

## 10 OPINION

# Rob Swarten is right - the swamp can thrive when conditions suit



DOLLARS AND SENSE  
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I DON'T know Robert Swarten well, but we are something more than acquaintances and I have the greatest respect for him.

His tough political style, ability to deal with big issues (including the Public Works portfolio), and his relentless support for the people his party has historically looked out for is undeniable.

I can only marvel at his continued commitment to the cause, given the disgraceful treatment he experienced from certain sectors of the Labor movement.

There's also the fact that around the time I started writing these newspaper articles (nearly 20 years ago), one of our important community organisations experienced a series of serious accidents and that led me to approach Robert with my concerns and some ideas.

He took it on himself to "have a proper look". Since then the organisation has gone from strength to strength, in no small part, I believe, due to Robert's involvement.

Robert listened to someone he barely knew and got a great result.

And Robert is good company. We did have some beers one night - he was constantly harangued by a union maddie, but totally took it on the chin.

I'm sure he thinks I must have been a little mad myself to take on Bill Shorten over the franking credit issue at the "town hall style" meeting held prior to the last federal election. I thought it would be like

when Dad took me to meet Gough Whitlam at the Municipal Theatre (1974 perhaps? - I remember the excitement that pervaded the room, and his huge hands!). Imagine my surprise when 45 years later, I found myself wearing a spotted blue tie (I just thought it looked nice) while almost everyone else wore red t-shirts (very intimidating, but you don't care about that when your name is David).

The truth is that Robert and I have a lot in common - my parents were teachers (which Robert used to be, I believe), I care very much about people and community, education, health care (I used to work in hospitals), our legal system and all the things that make Australia an amazing place to live.

But I am also an economist and a businessperson, and despite my sometimes naïve take on things, I do have a knack for recognising when the balance is out.

Way before it was "a thing", I saw that fee for service finance advice was inevitable (and desirable), put my money where my mouth is and built a successful business around it.

I wrote a column warning that Kerry Packer would close the meatworks if the unions did not give up on their ridiculous rolling strikes.

I'm just a practical sort of economist guy - it seemed obvious I saw that Labor's regressive franking credits policy was actually a tax on retirees, and as such was going to be a big issue.

Each time I was ridiculed by vested interests and those "in the know".

What I see now is a global economy brought to its knees by COVID-19. Australia's debt alone is going to increase by at least \$300 billion, and that is going to have to be paid for.

The private sector, for over

a decade the whipping boy for progressives and rusted-on lefties, is not going to shoulder the burden.

One, it is now front and centre a key part of the social structure needed to help us through, and two, weakened by years of over-regulation and populist distractions, it is now not big or robust enough to do all the things being asked of it: underwriting the entire tax take of the economy, being held to unattainable standards of perfection, and fuelling economic growth and therefore jobs (which means economic security for households).

So what of the public sector? Nurses, teachers, police, fireys - they are also key to the welfare of our society, and in general that's not what this is about. Simply we are paying far too high a price for the administration of the public sector, and for unaccountable policy and regulatory extensions of government. This administrative class is called bureaucrats.

In a 2015 article in *The Australian* a journalist asked "do we really need 20,000 people employed at the ATO, being paid an average of \$165,000 each to collect taxes?"

At the time the cost was \$3.5 billion, representing one bureaucrat for every 500 people.

It's more now, and compares with the US, where the IRS employs one individual per 2000 people.

What about the Department of Social Services, where the bureaucrats cost in excess of \$5.5 billion, for an average salary of more than \$160,000 each? Do you think the average Centrelink client service officer earns that?

Or the Federal Department of Health, with 4500 people costing an average of \$222,000 each - about three times the average salary for a nurse, for a

company lay with its owners and existing shareholders.

"Virgin has very substantial shareholders, including Singapore Airlines and Etihad Airlines who own 20 per cent each," she said.

