

COMMENT & DEBATE

Fitzgerald's views merit more than sticking your head in sand

FAMED corruption fighter Tony Fitzgerald, QC, gave a speech last week that has shaken Premier Anna Bligh and Queenslanders. What he had to say should also serve as a wake-up call for Premier John Brumby and Victorians.

They do things differently in Queensland. A premier, police commissioner and several cabinet ministers have variously been charged with, or gone to jail for, corruption in Queensland. Victoria has a better political culture, and it would be wrong to suggest direct parallels between the two states.

Nonetheless, it is sobering to note that a lot of what Fitzgerald said about Queensland could also be said about Victoria.

In a speech to mark 20 years since his landmark report on corruption in Queensland, Fitzgerald had a message for political



PAUL AUSTIN

Brumby's response to corruption warnings ignores real dangers.

leaders generally, not just in the Sunshine State. "Despite their protestations of high standards of probity, which personally might well be correct, and irrespective of what they intend, political leaders who gloss over corruption risk being perceived by their colleagues and the electorate as

regarding it of little importance," he said. "Even if incorrect, that is a disastrous perception.

"Greed, power and opportunity in combination provide an almost irresistible temptation for many which can only be countered by the near-certainty of exposure and severe punishment."

Fitzgerald cautioned the Queensland Government that politics was about more than gaining and retaining power. Ethics were crucial.

But ethics were always tested by incumbency, he said, and the Government was shrouding some of its activities in secrecy by "sham claims" that voluminous documents were "cabinet-in-confidence" and therefore exempt from public release.

Bligh responded to the Fitzgerald missive with a jolt. Brumby responded with a shrug

of the shoulders. The contrast is understandable, up to a point; after all, Fitzgerald was talking about Queensland. But Brumby's complacency is unhealthy.

Fitzgerald talked about documents being kept from the Queensland public through sham claims of confidentiality. Victorian Labor used to rail against the same thing happening here under Jeff Kennett.

During the 1999 election campaign, Steve Bracks promised Labor would "end the use of commercial-in-confidence to conceal government contracts with the private sector" and "stop exempting documents (from release under freedom of information laws) merely because they are attached to a cabinet document".

Victorian Labor has a better record than Kennett on FoI, but it has not lived up to its promise.

There is hardly a political journalist or Opposition MP in this state who doesn't have a story to tell about dodgy "in-confidence" claims being made to prevent release of official documents.

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Fitzgerald nominated "the near-certainty of exposure and severe punishment" as the only counter to the temptation to engage in corrupt behaviour. Yet Brumby refuses to establish a broad-ranging, anti-corruption commission in Victoria.

Queensland has such an agency, so do NSW and Western Australia. Brumby's stubbornness on this issue leaves him open to the accusation he is not doing

enough to expose and punish corruption wherever it occurs and whatever the cost.

But the sentence in Fitzgerald's speech that should have had Brumby squirming most was this one: "Access can now be purchased, patronage is dispensed, mates and supporters are appointed and retired politicians exploit their connections to obtain 'success fees' for deals between business and government."

Sounds a lot like Victoria. Former Labor minister David White sought a success fee of \$350,000 for lobbying the Bracks government over gaming policy on behalf of Tattersall's.

The Brumby Government appointed former Labor minister Andre Haermeyer to the plum post of Victoria's trade commissioner in Europe after he quit Parliament mid-term. (It is only

fair to record that Labor also appointed former Liberal frontbencher Victor Perton to the equivalent position in the US).

Brumby this week made an extraordinary assertion on the issue of business leaders paying for access to ministers. In response to Fitzgerald, Bligh has promised to ban her MPs from attending fund-raisers with business people. But Brumby suggests there is no need for such action in Victoria because "there is no payment for access". "We don't have that in our state. We never have."

And yet Victorian Labor's fund-raising arm, Progressive Business, runs lots of exclusive functions featuring the Premier and senior ministers.

For instance, members paid up to \$5500 to attend a one-day retreat with premier Bracks and his cabinet before the 2006 elec-

tion. Invitations promised that "ministers will be available for face-to-face dialogue" and said the forum would provide the opportunity to "outline your organisation's own vision for the future to Victorian ministers".

