



LIFE'S HEART AND SOLE

DUSK falls as I sit in peak-hour traffic on the Story Bridge. Rain tadpoles across the windscreen and I'm almost late for a meeting, half listening to the radio and thinking about shoes.

Not fabulous deep-red suede ankle boots for winter but garden-variety school shoes. Good pair of Clarks cost \$100 these days. Any decent pair costs at least 50 bucks.

I am driving to a meeting that looks at ways of giving a hand-up to women and children at the brink of poverty, the ones who fall through the cracks.

Workers at shelters for those fleeing abusive homes tell us that one of the things children need – apart from a safe bed and food – are school shoes. Getting kids back to school, back to their mates and some kind of normalcy, often helps, providing routine in the chaos. But they need replacement school shoes.

Often when fleeing an abusive partner, that person will jump in the car and go. They don't pack – that could arouse suspicion. Mothers and children often arrive at shelters desperate, without a toothbrush or spare undies. Can you imagine?

So, I'm driving along thinking, surely in this day and age there's some way of partnering with a Queensland company to provide school shoes to the state's shelters.

Mark Colvin, of Radio National's *PM*, interrupts this line of thinking with the extraordinary report on what's going on at the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption. The NSW Government – at the time of writing this – is refusing to disclose the amount it's paid to taxpayer-funded lawyers representing two former Labor ministers accused of criminal conspiracy. Legal sources calculate that already the cases of Ian Macdonald and multimillionaire Eddie Obeid have swallowed more than \$700,000. Bills of more than \$1.1 million are predicted. Of taxpayers' money.

Under the law in NSW, taxpayers foot the bill when a politician or ex-politician is called to account at the ICAC. The radio reports Macdonald is



represented by senior counsel Tim Hale. For Obeid, it's journalist-turned-lawyer Stuart Littlemore. Neither man works alone. A defence team means taxpayers are bankrolling the two to the tune of \$8000 a day.

So far there's been more than 40 days of hearings into allegations that the pair engaged in a criminal conspiracy to grab land over which lucrative coal exploration licences were granted.

Obeid and Macdonald are loaded. Obeid has been reported to have been one of the wealthiest members of the NSW Parliament. Yet, taxpayers foot the bill? That's not quite how it works for ordinary Australians.

A cyclist I know was catapulted

from his bike when a young man in a SUV swerved and hit him a couple of years ago. He broke and punctured ribs, spinal bones and organs and is still on drugs two years on. He spent \$25,000 just to pursue compensation from the driver's insurer. That's without even taking it to court. Legal costs frighten off most Australians, so the insurer wins and the little guy backs down.

Meanwhile, for the Obeids and Macdonalds of the world, only the best will do.

Now, I want to stay near this business of fairness.

Something has shifted deeply in Australian politics – and it should worry both parties: Australians feel



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disconnected from the halls of power like never before. Australians do not feel "all in this together". They are, instead, watching actions.

What do they see? The Gillard Government decided to move about 84,000 parents to the Newstart Allowance when their youngest child turns eight, in a bid to push them to work. Under the change, more than 60,000 single parents now receive \$60-\$100 a week less.

But here's the awful punch line. An analysis of government data, reported in *The Australian* recently, reveals 60 per cent of single parents transferred from the Parenting Payment to the lower Newstart Allowance were already working. And 10 per cent of the single mothers were caring for a child or adult with a significant illness or disability.

The data also reveals one in 10 single parents has major barriers to employment including mental health problems, injuries or homelessness.

So we're financially punishing the women who care for some of the most disadvantaged people in Australia.

There is so little public conversation about what kind of society we want to live in.

In the sparring on ABC TV's Q&A several weeks ago was this from Eva Cox, author, academic and activist: "Can we please start to talk about the good society and not just the growing economy?"

Economics really doesn't deal with the things that really count."

Politicians need to remember, as a basic rule: Do no harm. Let's not screw over the vulnerable.

You don't have to go to Rooty Hill. Just walk in someone else's shoes.

And remember those Australians who haven't a hope in hell of affording any shoes at all.

PS If there is one company or group of friends in this state who, today over their coffee, pauses and thinks, "Hell, we can fund new school shoes (and school bags) for the kids that come into Queensland's shelters", I would be pleased to hear from them.

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Every 11 hours an Australian woman dies from ovarian cancer

There is no detection test. Learn the symptoms today at www.ovariancancer.net.au or call 1300 660 334.

Don't leave it until the 11th hour!

