

James Campbell: We deserve better from Labor and Daniel Andrews

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If you want to capture the flavour of how Daniel Andrews has governed us these past four years, you can't go past the story of a mysterious memorandum from 2015.

Back then, the newly elected Andrews Government was locked in negotiations with the United Firefighters Union for a new pay deal for their staff at the CFA and MFB.

The minister with responsibility for trying to satisfy the UFU boss, Peter Marshall, was Jane Garrett.

On August 5 that year, the Premier's adviser, J.P. Blandthorn, prepared him a "Premier's Private Office Memorandum" suggesting he might like to ask Marshall "to be more respectful to all ministers, members, staff and departments and to treat them with the respect that he would demand himself".

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He went on to tell the Premier that Marshall "has crossed the line in recent months as to what would be considered acceptable".

A year later, after Garrett, the CFA's CEO and its board had all resigned rather than agree to the pay deal that Andrews was determined to ram through against all opposition, Coalition leader Matthew Guy got up in parliament and asked the Premier: "On how many occasions have your own staff, public servants or ministers complained to you, your department or private office formally or informally about Peter Marshall's conduct towards them?"

Andrews' answer was as follows: "The Leader of the Opposition, if I heard him correctly, has asked whether ever a complaint has been made to me. I am not aware of a complaint being made to me. I cannot recall a complaint being

made to me, but he then went on ... he then went on to talk about staff, formal, informal complaints.

“Again, I can hardly be expected to speak for an indefinite period and an indefinite number of people and an indefinite nature of complaints that might have been made, formal and informal. “For my own part, I have answered the Leader of the Opposition’s question clearly.”

Whether or not you think the Premier’s answer squares with what was written in Blandthorn’s memo depends, of course, on how you define the word “complaint”.



United Firefighters Union chief Peter Marshall. Picture: Nicole Garmston

In a strict sense, I suppose you could argue — at a stretch — that Blandthorn was not “complaining” about Marshall’s behaviour, he was merely mentioning it and suggesting Andrews tell him to knock it off.

On that interpretation, Andrews was telling the truth and it’s not his fault that Guy wasn’t bright enough to ask a question that encompassed all warnings, advices, memorandums and notices of concern about Marshall’s behaviour.

That seems to have been the line Andrews took a few days later when a leaked copy of the memorandum made its way on to the front page of the Herald Sun. “No advice was received that would constitute a complaint,” he said.

What makes this episode most illustrative of the way things have been going in Dan’s Victoria these past four years is not the Premier’s trickiness with words, nor the Liberal Party’s failure to nail him for it, but that, officially, the memorandum never existed.

When the Herald Sun made a Freedom of Information request for an official copy, the public servants couldn’t find it. Although it had been produced on paper that carried the coat of arms of the State of Victoria and circulated to Garrett, Andrews, his chief of staff, Johnny McLindon, Garrett’s chief of staff, Mark O’Brien, and Andrews’ trusted adviser, Chris Reilly, it had never been entered into the government’s document- management system as, by law, it is meant to have been.

Does that matter? Should we care that Andrews and his crew like to communicate “offline” — away from the prying eyes of bureaucrats and agencies that are meant to keep an eye on what they are up to?

In my opinion, the answer is yes, we should.



Jane Garrett. Picture: Nicole

Garmston

ONE of things that has distinguished this state from our more easygoing and arguably corrupt neighbours in Queensland and New South Wales has been that we have more or less instinctively been able to trust that when it comes to our leaders, things are what they seem to be.

But when things have come to the point where we are being governed by secret memos and the UFU boss can go on radio and claim he has a secret deal with the Premier (a claim he has since abandoned in an affidavit); when hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent on court cases to prevent the Ombudsman investigating the rorting of electorate office entitlements, used to help Labor to get elected; when a minister and a Speaker both have to resign for rorting their second home allowances while another is forced out for chauffeuring his dogs around in his ministerial limousine; when IBAC is investigating alleged kickbacks from printers which later were used to pay for ALP membership; the entire leadership of the CFA and MFB can be “disappeared”; and when six ministers are refusing to speak to the police, I think it is fair to say that things have changed.

All this Andrews has managed to achieve in four short years.

What, you have to wonder, might he achieve if he were to be given another four.