

AND TO THINK THAT WE SAW IT ON SPRING STREET

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An indulgent, bloated bureaucracy helped cause the deadly hotel quarantine debacle

“When I leave home to walk to school / Dad always says to me / ‘Marco, keep your eyelids up / And see what you can see.’” So begins the classic 1937 children’s book *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* by Dr Seuss.

Marco, as he walked to school, imagined many things and saw many more. Then again, his eyes were wide open. Not so those of Victoria’s most senior public servants, going by their evidence to the board of inquiry into hotel quarantine. They saw nothing.

Or rather, nobody. That must have taken some effort. And considerable talent. “Nobody?” exclaimed the King in *Through the Looking Glass* when Alice told him “I see nobody on the road.”

“I only wish I had such eyes,” the monarch sighed. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too! Why, it’s as much as I can do to see real people, by this light.”

With this decision, however, it seems that there were no real people to be seen. Rather, it was born by immaculate misconception, an orphan whose maternity and paternity were both unknown.

Nor, as best one can tell, had the guardians of Victoria’s public service been in any hurry to resolve the mystery — not even when the scale of the disaster became apparent.

Under normal circumstances, one would have expected the unfolding catastrophe to precipitate a frantic search for the culprits, all the more so as the Premier needed to be briefed on what the board was likely to conclude.

And knowing what had happened could help avoid a repeat performance once the crisis moved into its next phase.

Moreover, the departmental secretaries didn’t lack the means to find out. For example, Chris Eccles, the head of the Premier’s Department, would have had more than enough clout to identify those involved and extract information that was being withheld.

There was, however, no trace of any such investigation in Eccles’s evidence or that of his senior colleagues. It was as if understanding how errors had occurred that had claimed

hundreds of Victorians' lives was not their concern.

Of course, pursuing those inquiries might have been uncomfortable. "Wilful ignorance"

— as the lawyers call it when a defendant who has a reasonable ability to learn potentially discomfiting information chooses to remain uninformed — has long been the tactic of those whose only genuine act of faith is their vow of silence. As the mafia dons say, better to live in ignorance than to die knowing.

The great 19th-century reformers who forged Victoria's public service would have been appalled. Unfailingly high minded, they were imbued with an ethos that emerged from the Protestant Reformation.

Giving the term "to be accountable" its contemporary meaning, the Puritans had effected a revolution by applying it to the Commonwealth formed in 1649, after the trial and execution of Charles I. And quaking in dread of eternal damnation, they imposed on their public servants obligations magnificently rendered by John Milton, who served as secretary for foreign tongues in the Commonwealth's Council of State.

At the heart of those obligations were the duties "without fear" to "learn and know, and thence do / What might be public good"; to ensure "the very words" of every decision were meticulously recorded and properly filed; to abjure all false denials of responsibility; and to live every moment in the realisation that they were "towards the throne supreme / Accountable".

Those were, no doubt, ideals whose form changed over the centuries that followed. But from Victoria's 1858 Commission on the Civil Service — chaired by University of Melbourne professor WE Hearn, an astonishing polymath who was a pure product of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy — to the colony's public service legislation of 1862 and 1883, their imprint was unmistakable.

Unfortunately, aspiring is one thing, achieving another. Already in 1863, Walter Bagehot, editor of *The Economist*, warned wellmeaning reformers that bureaucracies were inherently "selfabsorbed and self-multiplying", while the natural inclination of their heads was to "hate the untrained public", whom they viewed as "stupid, ignorant (and) reckless".

"Skilled in the forms and pompous with memories of office", the service's uppermost layers could ably answer every question except one: "How does this regulation conduce to the end in view?" And as the bureaucracy expanded, its political weight would inevitably grow, confirming the Comte de Mirabeau's dictum that "he who administers, governs" — or, rather, misgoverns. There was consequently an unavoidable tension between the reformers' ideals and the realities of the public service they did so much to entrench.

To make matters worse, that tension was especially acute in Victoria, largely because the state's heavily protected economy could more readily bear the burden of a bloated, union-dominated, public sector than its more trade-exposed counterpart in NSW. And instead of curing the problem, the dismantling of protection merely caused it to take new forms, as

greater public spending and regulation renewed and extended the public sector's tentacles.

The result was a public service that was as large and resistant to reform as it was institutionally weak. Rarely, if ever, generating leaders of the stature of Wallace Wurth, Sir John Goodsell and Gerry Gleeson in NSW, its top ranks smacked less of Miltonian grace than of Dickensian disgrace, all too often resembling the Office of Circumlocution in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*: an office whose command over the public — “that word of impertinent signification”

— lay entirely in its mastery of “the art of perceiving — HOW NOT TO DO IT”.

Meanwhile, as the Lawyer X affair shows, the Victorian public sector's every apparent nadir has proven merely a step above an even lower form of degradation; but steeped in political expediency, its ability to protect its own was and remains unsurpassed.

Little wonder the contrasts are so glaring: between private sector executives who, regardless of culpability, face jail for a single death on their watch, and the senior ranks of the public sector who, after almost 800 deaths, will almost certainly get to bury their mistakes; between private sector chief executives who no amount of contrition can save from the scaffold, and department heads who can rely on barely whispered faux remorse to set them free; and between private sector businesses and their workers, whose livelihoods can be shattered at an official's whim, and public servants, whose jobs and pay are sacrosanct.

Those are the contrasts today's little Marco will see as he walks, eyelids up, through Melbourne's streets. They are what will frame his choices, when he shapes his future. And as Marco's choices, and those of millions of young people, make us an even more risk-averse, coddled society than we already are, Victoria's debacle will haunt Australians for generations to come.

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