This sort of thing is still happening under Brumby. Progressive Business boasts on its website that it is "the leading organisation linking business with government". "Build dialogue with Victorian and federal ministers and improve your understanding of the policy areas that directly affect your business," it says.

Brumby's "nothing to see here" attitude to the sorts of issues Fitzgerald has raised betrays an inability to accept that government in Victoria is not as open, transparent and corruption-resistant as it should be.

Paul Austin is state political editor.

Terror in our backyard

A comprehensive strategy would help defuse the real threat to Australia's security, writes **Rajat Ganguly**.

THE arrests of four suspects in Melbourne on Tuesday, which are claimed to have foiled alleged plans for a terrorist attack against Holsworthy Barracks, provide a much needed wake-up call regarding Australia's vulnerability to attacks from home-grown terrorists with links to foreign groups. As the Rudd Government searches for an appropriate response to this threat, it will be important to remember a few key lessons.

First, Australia's support to the American-led "global war on terror" and its military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, has placed this country squarely in the crossfire of transnational Islamist terrorist organisations such as an invigorated al-Qaeda and its various affiliates.

Following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, al-Qaeda was greatly weakened and its top leadership forced to seek shelter in the lawless Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan's north-west. But as the US attention shifted to Iraq, al-Qaeda regained its power and strengthened its contacts with militant Islamist organisations in various countries, including al-Shabab in Somalia.

In recent public pronouncements, both Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's top leaders, have called on Islamist groups to strike at the US and its allies as a form of punishment for committing atrocities against Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq.

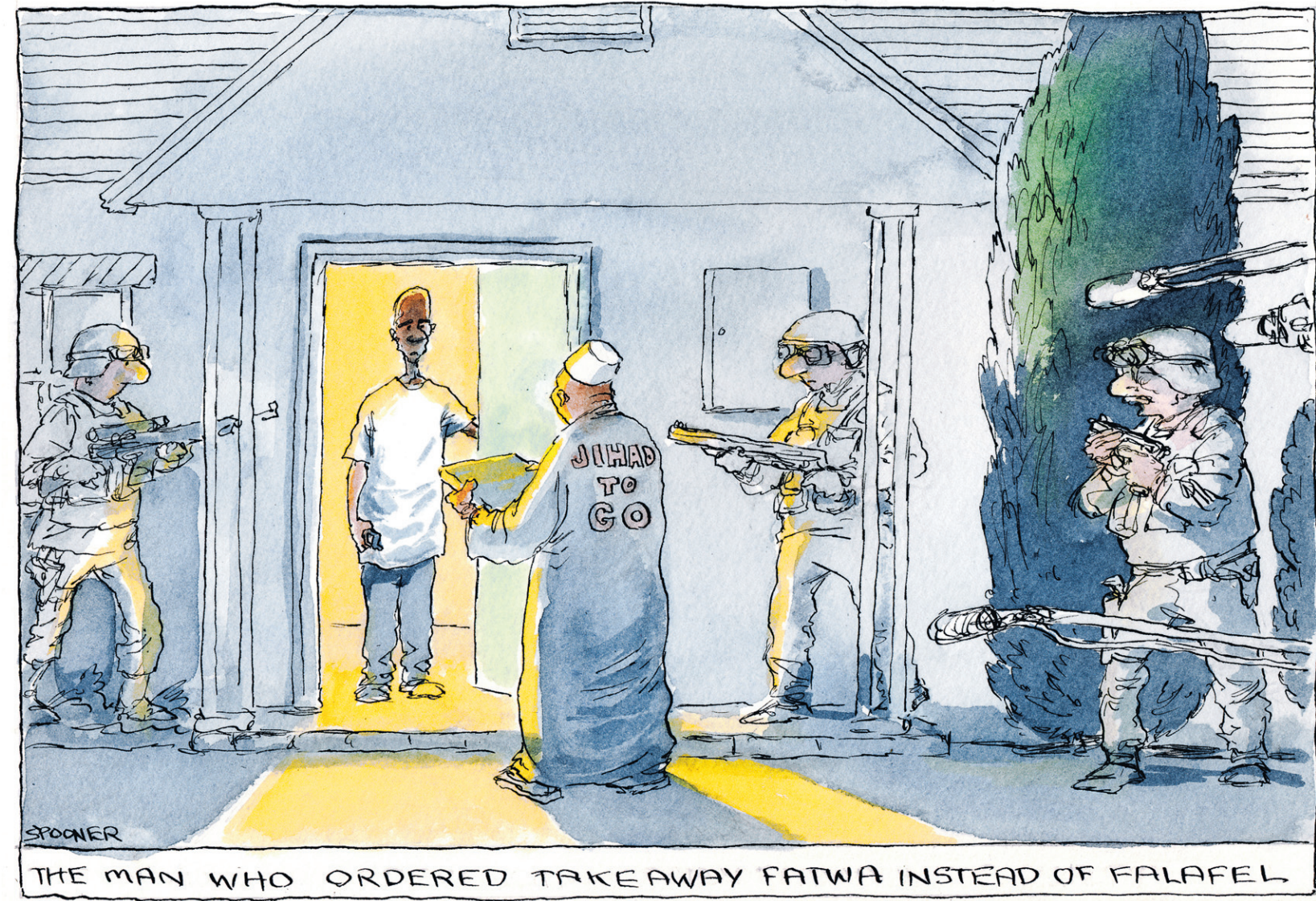
So, the alleged plan to attack Holsworthy Barracks does not come as a total surprise. In a real and symbolic sense, it would have represented punishing the Australian military for its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It could also be intended to build public pressure for the withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan.

