

# The Sydney Morning Herald

POLITICS FEDERAL TAYLOR INVESTIGATION

OPINION

## *It's time we clipped the ministerial wing of its protected species - the advisers*

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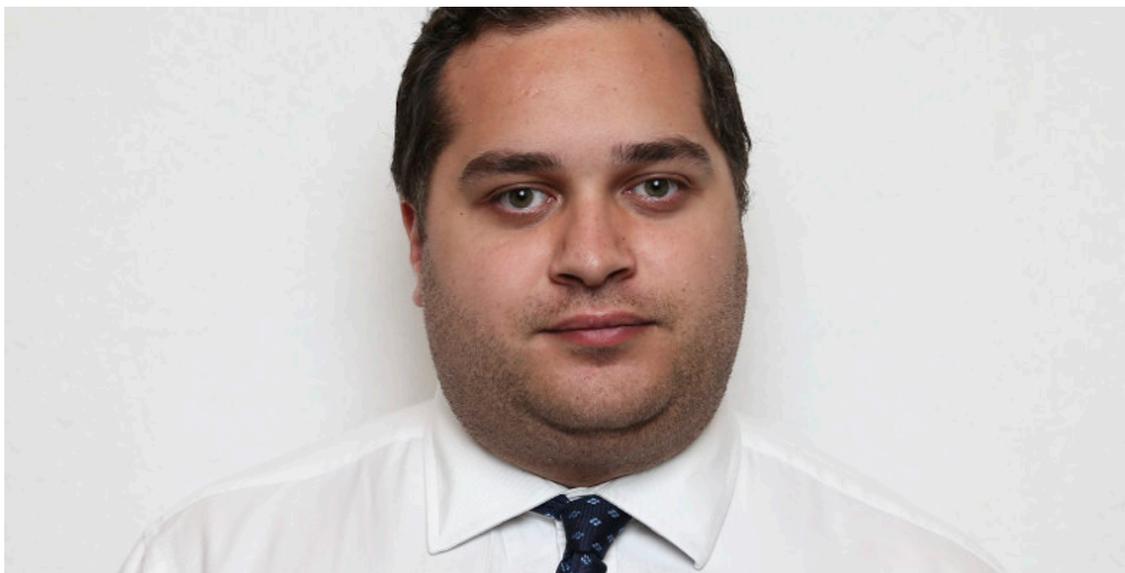
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Some of the desks are being cleared out in the ministerial wing of Parliament House after a summer that subjected ministers and their staff to more scrutiny than they could take. The office of Angus Taylor has farewelled several advisers after the farce of the Clover Moore letter, when the Energy Minister sent fake numbers to the City of Sydney mayor and the media in a bumbling attempt to grab a headline.

Few mourn the departure of Josh Manuatu, a senior adviser and Young Liberal apparatchik who has been [named in some reports about the affair](#). He has been swept off the national stage and tossed to the Liberal office in the Australian Capital Territory. His fate is to be a big political fish in a very small pond.



Josh Manuatu, the Liberal staff member outed as the backroom operative in minister Angus Taylor's troubles with Clover Moore. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

*The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* asked Manuatu in a Whatsapp message on Thursday whether he had created the false document or sent it to others. He read the message but did not reply.

The office of Bridget McKenzie, meanwhile, has been disbanded. The former Nationals deputy no longer has a portfolio and her advisers must seek work elsewhere. This is unfair on the good ones. As for the bad ones – well, their names, and their part in handing out \$100 million in sports grants, remain hidden for now.

Both ministerial offices displayed basic incompetence. Both have evaded full scrutiny. This is often the way in Parliament House, where attention falls on ministers while advisers stand in the background. But it is time for advisers to be held to account.

What happened in Taylor's office reveals the flaws that need fixing. The Australian Federal Police conclusion is crucial. "There is no evidence to indicate the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction was involved in falsifying information," said the AFP. So who did? The AFP served the public poorly by not going further. Who, exactly, was the fool in that office who relayed a false document?

