

Baillieu blogged down by witchhunt

By **Andrew Bolt**

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Ted Baillieu was perfectly right last month to fire two Liberal staffers who wrote rude things about him on a blog.

But all he's done since to hunt out other "cancerous elements" of this "cell" has been spectacularly wrong.

Result: that burning smell from the witch-hunt he's set off is actually coming from his own roasted backside. Let's rewind. Two Liberal staffers, Simon Morgan and John Osborn, were dumb and disloyal enough to use work computers to post scathing items on Baillieu on a website called hewhostandsfornothing.blogspot.com and decorated with a huge picture of him wearing a clown's nose.

Showing all the vitriol that anonymous blogging tends to unleash, the staffers pilloried Baillieu as a "vile communist" and a "vacuous moron" who stood for nothing and was killing the party by trying to attack the Brumby Government from the Left.

Naturally, the two staffers had to go. What they did so publicly and cruelly could only hurt the Liberals and was incompatible with their paid jobs.

And that was about the last sound decision Baillieu made. Since then, what should have been a discreet dismissal of two rogue staffers was then turned by his office into a front-page crisis.

Baillieu on the weekend announced the sacked duo were in fact "a cell who have been effectively working for the ALP" and had "corrupted our party".

This vilification of officials who in fact wanted Baillieu just to be more like a traditional Liberal was incendiary enough - and fodder for damaging front-page stories in both Melbourne's daily newspapers.

But Baillieu added ominously: "They have not acted alone." Other Liberals were suspected of having helped them.

"We have some cancerous elements within our party . . . We have genuine, deep-seated problems and it is time that we confront them."

Amazing. This is the language of a Lenin, purging the Mensheviks. It is not the language of a leader of a Liberal Party that does and should comprise members of many views, none of whom deserved to be damned as traitors and hunted down as dogs.

Nor were his form of words the only sign Baillieu had lost all sense of moderation. The private emails of the two staffers were leaked to his most trusted media ally, *Age* reporter Paul Austin, who gave them a huge airing.

These were emails in which Morgan and Osborn rubbished Liberal candidates and politicians with abuse such as "low, low dog", "d...weed" and "process-driven little clerk". What did Baillieu's people think the party could gain by having this muck published?

The staffers were already sacked, after all, and indeed now felt free to pay Baillieu back twice as hard by releasing an email sent by one of his operatives, Susan Chandler, in which she described one Liberal candidate as a "greedy f...ing Jew". She quit.

I only assume Baillieu's side hoped to build enough outrage to hunt or shame their other critics -- no matter the damage done to the party itself.

But in doing so, they didn't stop at releasing the private emails of just the two sacked staffers. The Age was also leaked a private email sent to Morgan by an old friend, Luke Dixon.

In it, Dixon rightly criticised Baillieu for having once more tried to attack the Government from the Left, this time by whipping up hype about possible damage to Port Phillip Bay by the dredging of the shipping channel.

"Can someone . . . please f...ing remind him (Baillieu) that this is the Liberal Party - the party of business!!!" he emailed.

Dixon had done nothing but express in a private email an opinion shared by many Liberals. True, he'd once been a Liberal staffer, but he was now an employee of the Property Council of Victoria and entitled to his view.

How dare the party leak his emails to the media, forcing him to resign from his branch? Is that the Liberals today?

Maybe. Last year Philip Davis, the Liberals' then Upper House leader and a conservative, warned his colleagues in a 10-page document that voters still seemed not to have "understood what the Victorian Liberal Party stands for".

That, too, was leaked to The Age by someone unknown, and Davis soon quit a position made untenable, to be replaced by a Baillieu ally.

If Baillieu's philosophy was cutting through with voters, some of this crushing of critics might be excusable.

But it isn't. Baillieu is a very decent man who works much harder than his laid-back image suggests. He's also facing a new Premier who is taking risks by actually doing stuff - bad stuff on water - and seems arrogant.

Yet the polls show the Liberals are just sleep-walking to another disaster, and the last week of headlines - most generated by Baillieu himself - will not have won the party a single vote.

What a shambles. More of this and the train will pull into the station of Liberal transport spokesman, Terry Mulder, who at least seems the kind of man not threatened by good advice - or even the ravings on some who-reads-it blog.