A key lesson of the failed attack is this: we can no longer pretend that far-off terrorist groups do not pose an immediate and direct threat to the Australian homeland.

A second lesson is that it indicates that al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist attacks against Australia are most likely to be organised and implemented by affiliates operating outside of the Middle East and west Asian regions.

Our focus is often in South-East Asia, where the main threat to Australia is posed by Jemaah Islamiyah and its various factions. Al-Shabab in Somalia, however, poses a much bigger threat.

The organisation — whose name means "The Youth" in Arabic — grew out of the Somalia Islamic Courts Council that took control of most of southern Somalia for six months in 2006 but was then ousted from power by the US-backed government forces with support from the Ethiopian military. From early 2007, al-Shabab became the main



Islamist resistance group in Somalia and this prompted a massive recruitment drive. Even though it was listed as a foreign terrorist organisation by the US government in February 2008 and its leader, Aden Hashi Ayro, was killed in a US air strike in May 2008, al-Shabab was able to grow rapidly taking advantage of the weak institutional capacity of the Somali Government and the widespread resentment generated by the presence of Ethiopian soldiers in the country.

By 2009, it was the main al-Qaeda affiliate operating in the Horn of Africa and controlled a vast area south of Mogadishu, the capital.

Many of its leaders, including Ayro, had strong links with al-Qaeda and had received training in terror camps in Afghanistan. With al-Qaeda's help, al-Shabab began to organise terrorist training camps in southern Somalia and trained a large number of foreign militants. The transnational reach of the organisation has, therefore, increased exponentially in recent times.

A third and final lesson of this week's alleged terror plot is that groups such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabab are able to directly threaten Australia by activating "sleeping cells" here.

After the 2001 attacks on the US, Western states tightened their border security with the result that terrorist organisations started concentrating on recruiting personnel from inside Western countries.

Today there are undoubtedly autonomous sleeper cells in most Western states that could be activated as needed by groups like al-Qaeda and al-Shabab.

An Australian counterterrorism strategy must incorporate the following elements:

First, the reason Australian citizens, especially youth, are motivated to join terrorist organisations must be addressed and effectively neutralised.

This would require, among other things, a concerted national effort to win the war of ideas through sustained and deeper engagement with ethnic communities and community leaders.

Second, the capacity of domestic terrorist cells and their foreign sponsors to carry out attacks must be eliminated. The Melbourne arrests show that Australia's security agencies are already doing this quite effectively.

