



Mate, expectations

by Karen Middleton

Federal politics



Finance Minister Katy Gallagher, December 2, 2025. © Lukas Coch /AAP Images

A government that orders a review into how its board members are appointed could be seen as having integrity, but what if it bottom-draws the result and rejects key recommendations?



Voters hate hypocrisy. They can forgive mistakes, omissions and oversights. But those who seem like hypocrites, they punish.

Since before winning office in 2022, federal Labor frontbenchers have talked a lot about integrity. Now in their fourth year of government, they're at risk of creating the dangerous collective impression that their hearts aren't really in it.

When Finance Minister Katy Gallagher finally acceded on Tuesday to sustained Senate pressure and published a report on the process of government board appointments received two years and four months ago, her language was notably different than when she commissioned it in early 2023, back when talking up integrity was still a thing.

Gallagher's ACT senatorial nemesis David Pocock had led the campaign to unearth what was dubbed the "Jobs for Mates" report. The minister could hardly argue with the nickname: she used exactly those words in announcing the review on February 5, 2023.

"This review is all about putting an end to the 'jobs for mates' culture that defined the previous Morrison government's public sector appointments," Gallagher said in a statement at the time. It was part of the Albanese Government's integrity agenda and would be published when completed in mid 2023, in line with a "commitment to transparency".

But there's an old saying: be careful what you wish for. Reviewer Lynelle Briggs, a former senior bureaucrat and aged-care royal commissioner, clearly went further than the government considered helpful.

Titled "No Favourites", the 108-page report is blunt, prescriptive and damning. Some aspects of Briggs' recommended overhaul are a bit unrealistic and possibly unworkable. For example, she singled out governments' "egregious" persistent habit of making sometimes-questionable appointments on the eve of an election and proposed a ban on appointments within six months of the last possible election date in a term. It's a good idea in principle, but given the prime ministerial discretion to choose an earlier date it would have little effect. Nevertheless, there's a lot that could improve a system that, Briggs said, fuels the impression of "patronage and nepotism" and makes all ministerial appointments appear "politically dodgy" when most are not.

She proposed a more formal set of rules, overseen by the Australian Public Service Commission and involving special legislation. Ministers could still be involved in appointments but with greater checks and balances. And without formally recommending it, she suggested reviewing what board appointees are being paid, revealing that some full-time public servants representing the government on boards are "occasionally" receiving fees for attending meetings, a potential breach of the *Remuneration Tribunal Act*. A government spokesperson told *The Monthly* that the "employing bodies and individual office holders are responsible for administering and complying with the provisions in the law", and some officials may be entitled to travel allowance.

It's no wonder the report was buried. You can just imagine the horror when they unwrapped it. It went straight into the bottom drawer and probably guarantees Briggs won't be offered further government work anytime soon.

But more than its findings, it's how the report has been handled that creates the credibility problem. If it had been published promptly as promised, it would have reflected largely on the previous government. Its Labor successors could have laid out the findings, argued that aspects of Briggs' proposals aren't practical, produced an alternative amended framework and moved on. Given how many appointments have been made since, it's hard not to conclude that it was simply inconvenient.

There's something comedic about ordering a review citing transparency and accountability, and then hiding its uncomfortable recommendations for 28 months and eventually seeking to make a virtue of rejecting much of what it said is essential. It's reminiscent of the TV series *Utopia* and its brilliant 1980s British forerunner, *Yes Minister*, the first episode of which was deliciously titled "Open Government".

Gallagher finally released the report just a couple of hours before a Senate estimates committee hearing, accompanied by her 14-page plan to tackle the problems Briggs described. The appointments framework, to take effect from February next year, applies to engaging departmental secretaries, heads of other agencies, and statutory bodies and members of government boards. It doesn't cover diplomats or a range of other positions.

It's really an ambition statement about selection on merit with guidance for ministers to make "the best possible" appointments. It includes a provision for some appointments to be exempted from the new framework with the prime minister's agreement. There are no enforcement provisions, nor will there be any dedicated legislation. Greens senator Barbara Pocock described it as a "motherhood" statement, something Gallagher rejected.