Old conventions would hide this forever. One rule, once called the "McMullan Principle" after former Labor minister Bob McMullan, says that advisers should not be called before Senate inquiries because it is the minister's job to answer to Parliament. This will be tested if the inquiry into McKenzie's sports grants tries to call her former advisers.

Another convention is that advisers remain anonymous. The reasoning is staffers are not elected and merely serve the minister. The effect is to hide what goes on, even when that leads to astonishing failures.

Freedom of Information law cannot do enough to shed light on these corners of the blue carpet wing of Parliament House. When I lodged an FOI request with Taylor's office, the response from senior adviser Tim Neal was to black out every staff member's name and keep almost every document hidden. (An FOI request to a minister's office is not decided by the department but by the office itself – which usually means the decision comes from an adviser who sits close to the subject of the request.)

Good advisers know the problems here. They can see new ministers advised by inexperienced advisers, fresh graduates promoted beyond their capacities and Young Liberals spending their time in a minister's office waging factional wars in a distant branch. In the Canberra bubble, none choke on their own gas quite like the young party animals drunk on the rivalries and ideologies of student politics. They tread the blue carpet at taxpayer expense.

The success stories are easy to see, like the rise of Craig Emerson from adviser rank in Bob Hawke's office to a cabinet ministry in Julia Gillard's government, or the rise of Tony Smith from Peter Costello's office to the Speaker's chair in the House of Representatives. But the failures are hidden.

An entirely new layer of government has grown without any check on its role. The number of ministerial advisers has swollen under both sides of politics from 155 in 1972 to 449 in 2019. It is easy to see why: it only takes a decision in the prime minister's office to add more staff.

The work is intense but the salaries are generous. A mid-tier adviser can earn \$180,000 a year, which is more than twice Australia's average full-time salary. The top advisers can collect a maximum of \$269,631 under the enterprise agreement, which also offers a private car allowance as part of a \$32,846 benefits package. These salaries also come with 15.4 per cent superannuation.

The elite are looked after by a prime ministerial decision that added \$1.4 million in extra payments to 52 personal staff last year, worth \$30,000 each on average.

Skilled advisers are more important than ever when politicians are struggling. Consider the state of the Nationals party room this fortnight, ruptured by bloated egos and burning grievances. With the lords of the manor treating the ballrooms like the stables, no wonder good help is hard to find.

The system is broken and is likely to get worse. The major political parties are under pressure from falling membership and dwindling finances, with nothing to stop them adding more advisers in Parliament House to do party work on government salaries.

(Scott Morrison's social media video about his bushfire response was just one example of work that blurred the lines between government and party. There will be more to come. Convention dictates that the opposition party gets more

advisers in proportion to any government increase, so both sides win.)

There is no sign this gives Australians better government. For all the smart people who take jobs as advisers, the expansion of their ranks cannot be correlated with any golden era in outcomes. And governance suffers. A public service officer who was party to a fake document would face a grilling and a penalty. Not so an adviser. There is no forum to impose accountability.

While ministers are bound by an 11-page code of conduct written by the Prime Minister, advisers merely have to read a one-page guide from the special minister of state. The guide says they should "make themselves aware" of the code of conduct for the public service. It does not require them to follow it.

Eight years ago, Business Council of Australia chief Jennifer Westacott, a former department secretary, told senior public servants their ability to deliver "frank and fearless advice" was under threat. "Your authority has been undermined by political gatekeepers, often with little expertise and no accountability," she said. Politicians (and their gatekeepers) responded with indignation, but Westacott was right.

The government has been told what to do. Its review of the public service, led by former Telstra chief David Thodey, recommended a legislated code of conduct for advisers with "appropriate enforcement" to punish mistakes. The Thodey review also said the proposed Commonwealth Integrity Commission should cover ministerial staff. In line with one of Westacott's concerns, it said half the advisers in a minister's office should have public service experience.

A stronger system is in Morrison's own interest. The lessons of the past few months are obvious: prime ministers need protection from incompetence in the ministerial wing. So do voters.

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