Third, the identification of vulnerable targets that terrorist groups could strike and security in these areas must be increased. This applies particularly to transportation

and communications infrastructure, military installations, water systems and power grids, government buildings, hotels, schools and hospitals.

Fourth, the legal system must be strengthened to ensure that people are deterred from committing acts of terrorism and terrorism-related offences.

We can no longer pretend that far-off terrorist groups do not pose an immediate and direct threat to the Australian homeland. ¶

Finally, it must be recognised that, in spite of our best efforts, terrorism remains a real possibility. Australia must have a rapid response and recovery system that can quickly restore calm and normalcy and provide needed assistance to victims.

After this week's raid, one would hope that the Federal Government is already putting in place a strategy such as this.

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At last, a little vindication for busy mothers

THERE'S a scene in *Coraline*, the new film adaptation of Neil Gaiman's creepy children's novel, that strikes a chord with any working parent: Coraline tries to gain the attention of her mother and father, who are bent over their computers, heads down, trying to meet a deadline.

They don't even look up. "Let me work," pleads the father. The mother is even worse: she's too busy to run the home, meals are last-minute solutions from the back of the fridge, and the daughter is supposed to amuse herself. "I don't mind what you do," says the distracted mother in the original book, "as long as you don't make a mess."

At least these parents didn't hide from the kids. When I worked full-time from home, I would sometimes go out the front door, wave goodbye to my little daughter and her father, and then sneak into the study through the back door, typing all day in secret.

In Gaiman's story, Coraline discovers a portal in her family's apartment that opens into an alternate universe, where she meets her "Other Mother". This one looks like the original, but she certainly doesn't behave like her. She serves up generous meals of roast chicken, followed by frosted cupcakes. She decorates, she cleans, she thinks only of Coraline. And so does the Other Father, who plants a garden in the shape of his daughter's face. "Everything's right in this world, kiddo," he says.

But here's the twist: Coraline truly is the centre of this family universe, and that's the problem. Her Other Mother is all-loving, all-consuming — indeed, she seems to confuse the two urges. With her black button eyes and her restless, grasping hands — nightmare exaggerations of "the mother's touch" — she is the helicopter parent from hell. Coraline's quest is to escape the clutches of this attachment parenting paradigm and make it back to her own neglectful, forgetful but — she realises — loving parents.

Gaiman writes what he knows. "I suspect the parents in *Coraline*, and all the books, are much more me, parodying me — my nose in a book, my head somewhere else. It's more me taking all the worst bits of me than it is my parents," he told the London *Telegraph*. He comes from a long line of children's authors who've shut the door on the pram in the hallway — consider Edith Nesbit, who dedicated her books to her three children, and filled them with absentee dads and frantically busy mums while children made their own fun. And dinner.

But back then, no one was expected to pay court on their offspring. Now that parenting is not only a verb but comes with its own set of key performance indicators, we're all too well aware of how and when we fall short.

Will Gaiman's elegant propaganda for working families turn children off the fantasy of the ever-available and availing Other Mother? I hope so.

I've often worried that the kids will find me out. My son was certainly cross when he discovered, in his first week of



MICHELLE GRIFFIN

Let's put the gloves down — parenting is tough enough as it is.

prep, that other mothers didn't work. That they picked the children up every day after school, and often bought them an ice-cream on the way home. Before then, he thought all mothers used childcare.

Ever since my eldest was born, the Other Mother has been haunting me. She is the mother I should have been, the one who always pays attention to the children. The one who isn't on the phone. The one who never has any deadlines. Usually, the Other Mother just writes opinion columns, perhaps on these pages, explaining why she gave up work to be with her children because no natural mother could do otherwise.



Coraline truly is the centre of this family universe, and that's the problem. ¶

She's the one who says "if you're not going to look after them, you shouldn't have children", when we leave them at creche or book them into after-care or take a full-time job. She's the one who says that if parenting isn't the hardest job you've ever done, you're not doing a good enough job.

This is why, in the novel, the Other Mother shows Coraline a mirror in which she can see her real parents, and hear them say: "How nice it is, not to have Coraline around any more. . . Now we can do all the things we wanted to do." The Other Mother says that if her parents have left, "it must be because they became bored with you". Ah, but Coraline defends them, in a line to make any voice catch when reading aloud: "They weren't bored of me."

