

CHARLTON HART

Not on fire? Not a problem

Government's habit of ignoring issues until they hit crisis point flirts with fate



At what point does a pattern of crisis management become a governing philosophy?

For the Cook Government, the line is becoming increasingly blurry — forced to fend off criticism of departments plagued by predictable failures with a strategy which appears to be less about prevention and more about perfecting the art of the panicked press conference.

Across multiple portfolios, a worrying pattern has emerged: ministers who appear unwilling, or perhaps unable, to ask the tough questions of their departments, choosing to be guided by advice rather than interrogating it.

Consider the flammable cladding still clinging to almost a dozen Department of Education buildings.

The catastrophic Grenfell Tower fire in London was in 2017, a horrific lesson in the dangers of this material.

Yet, years after a Statewide audit identified the risk, these buildings remain untouched.

The Government's explanation of complex and disruptive works wears thin.

Each day that passes is another day we are gambling with a potential disaster.

The proactive approach would have been to treat this with the urgency it demands, not let it languish on a maintenance to-do list, presumably somewhere behind fixing a squeaky door.

This reactive lurch is also on full display in the sudden "priority" to crack down on illegal

tobacco and vape shops. Police Minister Reece Whitby is now talking tough, promising new laws to shut down these fronts for organised crime.

It's a bold and brilliant move, but one that raises the question: where was this urgency before? The violent

tobacco wars have been escalating on the east coast for years.

It was only when flames and shootings erupted on Perth's streets that our Government realised the situation was a little more serious.

One has to wonder if the policy memos were simply lost in the mail until the smoke signals from burning shops became impossible to ignore.

Nowhere is the failure of ministerial curiosity more evident than in our health system.

An infectious diseases expert has warned that the methods used to trace legionnaires' cases at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital are "critically flawed", potentially masking hospital-acquired infections.

When questioned, Health Minister Meredith Hammat's office defaulted to a now familiar refrain: "The minister will continue to be guided by advice from experts at WA Health."

A response so reassuringly passive it makes you wonder if the minister's primary role is simply to forward emails.

This hands-off approach is echoed by Health Infrastructure Minister John Carey's defensiveness over the crumbling state of our hospitals.

It's a pattern of accepting the departmental line without scrutiny, and it's reinforced by the Government's increasing reliance on the faceless "State Government spokesperson". It's a tactic designed

to insulate ministers from accountability, creating a buffer between decision-makers and the public they serve.

Why hide behind a nameless representative if you have confidence in your actions?

Whether it's flammable cladding on schools, lead and legionella in the water across our health system, the theme is consistent.

Problems are left to fester until they become undeniable public crises — and these are only the ones we know about so far.

Effective governance is not about racetracks, rugby teams or reactive press conferences.

It is the relentless, often unglamorous, work of holding departments to account and asking uncomfortable questions.

No one, including our elected representatives, should be expected to always get things right. What matters is taking accountability and fessing up even when the faecal matter from the burst sewage pipe at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital hits the fan.

Former US president Harry S. Truman famously kept a sign on his desk that read "The Buck Stops Here."

In WA's corridors of power, one gets the feeling that the signs all point to the nearest exit or, failing that, to the email address of a nameless spokesperson.

Perhaps it's time we gave this person a name and their own portfolio: Minister for Things That Might Look Bad. At this rate, they'd be the busiest person in government, at least then we'd know who was actually in charge.

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