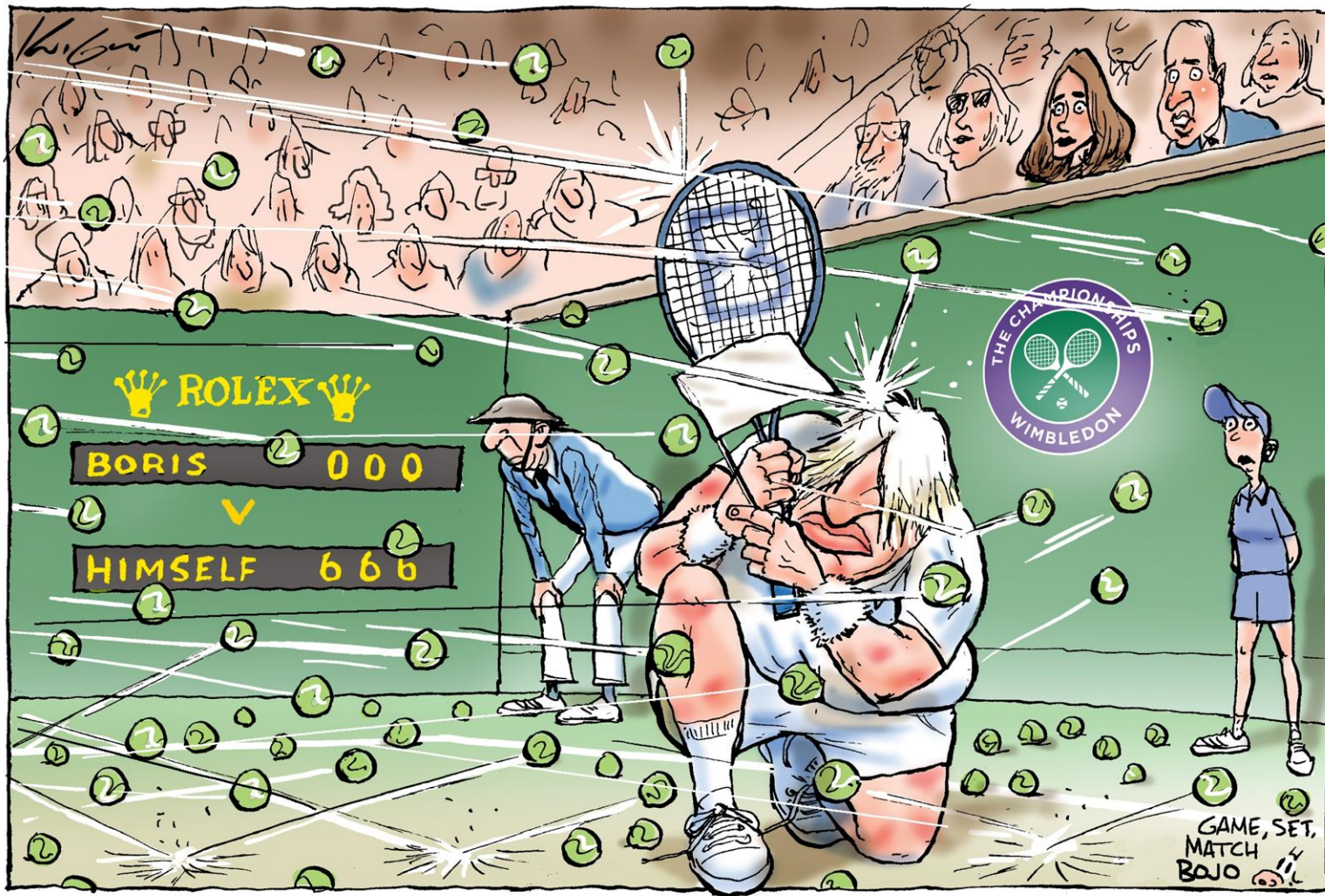


MARK KNIGHT

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GRACE BALDWIN

Why it's OK to be 'woke'

In an unfortunate twist of rhetoric, the term “woke” has been appropriated by audiences terrified of social progression. Woke is not a dirty word. The definition of woke is to be “alert to social injustice in society, especially racism”. I’m struggling to see the problem.

The only time this word is ever used, ironically, is when people are disparaging attempts to reach an equitable society. People who actually care about social justice never refer to themselves as “woke”; it is a word weaponised by some to stunt equity.

The discourse around Anthony Albanese’s government fully instating the Uluru Statement from the Heart is a textbook example. Written by Indigenous leaders, the statement outlines the path for recognising First Nations people in Australia’s constitution.

Miraculously, this move is controversial to some people.

