Government sacks a hero

BY: VIRGINIA SIMMONS | The Australian

April 04, 2013 4:48PM

THE Napthine Government’s unceremonious sacking of more than half of the 14 TAFE board chairs is an outrage and an insult to all those competent industry leaders and dedicated citizens who have given so unstintingly to their local TAFE communities over many years and who, in more recent times, have worked to guide the institutes through a period of unprecedented budget cuts.

“Thank you (not),” says the government.

The heavy-handed way in which this has occurred constrains the current CEOs from speaking out. However, as a former CEO of Chisholm Institute, I cannot remain silent about the sacking of board chair David Willersdorf.

Media reports state that the rationale is to give TAFE boards a stronger commercial focus and that this was foreshadowed in the recent TAFE Reform Panel report. Ironically, Victorian TAFE institutes are by far the most commercial in the country. Board chairs, it is said, need to be able to steer the institutes through a period of restructuring and realignment (code for decimation?).

Well, try this on for size:

Until recently, David Willersdorf, was General Manager of the Grenda Corporation which started as a family company. By the time it was sold in 2011 it employed over 2000 people and had a turnover close to $400 million.

Grenda Transit operated in excess of six hundred and fifty vehicles on bus routes in Melbourne’s southeast. The manufacturing arm, Volgren Australia, was Australia’s largest bus body manufacturer. In 2010 it manufactured over 700 new vehicles for the Australian market and manufactured vehicles in two locations overseas. David was instrumental in the development of the company and in its sale.

Is this a man without a commercial focus or who needs to be told about restructuring? Who is the government kidding?

But this is not all there is to David Willersdorf. He is a man who is widely respected and admired in the Dandenong and surrounding south-east region and who deserves much better treatment. A local hero, his contribution to Chisholm is only part of his civic service. He has been an excellent
chairperson who ensured that all board members’ views were heard. He has led the strategic planning process with wisdom and intelligence.

He has taken a lead role in driving financial accountability and sustainability. He has engaged enthusiastically with students and attended their events and graduations. When the institute established a charitable trust to fund scholarships for needy students he brought his numerous local contacts to bear to generate donor support and has ensured that scholarships continue in a time when students are struggling with increased fees. The list goes on …

In short, he brings the ideal balance of financial acumen and educational commitment to the board table.

Shame on the government for the petty short-sightedness and outright rudeness it has meted out to David and to other TAFE board chairs.

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