

Minister for Bad News

CAROL NADER, THE AGE,
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Long before it became her job, Lisa Neville had already taken an interest in society's most vulnerable. In the early days of the Bracks government, which she would later join, Neville was a community visitor, inspecting the conditions in which the elderly and people with disabilities or a mental illness were living in residential facilities, and reporting back to the state's Public Advocate.

"I thought they needed a lot of work," says Neville. "It was one of those areas that I thought needed a bit of focus and attention, and there were some when I visited that I was quite distressed about."

Recently, the tables were turned on Neville when, as Community Services Minister, she was forced to answer questions about why some of these services are so appallingly run. Public Advocate Colleen Pearce, on the front page of this newspaper, gave the State Government a spray over the condition of supported residential services.

Some women, Pearce said, were being raped in these facilities and swapping sex for cigarettes.

It was the latest in a litany of bad news stories that have plagued Neville this year. Among them, shocking reports of lives shattered and lost - a girl, 2, known to child protection services and allegedly killed by her father; and last week two mentally ill men allegedly stabbed to death at the Thomas Embling Hospital by another mentally ill man.

There has also been a barrage of criticism from more than one government watchdog. Just this week, the Auditor-General lamented the state of mental health care. The Ombudsman recently slammed the Department of Human Services for placing young children with sex offenders, and is expected to release soon his long-awaited report into child protection - a document expected to amount to a public caning.

Throw in a death threat in June directed at Neville by anti-fluoride extremists opposed to government plans to add fluoride to Geelong's water, and it has been a far from restful year for her.

So it might be a relief that few Victorians would be likely to recognise the member for Bellarine, 45, if they ran into her on the street - except, perhaps, in her own electorate. Neville does not invite the limelight. The public only hears from her when she is forced to front the cameras or when her wavering voice is heard on the radio. And by her own admission, she is not a great media performer. She stammers when under pressure.

After one particularly painful interview recently on Neil Mitchell's radio program, the Opposition gleefully sent to media outlets what is now known as the "you know" transcript, highlighting, in bold, 37 times when Neville said "you know" during the interview. Some might argue that poking fun at her in this way trivialises the complex issues she is trying to articulate, although part of her job is to be able to explain issues to the community. To her credit, Neville is able to laugh about the "you know" fiasco.

"Am I a polished media performer? Probably not," she says. "Is that my priority? Well obviously being able to communicate a message is important to the community ... There's a difference between being polished and being able to try and tell a message. Obviously, I'd like to get rid of using 'you know'."

In the meantime, she has a lot to be getting on with.

Part of the ALP's dominant Right faction, Neville - widely regarded as a workaholic - is also a single mother to a son, Sam, 13. She says the two are close, a bond that finds expression in part through a shared passion for the Geelong Football Club. She regularly commutes from Geelong to Melbourne for work. Lots of single parents make it work," she says. It's not easy. It's constantly balancing, and sometimes I can't do something because I want to get home to see Sam. You make those judgments [because families have to] make those judgments."

Even so, she juggles this with a massive workload taking in several complex areas including child protection, mental health, disability and drugs and alcohol. She is the Minister for Bad News.

The one portfolio Neville held that afforded her warm and fuzzy photo opportunities, as minister for children, was taken from her and handed to Maxine Morand in 2007.

During an interview with *The Age* this week, Neville declines to describe herself as ambitious, preferring to use the word "idealistic". What drives her to work so hard, she says, is a passion for social justice and social policy - areas inevitably brimming with bad news stories.

Neville, who was Victoria's first mental health minister, says she asked John Brumby for the community services gig when he became Premier.

"I put my hand up, and I put my hand up absolutely knowing that these were challenging issues," she says. "They often only get bad media, so I get a lot of community attention, but they are absolutely critical issues ... Most days I feel excited about the opportunities, although realistic about the challenges."

What about when a terrible story makes the headlines and you know you're going to have a bad day?

