

## **WAKE UP JEFF**

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On the evening of the extraordinary Frankston East by-election in Victoria I took myself to the pictures. We picked The Sixth Sense, a story so subtle and truly frightening that I left with a heart filled with the images of the sorrowful dead, who don't know they are ghosts because, as a frightened little boy says, the only one who can see or hear them, they only see what they want to.

Since that night I have been haunted by another spectre: I see Jeff Kennett at his lonely luncheon table, pondering his next move, now that he doesn't have a state to play with. Once, he could do anything: controlling government and the Parliament so absolutely that he could rule by decree. Suddenly, at best he could only keep any semblance of power, in government or out of it, by negotiating with people who don't depend on his goodwill and favour, who owe him no loyalty; hurt by slights and put-downs, quietly willing to deny or obstruct. In Opposition he could only be a spoiler, with no reasonable short-term prospect of regaining the people's confidence - the by-election doubled the September swing. Nor could he deal as ruthlessly, or at all, with mutineers within his own Party: once Toad piloted his little band of toadies into a muddy little billabong, a chorus of disappointed croaking fills the political pond.

When I was very small I would fantasise about possessing my own world, of being the absolute deity of a community of doll-sized, miniature grown-ups - Barbies and Kens - who could do nothing unless it was my will, for I had the power to hurt them. A therapist, I'm sure, would have found this a normal, imaginative reaction to the powerlessness of a rather sensitive child in an inexplicable, adult world. I wonder about Kennett's childhood, his continuing to take such obvious pleasure in being, and so evidently still yearning to be and to be seen to be, 'strong.'

That weekend The Sydney Morning Herald ran a feature on the social disintegration of a small, scientific Antarctic community in the 1996 Casey

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Mutiny. The ‘community’ had turned on its leader. He hadn’t sinned much, really. He was brave, honest and smart but (as Deborah Cameron, the journalist, put it), he took seriously his responsibilities as a leader. He worked alone, took decisions, announced them, and bore being disliked with equanimity: ‘it was almost as though he thought that better leaders made tougher decisions which upset people and made you unpopular. In his mind, effective management was inextricably linked to unpopularity.’

We have thousands of leaders like this, but the effect of such leadership in a closed, small world locked in together by the Antarctic winter, linked to the outside world only by telephone, fax and the internet, was catastrophic. The man sent in to resolve the conflict, couldn’t. Having sent their leader to Coventry, fairly or not, the community wasn’t going to bring him out.

The investigator’s report has never been released. Its lessons may not have been learned. It seems to me that the Casey Mutiny mirrors that of the Victorian reaction to seven years of extreme, managerial government.

Successful leadership means engaging followers in a cause. Alistair Mant, in his recent book, Intelligent Leadership (Allen & Unwin), points out that they are not following the leader so much as attaching themselves to a purpose which the leader exemplifies and embodies, that what matters is not his charisma but the bonding between the leader and a *good enough* purpose. Leadership requires possessing qualities of knowledge and skill coupled with willingness to learn and motivation. It also requires personality traits and intellectual firepower which, Mant suggests, are the primary cause of most big ‘cockups and blunders’: leaders’ most damaging personality quirk is a dominant urge for survival, because past experiences had predisposed them to approach all encounters as potentially threatening.

Think about it. The most complained-about behaviour of bosses is bullying of subordinates and kowtowing to higher authority, which means that an authoritarian leader cannot be admired by sane and decent people. How,

then, can anyone rise to the top of a large organisation and yet be clearly either stupid or arrogant? Mant concludes that the very qualities that destroy a leader's success are what drive them to achieve - great energy, being very controlling, seductive and, of course, ambitious. It can all be held together but like a circus jugglers, paying such attention to the dynamics of keeping those spinning plates or balls in the air, that there is little space for serious thought. The authoritarian leader can only see and hear what they want to. And over the precipice they go.

Which brings me back to Mr Kennett. A wise child should tell him kindly that he's dead, so he can move on to another plane of existence.