

Herald Sun EDITORIAL

Duty-bound to cut tax

AS Government cash grabs go, stamp duty on houses is hard to top. It is a roadblock on the way to the Australian dream, a financial whack for families scratching to buy a home.

Stamp duty does nothing to encourage the building industry or home ownership. The only function it serves is to swell Government coffers.

With house prices racing inflation for a decade, the cash cow has grown relentlessly and homebuyers have been milked.

Given that, the Bracks Government's election promise to rein in its take is welcome, and long overdue.

But the election sweetener — aimed squarely at low to middle income earners — should not be overestimated.

Last year the Government siphoned a staggering \$2.6 billion in stamp duty.

The Premier's belated action will give back just \$120 million a year of that, less than one 20th of the total haul.

Victorians will remain subject to one of the nation's highest stamp duty regimes.

While the Government estimates that three-quarters of homebuyers will benefit from its housing affordability policy, stamp duty cuts are only one part of it.

Various bonuses are included to sell the overall package, some of which are due to end within the life of the next government.

In a climate of rising interest rates, any tax cut will be welcomed by homebuyers.

Real relief from the stamp duty burden, however, continues to remain overdue.

Plans go awry

VICTORIA'S top planning judge, Stuart Morris, has rethought his own plans.

As president of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, Justice Morris has a duty to protect VCAT's reputation.

Yesterday he announced he was withdrawing from a controversial housing deal in order to do just that.

The move is appropriate and necessary. Under the former proposal, prime land accumulated by Justice Morris was to be sold to a retirement home developer.

A four-storey, 92-unit home was planned for the blue chip site at Ivanhoe Park.

Predictably, the high-density development drew opposition from locals, with objections bound to be heard by VCAT.

In view of that, Justice Morris admitted a potential conflict of interest and promised to stand aside if the issue reached VCAT.

That was not enough to appease critics. In pulling out of the deal now, he admits to having been seen as responsible for a development over which he had no control.

It was, he says, an "impossible situation". In planning, Justice Morris is a man of power, prominence and standing.

His private real estate dealings inevitably influence perceptions of the tribunal.

He had no other proper course but to end the issue and protect VCAT, as he now has.

Dream finish

FIELDS of Omagh produced plenty of magic in his stellar racing career.

But the old champ saved the best for last, in his last race with the last bob of his head.

His second Cox Plate win, on the brink of retirement, secures a special place in turf lore.

Champions win Cox Plates and a rare few repeat the feat — but never before at nine.

Enjoy the paddock, Foo. You've earned it.



Bettina Arndt

FINALLY the Government has decided to spend some Medicare dollars on mental health care services that actually work.

Up until now, Medicare spending on mental problems has been firmly in the hands of the psychiatrists who have fought a mighty battle to keep it that way.

But it has become obvious that clinical psychologists do a far better job with common psychological problems such as anxiety, phobias, sleep and sexual problems, obesity, alcohol and drug abuse.

For years, the evidence has been stacking up that therapy techniques such as cognitive behaviour therapy can actually make people better.

These are evidence-based treatments, supported by research which proves they are effective.

Yet most people aren't able to afford the \$150 or so per session charged by the clinical psychologists best trained to provide these techniques.

Mental health care has been dominated by the medical profession, with only medicinally trained specialists, the psychiatrists, being given access to Medicare funding.

Much of the training received by psychiatrists focuses on the drug treatments. Their therapy training is less firmly grounded.

Most of the therapeutic training received by psychiatrists is not evidence-based.

Their training still includes the long-term talk therapies, which churn through the Medicare dollars with no proven results.

Finally the Government has had enough. A few years ago it gave a trial run to a scheme that trained GPs to refer to psychologists for limited ses-



Reaching out: psychological problems cover wide-ranging conditions.

Medicare for the mind

sions of treatment for common problems.

It worked well; the treatments made a difference, the doctors were happy referring patients for affordable, effective treatments and the Government was impressed by this cost-effective approach.

Now comes the revolution. From November, doctors will be able to refer patients to psychologists for 12 Medicare-funded sessions of evidence-based treatments a year.

That's great news, particularly as it should help sort out the properly trained psychologists from the more dubious members of the profession.

There are psychologists and even more so-called "counselors" offering all manner of weird and wonderful therapies that have absolutely no evidence to support them.

Crystal and colour therapy,

body work, neurolinguistic programming, craniosacral therapy; there's no end to the stuff being touted as cure-alls for mental ills.

With government money now being used to support legitimate treatments, it may just put some of these so-called therapists out of business, with a healthier community as a result.