Of course, many at-home parents seem spooked by their Other Mothers too. The ones who ask them if they're bored with the kids, or quiz them about plans to return to "real" jobs. The parent was so often devolve into this kind of shadowboxing; the parent you are, the one you might have been.

Michelle Griffin is arts editor.

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A meeting of the minds needed for warnings to work

PAUL VALENT

Dealing and preparing for disaster is about more than just the physical.

LACK of adequate warning has been blamed for the large death toll in the Black Saturday bushfires. Reasons for this deficiency were said to be lack of leadership, poor communication, and mistaken ideologies. However, for future warnings to be effective, distorted thinking among both the issuers and receivers of warnings, and reasons behind such thinking, will also need to be taken into account.

Consider this: In the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires, despite knowing that two weeks earlier 24 houses had burnt in the Mount Macedon area, in

spite of warnings over the next two weeks, and while 93 fires were burning in Victoria, and obvious local cues were present, few residents left the area on the day of the bushfire. Many pretended it was an ordinary day. They believed that "Macedon can't burn. It is in a green belt."

On Black Saturday, too, an expert on psychological responses to fires said about his own responses, "I acted opposite to my rational knowledge and ignored clear cues of rapidly approaching fires. Luck, not my knowledge, saved us. What was I thinking?"

What and how people think in disasters is crucial. For future warnings to be effective, they will need to penetrate denial and magical thinking and to steer thinking towards effective action.

War-time and disaster literature indicate certain prerequisites for effective warnings.

They need to be sparse (to avoid warning weariness), unambiguous, authoritative, and to be issued by a trusted source. They must signal the survival benefits of specific actions and the dangers of other actions or of inaction.

Warnings must convey constrained emotion and empathy to evoke the right degree of vigilance and anxiety. Too bureaucratic a voice can evoke nonchalance or resistance.

Fearful or despairing messages can lead to helplessness and panic, to disturbed attention and concentration, focusing on unimportant details, denial and premature or irrational conclusions.

Correct warnings cannot be issued without realistic faith that they will achieve their goals.

If, for instance, management believes that evacuation of more than 1 million inhabitants every

total fire ban day is impractical, clear evacuation warnings on such days will not be issued.

If, in fire storms, management believes that warnings will lead to unmanageable mass flight and widespread deaths on the roads, their warnings will be obfuscated or even be suppressed.

In the absence of clear warnings, the need for inner equilibrium takes over. ¶

Lack of faith in effective action can lead to irrational ideologies such as pretence that the same alternatives (defend or leave) apply to fire storms as to small bushfires. Unresolved traumas of firefighters dying in previous bushfires may lead to an ideology that communities are responsible for their own safety.

As for communities, in the absence of clear warnings, the need for inner equilibrium takes over. Rumours, false reassurance, magical thinking, and groupthink become rife. Prior natural emotional biases maintain full sway, such as seeing home as a place of security rather than a source of danger. Especially for males, not protecting the home may be felt as cowardice and betrayal. The more leaving involves grief and loss of identity, environment, ideals and values, the more it tends to be resisted.

On Black Saturday, the thinking of bushfire victims was not stupid. But they craved trustworthy and detailed information and direction that would allow them to save themselves and their families.

Such warnings are possible. In California, when specific bushfire conditions are reached, street by street manda-

tory evacuation orders are issued. Evacuation follows prior disaster exercises, and few fatalities result.

These principles can be applied here too, if we are willing to bear the costs. Such costs may include adequate evacuation routes, disaster exercises, and tolerance for evacuations that in retrospect were not necessary.

But not putting in the physical, social and emotional infrastructure before future bushfire seasons may sow the seeds for the next cycle of denial and distorted thinking. Preventive groundwork is more cost-effective than the millions generously given for reconstruction after failures of adequate preparation.

Paul Valent is a psychiatrist who led a mental health team in the Ash Wednesday bushfires. His latest book is *In Two Minds: Tales of a Psychotherapist*.