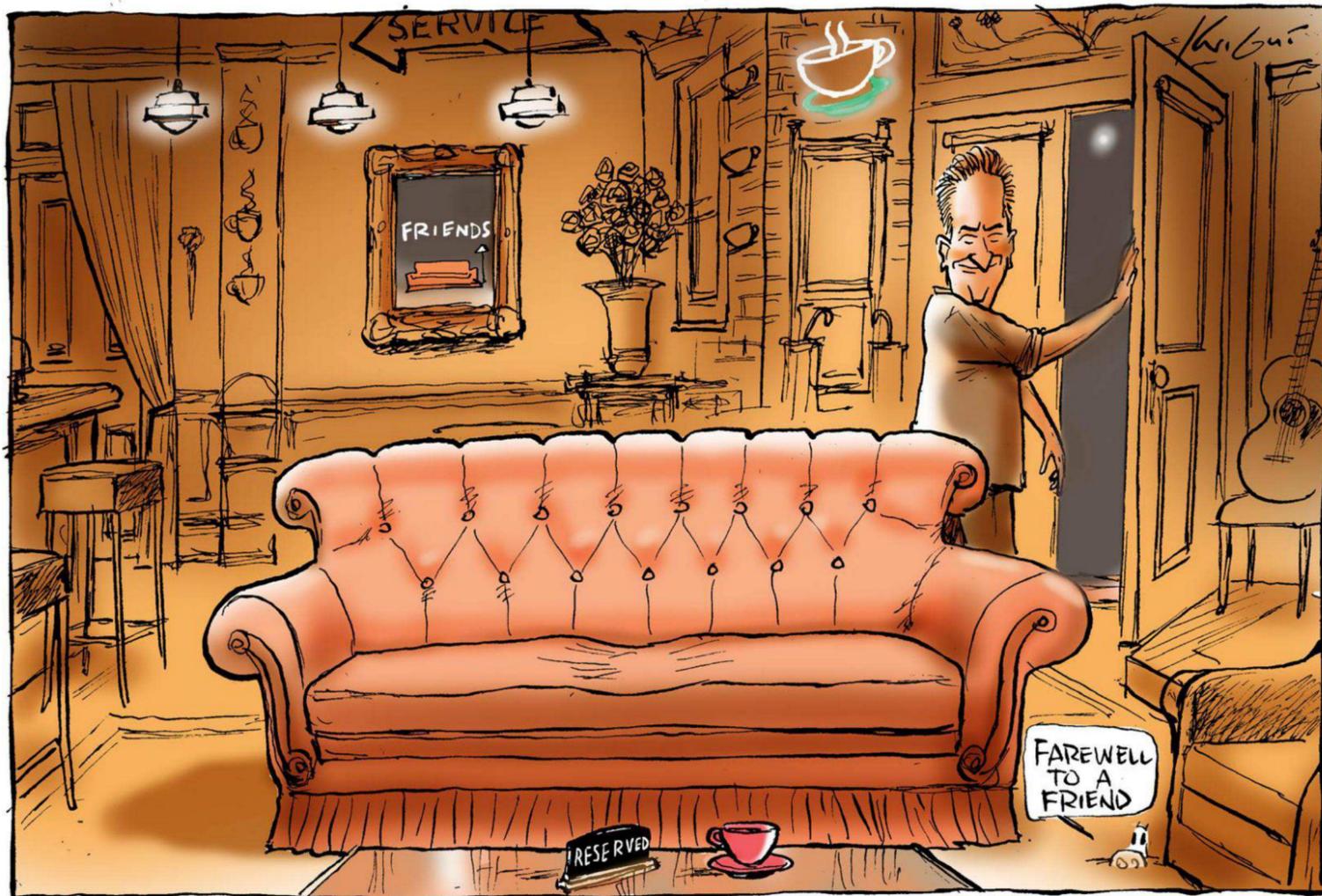


Mark Knight



Questions of open leadership

Tom Minear



Anthony Albanese will rarely have a moment in the spotlight like last week's White House press conference with Joe Biden, which makes it all the more curious that his office cut some of the exchanges from its transcript.

Here's what was missing, according to a transcript shared by the President's staff. US reporter Joey Garrison, who had grilled Biden, tried to ask Albanese something "regarding the Israel-Hamas war". "Go get 'em, Joe Joe," the President said, but the Prime Minister moved on to another journalist.

The Australian version offered only Albanese's rejection, apparently apropos of nothing: "We in Australia, I've managed to get it so we get one question each."

He has enforced that policy since he was a deer caught in the headlights during last year's election. So why leave out the exchange? Perhaps his office thought it a bad look, and from my view in the Rose Garden it certainly was.

