way e.g. lost significant property or CFA volunteers (not sure what the mood is there)?"

"My concern over going into the more impacted areas is that we may be setting expectations with participants that their needs will be acted on or they will be responded to in some way following the groups – it may be seen as engagement rather than research."

"Wangaratta residents are likely to have friends and family in the valley and there was a fire nearby so they will still have insight, hopefully without the trauma that many went through."

Ms Loukomitis responds in an email at 10:05am:

"Yes, Wangaratta is fine."

"You never know how any one group is going to respond, but going to areas directly impacted by the fires at this early point to get their general feelings about the government when so many are still dealing with the aftermath may be misconstrued as consultation or, worse, be seen as lacking sensitivity."

Later that day, the DPC manager emails Ms Loukomitis to say they had "sign off" and Wangaratta would be included in the QDOS survey.

Mr Andrews over his 12-year reign as Labor leader, both in opposition and government, has regularly drawn on his Wangaratta upbringing, but the DPC-QDOS documents don't reveal whether he played any role in having the city of almost 30,000 people included in the survey.

Summer bushfires saw emergency warnings in nearby areas and a relief centre established in Wangaratta as much of the northeast of Victoria battled bushfires

Smoke and mirrors via image and spin



DAMON JOHNSTON COMMENT

In a particularly strong field, an unnamed senior manager in the Department of Premier and Cabinet has won the QDOS expediency stakes.

The manager secured victory with a single email so unwittingly honest that it will be remembered as symbolising everything that is so outrageous about the Andrews government's use of this political strategy firm.

In the February 2020 email, the manager – whose name remains redacted – asks QDOS research director Steve Loukomitis for her advice about a dilemma.

"The documents to be destroyed hundreds of houses. The March 2020 QDOS final survey questions and the results were not included in almost 200 pages of the previously redacted emails and documents released to The Australian."

The documents do reveal the DPC wanted to survey Sydneyham, Strathmore and Glenroy in the metropolitan poll and Narre Warren and Berwick in the city's southeastern growth corridor.

Before Wangaratta was floated as the regional location, the DPC manager emailed Ms Loukomitis indicating there was high

level interest in finding out what areas hit by the bushfires thought of the government. "As discussed, we have sign off... with the regional location to be confirmed (looking north east closer to fire impacted towns)," the email states.

The emergence of the DPC-QDOS email exchange about Wangaratta follows a series of reports, based on hundreds of emails and documents released under FoI, revealing that the government's pandemic response including lockdown strategy was informed by second QDOS polling.

"settling expectations that their needs will be acted on or they'll be responded to in some way" following the focus groups. The bushfire-affected locals may even see the focus groups as "engagement rather than research".

Wangaratta, the manager proposed, might be the perfect compromise. Close enough, but not too close, to the bushfires. Still, they might have to "screen out" individuals who lost houses or were CFA volunteers. As the manager admitted, you can't be "sure what the mood is there".

This email talks to the fundamental problem with the Andrews government. That being it's an administration that spends too much time – and money – on image and spin rather than delivering basic services. Sure, when he had to lead the state through the unprecedented challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic, Daniel Andrews did turn to doctors. But he also turned to his spin doctor.

The Premier's deflections when The Australian this week revealed the extent of the political intelligence program run by QDOS don't stand up to scrutiny. It was his own government's documents that revealed what many Victorians suspected for three years: politics played a hand in the state's pandemic response.

Save or plunder: both sides in for the krill



Captain Peter Hammarstedt monitors Chinese super-trawlers in the Southern Ocean

EXCLUSIVE

MATTHEW DENHOLM
TASMANIA CORRESPONDENT

Having won the whaling war, Sea Shepherd's back in the Southern Ocean, this time taking on krill fishers and claiming to have evidence of Chinese super-trawlers endangering whales.

Placing the burgeoning krill industry firmly on notice, the group that famously hounded whalers has sent an Australian-funded ship to waters off the Antarctic Peninsula to track and film krill fishers.

Speaking from the vessel, the Allankay, campaigners from Sea Shepherd and Bob Brown Foundation told The Australian they

had seen krill vessels fishing through large pods of whales, risking their entanglement.

"We've witnessed around 200 whales and two trawlers ploughing right through them," said BFF Antarctic campaigner Alistair Allan. "They do that because where there's whales there's krill."

"There is a growing conflict between the krill fishery and wildlife, especially whales."

Sea Shepherd's Peter Hammarstedt said it appeared that some krill fishers were "deliberately steering for the spouts of the whales", placing them at risk of net entanglement.

"There are cases of whale entanglement – a couple of years ago there were three cases of dead humpback whales in these trawlers," Mr Hammarstedt said.

"The competition between whales and krill operations is only likely to increase with time. So we see the fishery as a direct threat to whales because of the entanglements... but also an indirect threat because these vessel operators are targeting the primary food source for baleen whales and for many species of penguin and the Antarctic fur seal."