Just as the sun rises in the east, social change will always be inhibited by those who live in fear.

The truth is, nobody will be negatively impacted by the implementation of the statement.

The introduction of a treaty and the sharing of Indigenous culture only benefits the nation – starting with education about how terms like “Aborigine” are outdated.

New protocol may mean nothing to you, but it does to someone else.

It’s interesting the same people who whinge that the youth of today are “too soft” have lost the plot over reconciliation and reparation.

In Australia, nearly every business, company, school and corporation has a “woke” reconciliation plan. Why not? It looks good for the KPIs.

The same entities host acknowledgements of country – rather than a welcome to country – on special occasions, then typically do nothing to engage with the Indigenous community all year (except maybe send a cheque to a charity after a fundraiser).

Until there is a meaningful conversation about reconciliation, everything is performative. It all means nothing.

The “woke” Uluru statement has come as a result of listening to First Nations people – and that is where reconciliation can begin.

If being “woke” means caring about others, I’m here for it. If you can’t see the need for wokeness, you’re not looking hard enough.

Far from an insult, calling someone or something woke can be a healthy reminder that they’re working for social justice in a way that threatens those who are stuck in their ways.

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Overseas workers can ease our health burden

THERE’S been a lot of bad news about our health system recently.

Every week we hear about GP clinics, hospitals and our ambulance service struggling with staff shortages and being overwhelmed by demand. And as the cold months continue, there is no sign of a respite.

Last week, federal Health Minister Mark Butler warned us to prepare for a third Omicron wave due to new sub-variants. Combined with our worst flu season since before the pandemic, the minister predicted rising demand for hospital care in coming weeks and months.

In Victoria alone, we currently have the equivalent of a major Melbourne hospital full of people needing treatment for Covid-19 and the daily numbers are surging before our eyes.

On June 21, there were 434 people in hospital with Covid-19 in Victoria. As of Sunday, that number had risen to 671.

Our public health system is juggling thousands of people needing care for flu and Covid-19, alongside the many thousands of people who need emergency care for other reasons every day.

And that’s before we even get to the almost 100,000 people waiting for elective surgery.

At the same time, we know that our healthcare workers are exhausted. A recent national study found more than 70 per cent of participating healthcare workers demonstrated symptoms of severe burnout.

To make matters worse, we still



TOM SYMONDSON

hear all too frequent reports of patients abusing and assaulting those same workers.

A few months ago, the Victorian government announced a \$3000 bonus for hospital workers who worked through the winter months.

But while that was a welcome boost, it didn’t cover the large number of health workers who don’t work in hospitals, but have still played such a critical role in keeping our community safe and healthy – in our community health services, GP practices and social services.

And money isn’t everything. We need to create better conditions and increase the number of workers to take the pressure off.

While the Victorian and federal governments are investing in more training of health workers in Australia, it will take years to build the workforce we need to meet current, let alone future, demand. It takes more than 10 years to train a surgeon, for example, and more than three years to train a nurse.

We need skilled health workers now if we are to get our system back on its feet.

Pandemic-related border closures stalled the migration of health professionals to Australia,

worsening a historic shortage of staff for many parts of Victoria. And so far, we haven’t done nearly enough to bounce back from that.

Other countries have acted swiftly, giving them a competitive advantage.

The UK recently created a new visa class for health workers to tackle its shortages. The Health and Care Worker Visa allows qualified doctors, nurses, social care workers, and their families to settle in the UK for five years.

Decisions are made in three weeks and applicants can ultimately become permanent residents, giving them confidence and security – something we make almost impossible in Australia.

According to Australian Home Affairs data, it can take many months and sometimes years for an application to be processed to work in this country and when workers do arrive, it can be hard to find housing, particularly in rural areas where demand is through the roof.

So, we shouldn’t be surprised that we struggle to attract overseas health workers – even with the promise of a relocation package of

up to \$13,000 from the Victorian government.

The states can only do so much when it comes to international workers – they don’t control the borders or immigration.

We need the commonwealth to act fast by introducing a new, specialised visa for health and community service workers with a fast turnaround, and a route to permanent residency.

Without that, we are asking people to uproot their families and move across the world in the knowledge we won’t let them make a permanent life for themselves here.

The recent release of data from the 2021 census confirmed we are a welcoming, diverse country.

For the first time, more than half of us (51.5 per cent) were either born overseas or have a parent born in another country.

The census also taught us that about a third of Australians have a long-term health problem.

If we want access to world-leading healthcare for ourselves and our loved ones, as well as better conditions for our health workers while we rebuild our domestic workforce, we must live up to our welcoming reputation and drastically improve our international recruitment game.

And for that, the Australian government needs to step up.

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