Gallagher argued it's better than what's been there, and that is probably true. Will it stop board appointments being used for political purposes? Unlikely. Does the government want it to? Good question.

The answer may lie in how the review came about. In March 2023, independent "teal" MP Sophie Scamps produced her own legislation, the Transparency and Quality Public Appointments Bill.

"This bill that I'm introducing today addresses the culture of cronyism and party-friendly appointments that have distorted and undermined our democracy," Scamps told the House of Representatives. She said it would ensure appointments were "no longer left entirely to the discretion of a minister".

"My 'ending jobs for mates' bill will establish a framework to ensure that major public Commonwealth appointments are made independently and transparently, and that appointees are of the highest quality and expertise," she said.

Governments are never big fans of private members' bills and rarely let them proceed to a vote. So it was with Scamps' legislation. But as integrity had been a key campaign issue, the government couldn't be seen to ignore it. No matter, the government could argue the bill was redundant because Gallagher had already announced her own review, a month earlier.

What's less well known is that Scamps had flagged her plans at a meeting with the then attorney-general Mark Dreyfus on January 31, 2023. Gallagher announced the review five days later, before the draft bill was ready.

At a Senate estimates hearing on Tuesday this week, Gallagher insisted the government has not sat on its hands for the two years since the report landed.

"There has been significant change to the approach around appointments based on actually having merit processes and looking at a pool of candidates, having things like a skills matrix that underpins what skills we're looking for on different boards and committees, looking at the gender balance," she said. "A whole range of things have changed."

But in its full historical context, it all looks a bit disingenuous.

So, too, does Communications Minister Anika Wells' response to another controversy: the cost of flying with an adviser and a bureaucrat to New York for three days in September during the United Nations' leaders week, to spruik the impending under-16s social media ban.

When Wells addressed the National Press Club on Wednesday, she was clearly irritated that her speech on the ban was being overshadowed by the astronomical almost \$100,000 price tag for three business-class flights.

"We will continue to disclose information about that trip through the usual processes," a snippy Wells told journalists.

She'd been scheduled to travel with the prime minister on his official aircraft, but her departure was delayed by the Optus triple-zero outage. The flights were clearly booked last minute when demand on the route was high, though why they cost so much more than regular business fares is a mystery.

The cost had emerged in media reports on Wednesday morning and Wells should have gone to the Press Club armed with a better response. Instead, she implied it was trivial.

The questions were completely fair. Being transparent and accountable is not just filling in a form quietly in a month or two. It's responding to public concerns swiftly and openly. Australians are entitled to a proper explanation. It's their money, which also pays for people on boards. These things might seem like sideline issues to governments with lots to do. But, politically, they can add up.

Integrity is defined as “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles”. The problem with governments raising expectations about integrity is then they need to meet them. What they don’t want is for a picture to form suggesting they weren’t really *that* serious about it.

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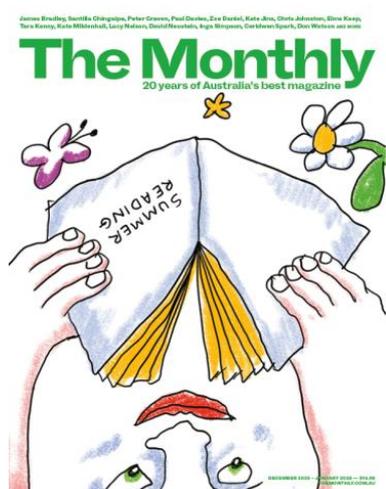
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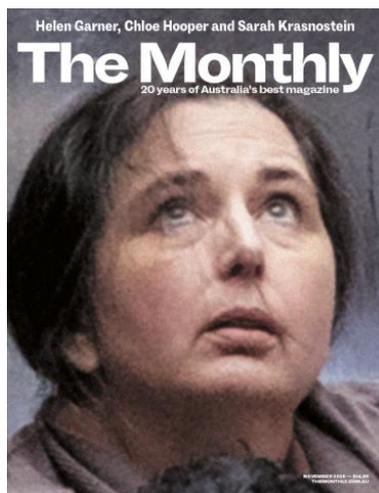
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