When the campaigners arrived in the area on Sunday, their presence had an immediate impact. "Both of the two Chinese vessels halted as soon as Sea Shepherd arrived on the scene and started running out of the area," Mr Hammarstedt said.

However, they had since returned, and were fishing in the area, near the South Orkney Islands, along with five other krill

vessels and two cargo ships that took the krill back to home ports.

Once home, the campaigners plan to highlight the use of krill in some fish oil health supplements and in some farmed salmon feed to give the fish a pink hue. "It's just an absurdity that krill is almost literally being vacuumed out of the mouths of chinstrap penguins in order to make salmon pink," Mr Hammarstedt said.

The main feed supply company for Australian salmon growers, BioMar, said it only used krill meal that was a "by-product from krill fished for human consumption". All krill sourced for BioMar is 100 per cent Marine Stewardship Council certified, a spokesman said.

Norway and China are among krill fishing nations increasingly

using super-trawlers with continuous pumping systems. The 120m-long Shen Len – the first of a series of Chinese krill super-trawlers being commissioned – can harvest 100,000 tonnes of krill a year.

An allowable krill catch is set by the 26-nation Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources.

The krill industry did not respond by deadline but has recently argued the catch limit is extremely conservative, while pointing to data suggesting krill abundance in the fishing area did not change overall, and perhaps increased, from 2000 to 2019.

However, scientists and conservationists are concerned the catch limit fails to take into consideration climate change impacts and whale foraging needs.

Leaders' footprints point way to seats that must be won

EXCLUSIVE

MAX MADSDON
DAVID TANNER

Parramatta has long held claim to being the political heart of Sydney. Now NSW Premier Dominic Perrotto and Labor leader Chris Minns have turned it into the epicentre of the 2023 election campaign.

The Australian has analysed the leaders' movements since January 1, tallying up the number of press conferences, picture opportunities and speeches each has undertaken on the road to get a sense of the seats the Coalition and Labor are targeting.

It shows Mr Minns has outpaced the Premier in the aggregate, tallying up almost a quarter more appearances over the 10-week period, with both leaders focusing most of their energy on the seat of Parramatta, vacated by retiring Liberal minister Geoff Lee on a 6.5 per cent margin.

Mr Minns has visited the seat eight times, and Mr Perrotto six.

While much of Mr Minns's time has been on the attack in Liberal seats, his five visits to Leppington – a notionally ALP-held seat on a 1.5 per cent margin established following a recent redistribution – demonstrates concern about the party's ability to hold it.

The vulnerability of Parramatta and Leppington has evidently been identified by Coalition strategists, with Mr Perrotto also a regular in the new seat, visiting four times.

BATTLEGROUND SEATS

Electorate either leader has visited more than once this year

Number of visits
 ★ PERROTTO
 ★ MINNS
 ● LIBERAL
 ● LABOR
 ● GREENS

Parramatta 6.5% margin
 Riverstone 6.2% margin
 Ryde 8.9% margin
 Manly 12.9% margin
 Balmain 10% margin
 Strathfield 5.2% margin
 Kogarah 0.1% margin
 Penrith 0.5% margin
 Badgers Creek 9.7% margin
 Leppington 1.5% margin
 East Hills 0.1% margin
 Heathcote* 1.7%

* Liberal MP but notionally ALP after redistribution

Source: NSWEC

threatened seats – Wakehurst, Pittwater and North Sydney – has been left to Treasurer Matt Kean.

The Coalition goes into the election with a notional minority of 46 seats, including two held by former Liberals who sit as independents. Even assuming these are won back, the government must secure a net gain of at least one more seat to secure a majority.

The majority of the Premier's media activity has been in Coalition-held seats, with only 40 per cent on the offensive trying to win new electoral assets.

Mr Minns, needing nine seats to claim a majority and six to claim minority government, has spent 38 per cent of this time on the offensive.

This has included four visits to the Liberal-held seats of Riverstone and South Coast, held on 6.2 per cent and 10.6 per cent margins, respectively. Penrith, East Hills and Strathfield, the seat of recently elected Labor MP Jason Yat-Sen Li, have each had three visits by the Labor leader.

The Greens' seat of Balmain – vacated by retiring MP Jamie Parker – has had two visits from Mr Minns.

Sydney CBD – held by independent Alex Greenwich – is considered neutral territory, with neither party mustering a serious challenge.

Published in late February, the most recent NSW poll suggested a tightening of the race between the parties, with popular support for Labor plunging by four percentage points, halving its two-party-preferred lead.

James Griffin facing a challenge from teal independent Joeline Hackman in the traditionally safe seat of Manly, once held by former premier Mike Baird, the Premier has stopped by the northern beaches seat twice, as he has in the paper-thin Liberal-held electorate of Penrith and East Hills. Sandbagging the other teal-