



Never mind that it has been obvious that having a factional boss as campaign chief is an anachronism in 2019, if for no other reason than there aren't enough hours in the day to do both jobs properly, the Labor Right remains wedded to the structure.

Murnain's fall is a big deal in the ALP nationally.

That credible Labor Right sources were prepared to brief that she was in trouble earlier in the week was interesting in itself. As one senior Labor figure observed, once such *lèse-majesté* against the boss of the faction would have been unthinkable.

Unfortunately for Murnain, her

misfortune was to preside over the faction at a time when it appears to be fracturing. In the recent ballot to decide who should replace the hapless Michael Daley as leader of the state party, a number of unions wandered off.

Indeed some are saying it was Murnain's failure to manage that contest — along with last year's lacklustre state campaign — that is the real reason she has exited and the ICAC stuff is just an ostensible reason.

Murnain's fall is a blow for advocates of equal opportunity in the ALP, for while it has had many distinguished female

parliamentarians, including several premiers, until her election it had never produced a top-level female factional boss — a faceless woman to go with all the faceless men who wield power.

Not that the rest of us should care, of course. We should just sit back and enjoy the show, which I am pleased to tell you is going to run and run. As one rather spooked Labor figure wailed yesterday: "They've scheduled the hearing for six weeks! Don't tell me they're going to talk about one dinner for six weeks!"

**JAMES CAMPBELL IS NATIONAL POLITICS EDITOR**  
james.campbell@news.com.au

## from the state's toenails

face of farmers. Farmers in Gippsland had to battle to get a minister to visit them late last year.

But it appears to be part of a bigger issue with the Premier.

Mr Andrews has visited rural Victoria 12 times in the nine months since being re-elected last November. In the first year of his first term he made more than 30 rural visits.

And the recent visits have been hit-and-run affairs to mainly large centres such as Geelong and Bendigo to open a kinder or make an announcement at a hospital or school. They are tightly managed events.

Contrast that with the two days he spent around Birchip talking to farmers on the first anniversary of his government in 2015. He even

stayed at the Birchip Hotel. At the time farmers were signing his praises.

But not now.

Things appeared to have changed when the messy CFA split hit the headlines in 2016. Rural people felt betrayed by the dismantling for a much-loved institution without adequate reason or explanation.

It seemed that at this point the Premier stopped listening and stopped visiting.

He needs to be careful how he manages rural communities and only needs to look at history for a warning sign.

Next month marks 20 years since Jeff Kennett was booted from government with his comment that regional Victoria was the "toenails

of the state pinpointed as a major catalyst for his shock loss.

The "toenails" comment has started to raise its head among farmers in relation to Premier Andrews and his government.

There is increasing discontent about the failed Murray Basin rail project, poor roads in western Victoria, issues such as solar farms and the relentless focus on Melbourne's tunnels and rail-crossing removals.

Real or not, there is a perception rural Victoria is being ignored. Governments ignore that warning at their peril.

**ED GANNON IS EDITOR OF THE WEEKLY TIMES.**  
ed.gannon@news.com.au  
@EdgannonWtn

# NAPLAN has lost sight of its main purpose

**D**UE to a number of challenges with this year's NAPLAN test, many people are questioning its value. From computer glitches for online test-takers to high absentee rates in year 9, it is difficult to know whether to trust the results.

While we are told to interpret the results with care, it is easy to see why the public is losing faith in the system. The concerns are real. For standardised testing to be reliable, strict procedures must be followed. Such procedures guarantee that all students have fair and equal conditions when sitting for the test.

What we know about this year's test is that many students didn't have that opportunity. So we must use tremendous caution when reviewing the results and we must refrain from making major policy decisions on the basis of such outcomes. One of the greatest problems is the transition from paper tests to online tests. This year, about 50 per cent of students took the online test and 50 per cent took the paper test. We have been told to trust that the two tests are comparable, yet we don't know exactly how the results have been made comparable.

Perhaps a bigger problem, however, is that many of the online students faced a number of computer issues during their testing time. Right now, we have no idea how many students were affected by computer glitches, or to what degree. Some students dealt with minor disruptions, while others had to completely start over on another day.

That means is the "fair and equal" conditions necessary for making a test trustworthy have been violated. Even minor disruptions can lead to frustration, anxiety and apathy, especially among students who already deal with test anxiety. That leads us to question whether we should even take this year's results seriously.

What is even more troubling is how state politicians are proposing massive policy changes on the basis of these questionable results. Victorian parents should be deeply troubled by the proposal of Education Minister James Merlino to "ensure our year 9 students are more engaged" by linking performance on NAPLAN to their future job prospects.

That suggestion is misguided for many reasons. First, it assumes that many reasons. First, it assumes that year 9 student performance on NAPLAN is strongly affected by student motivation. While conflating poor motivation with poor performance might make sense at first glance, there is little actual evidence to support that levels of year 9 disengagement from NAPLAN are any different from those seen in years 3, 5 or 7.

Second, we see moves to further increase the stakes associated with NAPLAN performance as worrying. Decades of research, both in Australia and internationally, have found that attaching higher stakes to testing



**STEVEN LEWIS**

do nothing to improve the performance being measured. The research finds that high stakes do, however, increase the likelihood of unintended, and often perverse, consequences. Such negative outcomes have included teaching to the test and a narrowing of the curriculum, as well as broader concerns around student anxiety.

To this end, we see the suggested introduction of a "proficiency certificate" tied to year 9 student NAPLAN results as entirely unnecessary. That possibly harmful move will only ratchet up the already considerable pressure faced by students and families.

What's more, such measures will, in all likelihood, produce no improvements to student performance on NAPLAN.

We also find the highly politicised debate around NAPLAN entirely unhelpful to addressing the core business of student learning. For more than a decade, NAPLAN performance has served as a political football, a reason for governments and oppositions of all political persuasions to blame one another.

The response from Tanya Plibersek, Shadow Minister for Education and Training, to the 2019 NAPLAN results was to note that, "on some measures, Russia is achieving better than Australia".

Such commentary is entirely unhelpful and distracts us from attending to what is actually required — achieving more equitable funding and more equitable conditions for students and schools across Australia.

Perhaps this is a good time to recall the original intention of NAPLAN, which was to "take the temperature" of the Australian education system more broadly. We can admire pursuits to better understand how the overall system is operating and whether particular areas of education need greater attention. However, over the past decade, we have seen a widening distance between the original purpose of NAPLAN and how it is actually being used.

New proposals that only increase stakes, without any evidence to suggest this gets at the right problem, are only getting us farther away from what the tests were designed to do.

It is time we look at systematic conditions and stop blaming individual students, teachers or schools.

**DR STEVEN LEWIS IS A FELLOW AT THE RESEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPACT (REDI) CENTRE OF DEAKIN UNIVERSITY. THIS ARTICLE WAS WRITTEN WITH DR JESSICA HOLLOWAY.**