Biden has held just nine press conferences this year, only two of them by himself. Not since Ronald Reagan has a president been so averse to fronting to the press. And after his predecessor Donald Trump derided the media as the "enemy of the people", it is little wonder US reporters are determined to assert their watchdog role.

But if Albanese's staff were embarrassed, the PM wasn't. The next day he complained about the behaviour of US reporters at the end of the press conference.

"The circus began, they just started screaming. It was very strange," he told politicians on Capitol Hill. "Our media can be difficult but they don't do the random shouting that was going on, which happened in the Oval Office as well ... I assume you just don't answer - that's what I would do."

There you have it. So much for his election vow to "change the way politics operates in this country" by avoiding soundbites and "actually answering questions". That had seemed a genuine promise, but he and his government have been depressingly allergic to scrutiny.

For instance, it refused to release records of ministerial use of taxpayer-funded VIP jets, ending a decades-long precedent, on supposed security grounds even though flight details are usually published months later.

Compare that to Biden, who revealed in advance he was flying into an active war zone in Israel.

Maybe Albanese could learn from him - or maybe he just gave Biden some ideas.

Tom Minear is Herald Sun US correspondent

Hold your fire and revise ban on gas connections

In just 10 weeks, the Victorian government will ban gas connections to new residential homes, and there is an overwhelming amount of uncertainty over what that means for Victorian families and workers.

Rushing the implementation threatens to create new pressures on housing affordability at a time when Victorians are already battling increasing cost-of-living pressures.

The gas appliance industry, and it seems most Victorians, support policies to reduce carbon emissions and meet the state's climate goals.

But the residential gas ban is a distraction from those goals, with relatively small emissions reductions, if any, and a high economic cost.

The Victorian government has chosen the worst time to kick off its gas ban. The transition to cleaner power generation is not happening fast enough to manage the electricity grid demands of a rapid switch from gas to electric appliances.

With an El Nino summer approaching, electricity grid operators have warned Victorians will face an increased risk of rolling blackouts.

Forced electrification of new Victorian homes ahead of the decarbonisation of our power supply will just push households on to a coal-based electricity grid that is already under significant pressure.

The Victorian Premier's backing of

Ross Jamieson



the State Electricity Commission's cooking-with-coal scheme will push up emissions and the chance of blackouts, while consumers are asked to pay an upfront bill in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Forecast savings from electrification are just that - forecasts.

The reality is that when brown coal leaves the state's energy system, the cost of electricity will significantly rise, as has been the case in other states.

Gas is part of the transition to renewable energy and achieving net zero by 2050. Labor governments across the country understand this sentiment.

NSW Energy, Environment and Climate Change Minister Penny Sharpe stated "gas is an important part of the transition".

While other progressive governments across Australia and the world understand gas is part of the transition to renewables, this seems lost on the Victorian government.

Last year, in the same 48-hour window, we saw Energy and Resources Minister Lily D'Ambrosio open a tap on the world-first hydrogen gas hot water unit and then

proceed to unveil Victoria's Gas Substitution Roadmap - with an ideological position to replace gas appliances in your home with electric ones.

The same pipes that supply natural gas to our homes today can be used to supply renewable gases to new homes in the near future - provided government policy doesn't prevent pipes being installed or maintained.

The government has indicated to industry bodies, such as the Gas Appliance Manufacturers Association of Australia, that they are open to consulting in good faith; however, as the clock runs down few commitments on orderly transition are being honoured.

The association has made calls to the government to change the timeline on the ban - highlighting that under normal circumstances, stakeholders including industry are given three years to implement changes as significant as those proposed - and a chance to have consultation with government.

Although our members do not agree with the ban proposed by the Victorian government, we request that the minister at least comes to the table to shift the timeline of the ban.

We also refute the cost savings claims made by the government.

A report by Frontier Economics highlights that an average four-bedroom all-electric home in Melbourne will cost between \$15,000

and \$26,000 more than if equivalent gas appliance are used.

These figures do not mesh with government claims that electrification will reduce housing costs.

But most concerning is that the current timeline - with the ban in just 10 weeks - will not allow Victorians planning for a new home nor the industry to adjust to the change.

Forcing the change at the beginning of 2024 does not enable a smooth transition for Victorians and threatens the viability of Australia's gas appliance manufacturers and their workforce.

The Gas Appliance Manufacturers Association is committed to the transition to net zero by 2050, and wants to work with the Victorian government. But the current approach is not sensible and appears to be based on ideological politics without an understanding of real-world implications of the decision.

This decision has been made with little consideration of the financial pressures faced by many Victorian families, the potential of 4000 Australian jobs going offshore and the supply chain problems that will cause delays in construction.

Victorian families are facing a cost-of-living crisis now - and forecasts of possible savings do nothing to help.

Ross Jamieson is president of the Gas Appliance Manufacturers Association of Australia