"You start the day with a deep breath and you say, 'This is part of what you signed up for, and these are really difficult portfolios'," she says. "There are things that go wrong, so it is taking a deep breath but also making sure that in all of that you remain pretty focused on and confident about where you're heading with the reforms."

Her interest in social policy was evident in her life before politics. She served as vice-president of the Victorian Council of Social Service and was involved in community campaigns protesting against the Kennett government's funding cuts and closures of schools and hospitals. She also served as Brumby's social policy adviser when he was opposition leader.

Neville was born in Newcastle. Her father worked for Qantas and the family moved around, with stints in Papua New Guinea, Sydney and Darwin before moving to Brisbane. She did an arts degree at Griffith University, and got her first taste of politics as general-secretary of the Queensland Union of Students. It was during the era of then Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen and she got caught up in the "anti-Joh movement".

"I was involved in all those protests during that time," she says.

She moved to Melbourne when she was elected general-secretary of the National Union of Students, and also served as president of the union the following year. She did a law degree off campus through Deakin University but never practised

law. At the time, her son was two and her marriage to Richard Marles, now federal member for Corio, had just ended.

Neville did her community work and entered politics in 2002. Despite having overseen reforms that have been applauded by the sectors she deals with, she is a regular target for the Opposition. While calling for a judicial inquiry into the child protection system, Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu has repeatedly demanded that Neville resign.

And those who work in the child protection system doubt she has the clout to deliver the tens of millions of dollars needed to improve what Child Safety Commissioner Bernie Geary calls a "very good but skeletal system".

In mental health, meanwhile, Neville spearheaded a plan to increase early intervention and prevention. But, sources say, the money hasn't flowed.

To be fair, this year she oversaw the biggest ever budget for children in out-of-home care. And the Brumby Government found an extra \$77 million recently to boost the child protection workforce. But some in the sector argue that the first came after a noisy campaign played out through the media, and the latter came after a series of crises - the Government had to do something to stem the incessant flow of bad news.

A keen observer says Neville comes across as defensive, that she lacks the warmth of Education Minister Bronwyn Pike. But, says another: "I think her intentions are good. I think she's a person of good moral values and is genuine."

All agree that Neville works very hard. "I'm in awe of her capacity for the job," says Geary. "It seems to me that she has the most difficult portfolios one can possibly think of and she approaches them with tremendous energy."

Children's Protection Society chief executive Bernadette Burchell is impressed by the minister's depth of knowledge. "I think she's a very bright person," she says. "Whether or not she comes across as she is really in the media is a moot point."

Neville's opposite number in Parliament, Mary Wooldridge, says Neville is probably trying very hard but lurches from crisis to crisis. "We have a minister who repeatedly says she doesn't know or hasn't been briefed or that it's someone else's fault," she says.

The issues she has had to manage - along with issues around hospital waiting lists - have caused the Government so much grief that Brumby in August split the Department of Human Services in two, amid criticism that it was too big and important areas were getting lost.

And while a lack of resources has been identified as a huge issue, much of the criticism focuses on questions of judgment.

For instance, child protection workers and police decided to leave a girl, 2, with her father despite the fact she had bruises. He later allegedly assaulted her - fatally. Then there was the panel that decided that a man who allegedly stabbed two others in Thomas Embling last week was well enough to be in the low-security part of the hospital.

Still, despite these complexities, Monash University senior lecturer in politics Dr Nick Economou points out: "When things go wrong, the first person who's in the firing line is the person who is identified as the responsible minister, even though technically he or she may not be responsible."

Take the horrific case of the father who has been accused of raping his daughter since the 1970s. Sections of the media - it could be argued somewhat irrationally - have pointed the finger at Neville.

"It would be a very tough person indeed to expect a minister - Labor, Liberal or otherwise - to be responsible for an incest case [alleged to have happened over 30 years]," says Economou.

