

## WHISTLEBLOWERS AUSTRALIA



**NATIONAL WHISTLEBLOWERS' DAY  
30 JULY 2017**

You may recall something of the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the Four Corners documentary, 'The Moonlight State', which went to air in May 1987. It ultimately brought down the government in Queensland, but few would have known the whistleblowers who made it possible, until they spoke publicly for the first time in another Four Corners documentary, 'Breaking the Brotherhood', which went to air last June (2017).

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2017/06/12/4682639.htm>

It is a gripping tale and would make a marvellous telemovie. There was undercover police officer, Jim Slade, whose report on drug trafficking was shelved at the highest level, the National Bureau of Criminal Intelligence officer, Peter Vassallo, who got journalist Chris Masters involved after meeting Jim Slade at a policing conference, the police officers on the beat who wouldn't take a bribe, like whistleblower Col Dillon, the Queensland police who planned to frame journalist Chris Masters as a paedophile and the undercover AFP officer, Dave Moore, tasked with protecting Masters, whose life was under threat.

Other information quickly followed on the ABC's website about the 'Bagman', the secret codes and the payments to bent cops in a web of corruption.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-12/fitzgerald-inquiry-files-reveal-inner-workings-of-corrupt-cops/8600046>

It hardly seems adequate to thank Jim Slade, Peter Vassallo and Col Dillon after so many years, but they probably would not have survived to tell the tale had they been known in 1987. Of course, our thanks also go to journalist Chris Masters who kept them out of the fray, to his great personal cost. Now that we can, we can do so knowing that their legacy will live on as a testament to why whistleblowing works – because it keeps our police and governments on track.

Thirty years on there is another whistleblower or two I'd like to thank, but can't – but you know who you are - because on 24 July another Four Corners program went to air. This time it was a program entitled 'Pumped: Who is benefiting from the billions spent on the Murray-Darling?' The story has quickly gained momentum with a focus on the alleged billion-dollar theft of water by some irrigators in the Barwon-Darling, who are alleged to have tampered with their pump meters to mask the amount of water they had drawn from the river, and the senior NSW bureaucrat who is alleged to have refused to approve a major operation against non-compliant irrigators in the north of NSW and who was recorded offering information – in secret - to their lobbyists.

Opinions aired in the program swung wildly upstream and downstream. They were everything from 'they are profiteering' and 'it's the biggest water grab in Australia's history' to the defensive, 'they bring a lot of business to town'.

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2017/07/24/4705065.htm>

Federal minister for water, Barnaby Joyce, later confirmed they wouldn't be investigating allegations of water theft. Three days later he was recorded in a public meeting in a pub in Shepparton, Victoria, accusing the ABC of campaigning to take your water away from you and

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to shut your town down. The NSW government limited an independent inquiry to the investigation of non-compliance, and the senior bureaucrat has apparently referred himself to the NSW corruption watchdog, the ICAC.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-26/barnaby-joyce-government-wontintervene-murray-darling/8743952>

Online, reports are coming in thick and fast, and some, like the Huffington Post, provide a useful synopsis - when the history is so important.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/07/24/four-corners-report-cottonfarmers-accused-of-stealing-murray-darling-water\\_a\\_23046214/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/07/24/four-corners-report-cottonfarmers-accused-of-stealing-murray-darling-water_a_23046214/)

Four days out - on national radio - Independent Senator Nick Xenophon reminded Barnaby Joyce, the Water Minister, he shouldn't be trying to shoot the messenger!

So, what have we learnt – 30 years on?

Whistleblowing works! - although whistleblowers still need to remain safely undercover and out of sight to be really effective. Whistleblower-protection laws continue to allow the self-serving and the powerful to bury wrongdoing along with the whistleblower. The influential who abuse the public's trust are still more likely to escape liability than not. Demonising the whistleblower or the publisher remains a powerful weapon in the hands of those with skin in the game. An independently strong public broadcaster can be relied upon to pursue the public's best interest without fear or favour. No surprises there. Given rampant greed, opportunity and too little red tape, hustlers will hustle - with impunity.

We don't have another thirty years to waste: Civil society, like water, is far too valuable. We need to tip the balance of power and opportunity in favour of the public's interest by setting up a strong public agency – a Public-Interest Disclosure Agency or PIDA - that exists *only* to protect, support and **promote the public's interest in the hands of a whistleblower.**

Whistleblowers, our supporters in the public interest everywhere – we salute you!

Cynthia Kardell  
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Whistleblowers Australia