The Australian Psychological Society has been given the huge task of working out which psychologists qualify for the new referral system.

Plus there's a huge job ahead training psychologists who have only minimal four-year degrees and often very little training in the therapy techniques they will be required to use. There are bound to be teething problems.

There's a big job training GPs to correctly diagnose peo-

ple in order to refer them to appropriate help, let alone monitor whether the treatment plan has been followed.

The most intriguing question about the new system concerns the psychiatrists.

With new entrants in the system under pressure to use treatments that work, why are psychiatrists still free to proceed on their own sweet way?

THERE'S no requirement on them to use evidence-based treatments, their government funding comes with no strings attached.

The new broom taken to the mental health system has exposed the psychiatrists' uncomfortable position. It won't be surprising to find them in the Government's sights in the next round of reform.

bettinaarndt@hotmail.com

BETTINA ARNDT is a writer and qualified clinical psychologist.

Washington makes right call

TRUE story: 30 years ago the phone rings in an Atlanta law firm. The caller is US President Jimmy Carter.

He asks one of the firm partners if he wants to become the new US ambassador to Australia. Witnessing this is a young lawyer, new to the firm, named Bob McCallum. Thus began McCallum's relationship with Australia.

Now fast forward three decades. Again the phone rings. Again it's a US President calling. This time George Bush wants to know if Bob McCallum would like to be the new US ambassador to Australia. Indeed he does.

And that's a bloody good thing for Australia.

If, like me, you have some serious reservations about President Bush's grasp of foreign policy, understanding of world affairs and general intelligence, then I have some good news for you.

If, like me, you're worried about the close allegiance forged between Prime Minister Howard and President Bush being a one-way street, then I have some really good news for you.

Help is not only on the way, it's arrived in the form of Robert McCallum.

McCallum and Bush met when they both attended Yale University.

Unlike C student Bush, McCallum won a Rhodes scholarship. Unlike Bush who

Duff Watkins

played a bit of baseball at uni, McCallum captained the Yale tennis team and played on the basketball team. Unlike Bush, who never really had a job till age 40, McCallum was a successful lawyer for 30 years.

Not only is he smart, he takes the job in Australia seriously. He's been on the job for a few months and has visited most capital cities.

He's well briefed politically and culturally. He's attended AFL games and viewed the Grand Final from Atlanta.

Anybody who gravitates easily to Aussie rules will settle nicely into our society.

Mostly, I like his attitude. An ambassador is the personal representative of the President. That's his paid job. But McCallum's personal quest is to represent the American people to Australia. He's determined to make it a two-way street by representing the views of Australians to Washington. And he's serious.

Remember when Senator Bob Brown was tossed out of Parliament for noisily protesting President Bush's address to Parliament?

Well, Ambassador McCallum has sought to meet Senator Brown to find out what's the problem. McCallum is reaching out.



One of us: Robert McCallum sports an Akubra.

So today I feel good about our relationship with the US. We'll never agree with them on every issue but when disagreements occur, as they do, it's pretty handy to have a bloke in town that can pick up the phone and do something positive about it.

Of course, we may not always get the result that we want but then, who does?

The point is Australia is among the elite. We are a nation of 20 million that influences a nation of 300 million. Our closest ally is the world's sole superpower.

We punch well above our weight in terms of political and economic clout with the US.

Thanks to the free trade agreement, our exports to the US have risen by 9.5 per cent. Small companies selling directly to the US have increased from 19 to 36 per cent.

Since most Australians are employed by small companies, free trade benefits more Australians.

And don't forget that Australia now sells directly to the US Government, a customer worth \$200 billion. The US Government alone is a top-10 world economy, and we are their preferred supplier.

So the US has heaps of reasons to listen to Australia, and McCallum says Condo-leezza Rice reminds him of this weekly.

McCallum's reminder to us is that terrorism is a problem for all countries. It's misguided, he says, to think that terrorists will ignore you if you ignore them. To believe that terrorists will simply leave Australia alone if we do not fight them is a grave error.

SO what has McCallum learned after being on the job in Australia for a few months?

That Australia does it differently but does it well. That democratic ways are many and varied. That it doesn't always have to be the US way.

Now that's a message worth sending to Washington. And if Australia can send it, the whole world may benefit.

The ambassador is reaching out. Let's reciprocate.

dw@execsearch.com.au

DR DUFF WATKINS is President of the Yale Club in Australia and Director Asia/Pacific, Cornerstone International Group.



Victorian deaths in 2006, compared with the same day last year.