It is very likely Neville will survive the series of scandals that have rocked her department. Nor are the voters likely to punish the Government over its record on these issues: mental health and child protection are not vote winners.

Still, there is much trepidation in the Government and the Department of Human Services about what the Ombudsman will uncover in his child protection report this month.

Neville neatly deflects a question about whether anyone's head - including her own - will roll if the report turns out to be a shocker.

"It's not about laying blame," she says. "They're not black and white issues. They're difficult decisions that people make."

Not a pretty story....

February The Age runs a series of stories highlighting the problems with children being housed together in residential care.

August A girl, 2, dies after being allegedly assaulted by her father. She first came to the attention of the Department of Human Services in June, when a childcare centre reported she had black eyes. Police and child protection workers investigated and left the child in her father's care. Two weeks later, the alleged assault occurred.

August It is revealed 2000 children in the system do not have an allocated case worker.

September Public Advocate says women are being raped and swapping sex for cigarettes in supported residential services.

The Ombudsman criticises DHS for allowing children to live with sex offenders. Says a child was allowed to live with a convicted sex offender because DHS failed to conduct criminal record checks. Neville claims spelling mistake caused the bungle.

Neville orders investigation over a father who allegedly raped his daughter for 30 years.

November Two mentally ill men are stabbed to death, allegedly by another mentally ill man, at Thomas Embling Hospital.

Auditor-General says hundreds of people with mental health problems are being locked in police cells because crisis assessment teams are not responding to them.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE AGE - 14 November 2009

Mary Wooldridge, Shadow Minister for Mental Health and Community Services in Victoria

It is misleading for the Age to blithely state as part of its profile of Lisa Neville (*Minister for Bad News*, 14 November) that the Brumby Labor Government will

escape the consequences of their failing mental health, drug and child protection services.

Your claim that mental health care and the protection of children are not vote winners would be disputed by the many individuals and families I speak to every day that care deeply about these vital issues, and who are worse off because of the Minister for Mental Health's incompetence.

Victorian families tell me is that things are getting worse - ageing parents are too afraid to die as they don't know what will happen to their adult child with a disability; mothers despair when excluded from their son or daughter's treatment for mental illness; and neighbours give up on reporting abuse to child protection officials because no-one follows up or takes action to help the vulnerable.

Their lives and stories expose the Minister's rhetoric about new laws, new plans and new money as a hollow boast.

Lisa Neville's incompetence has a serious negative effect upon the lives of thousands of vulnerable Victorians every day and her weak performance as Minister warrants her immediate removal by John Brumby.

LISA

Comment:

Dear Ms Wooldridge and Ms Nader,

It is disappointing but not surprising, you have both focused on bright lights and mileage - What sells newspapers and what makes political mileage!

It is easy to vaporise a Minister with such heavy fuel packs, but those who made the fuel packs, her department, will live on with the same public service traditional, captive market, no reason for customers or customer service, and no responsibility philosophy.

You can certainly vaporise a Minister, but public service departments are fire proof and protected better than the Baghdad Green Zone by traditional public service culture.

It's easy to make mileage out of such heavy material as the issues used. It's the reasons, which require time and energy to resolve and solve.

The issues used are just the tip of the iceberg, the problems below, and which generate the horrendous tips, are as a direct result of traditional public service philosophy - "No one within the department itself is responsible, or can be held truly responsible for service level and quality".

The Minister is the only person who can direct the department! Naturally, she is not going to be unpopular with her department, or give the Opposition mileage by proportioning blame for the department's failure to provide proper and accountable systemic management..... Quality management with the power to set, monitor and maintain staff work value to ensure its service outcomes are within the direction, intention and spirit of it's well defined and very comprehensive policies.

Consumers are unable to take their huge range of service level and quality complaints to a truly independent complaints process, where there are no public servants or pseudo public servants on the board! But where all members are from outside industry, to ensure a level playing field. And, that such a board have the power to truly direct the department.

Tony & Heather Tregale

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