"There is 40 per cent or thereabouts that is owned by



COMMITTED: Former Rocky MP Robert Swarten may have left parliament, but his heart is deeply entrenched in Labor values and he continues to voice his opinion with vigour. Picture: Bruce Long

federal overlay to a state function.

These are big numbers and they don't scratch the surface of peripheral agencies full of hangers on, the main purpose of which is to regulate the life out of everything and tell us how to live within their woke constraints.

By and large the general public does not understand these costs or their consequences. For one thing they are almost always taxpayer or industry funded, which means you have to be really interested to get to the truth behind the data. For another, the public service is a very sophisticated beast when it comes to self-protection - watch *Yes Minister*, or *The Office* and you'll soon get the message. And finally, the public service is the most unionised segment of the workforce (in fact without it unions would become virtually irrelevant).

Whenever the public service is under threat, unions are the first to its defence. If they were really interested in protecting people's jobs and managing front-line workload, they would insist on efficient management (thereby freeing up funds for the front-line).

But instead they say "look

at all the nurses/teachers we are going to lose".

This blinds the public to the real targets of efficiency measures, rightly, the bureaucrats and the bureaucratic processes they rely on to justify their ever increasing fiefdoms and salaries. Vale Campbell Newman.

Those that say that the public service simply follows policy orders handed down by law-maker politicians, are oblivious to its crucial policy setting role, and the propensity for public service organisations to become lobbyists for their own causes. Of course you can argue that the public service is required to act impartially, but then you would have to wonder the reason why its many departments have sought to broaden the scope of their ability to regulate, not through altering the law itself, but through regulations directly administered by them, and why some have sought (successfully) to exempt themselves from any, albeit flimsy, yoke of accountability.

Finally we have that old chestnut of outsourcing. In my business our licensing regime gives me wide discretion to outsource all sorts of tasks.

We hardly ever do, because I think it rarely delivers a good

result, and when it does, it's because of diligence in contract management - and consequently you end up spending just as much on that as you would if you'd done the job yourself. The difference though between my business and Robert's commentary on the debacle that was the new payroll software for the Queensland Department of Health, is that I am legally accountable for the actions of my contractors.

Public servants are not, and neither are politicians.

Robert is right - the swamp thrives when conditions are right and with all eyes on the private sector, much of the public service bureaucracy has become a giant piss-take.

A waste of time and money more focused on how many "inclusive" letters you can put on a toilet door, than on supporting the armies of nurses, teachers and others who are actually executing the work.

A waste of time and money that chokes the engine of enterprise - often deliberately, based on ideology, or for self-reward.

The private sector and households can no longer afford it, and this movie is coming soon to a theatre near you.

## LNP abandoning Virgin and CQ tourism in time of crisis: O'Rourke

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fares even higher and could mean tourists and investors decided not to come to CQ for a holiday or to do business.

On Tuesday Rockhampton Labor MP Barry O'Rourke accused the LNP of abandoning

Virgin and CQ tourism.

He said it had become "very clear" the LNP was "not the slightest bit interested" in saving Virgin.

LNP Federal Member for Capricornia Michelle Landry responded by saying the first responsibility to bail out a

company lay with its owners and existing shareholders.

"Virgin has very substantial shareholders, including Singapore Airlines and Etihad Airlines who own 20 per cent each," she said.

"There is 40 per cent or thereabouts that is owned by

substantial Chinese investors.

"As the treasurer said, the Federal Government was not going to bail out five large foreign shareholders with deep pockets who together own 90 per cent of this airline."

Ms Landry said the Federal Government had supported,

and would continue to support, the sector through various initiatives which to date had seen more than \$1.2 billion committed to maintain operations and support jobs. "The government's objective remains committed to two commercially viable airlines operating do-

mestically across Australia," she said. "This is important to competition and the Australian economy. We will ensure that the ACCC strongly enforces competition laws to ensure that airlines are able to compete effectively as the sector rebuilds."