

**HD THE BACK PADDOCK BLACK STUMP AWARDS****WC** 1,628 words**PD** 21 December 2016**SN** Weekly Times**SC** HERWEK**ED** WeeklyTimesWrap**PG** 12**LA** English**CY** © 2016 News Limited. All rights reserved.**LP**

It has been another busy year for Back Paddock, reporting on the stories that make the news for all the wrong reasons. Here are the best gaffes, debacles and weird stuff that made 2016 a memorable year

PHOTO OP OF THE YEAR WITH the country's longest election campaign ever, this was the year of the photo op. The country was overrun with polities posing in high-vis vests and kissing babies.

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Probably the most awkward moment was Bill Shorten's attempt to look human when he visited a supermarket and tried to talk to a shopper about lettuce while filling her trolley with random groceries.

An honourable mention goes to a group of Western District farmers opposed to fracking who took a dramatic aerial photograph of a giant BAN GAS sign formed by 2000 sheep nibbling on grain. The result read more like an ad for Bangas lamb sausages than a political protest.

But the winner is NSW Agriculture Minister Niall Blair who, while visiting a free-range pig farm near Dubbo, was upstaged by the pigs. As he posed for a photo out in the paddock, in the background was a boar doing what comes naturally in a herd of sows. A worthy winner.

PERSONALITY OF THE YEAR ALWAYS a hotly contested category, but even more so in this year of the longest election campaign in history. Polities were everywhere vying for attention with the look-at-me sales pitch.

There was Malcolm Turnbull trying to be all things to all people and Bill Shorten trying to be ... well, just noticed, and look over there, is that Pauline Hanson, Australia's most famous fish and chip vendor and human headline Derryn Hinch sitting on the red benches of the Senate?

But, standing head and shoulders above the rest is Barnaby Joyce. Yes, last year's winner triumphed again.

Barnaby was rarely out of the news, whether it was his ongoing duel with US movie star Johnny Depp — "I'm inside his head, I'm pulling little strings and pulling little levers" — or a rant over European carp in our rivers — "these disgusting mud-sucking creatures, bottom-dwelling mud-sucking creatures". Then there was this thought on his opposition to foreign ownership of Australian farm land: "There's one thing people won't do, and that is die for a rented country." A disgusting, stuffed herpes-infested carp trophy is on its way to your pool room as we speak, Barnaby.

BACKFLIP OF THE YEAR THERE were some admirable gymnastics on display worthy of this, an Olympic year. Murray Goulburn put in a sterling effort to ease the punishing clawback payments it had imposed on dairy farmers after stuffing up its milk price payments in 2015-16. The Turnbull Government also performed impressive contortions to reverse its clumsily conceived bid to send our fruit-picking backpackers packing with a 32.5 per cent tax rate, finally settling on 15 per cent.

But the stand-out winner is Mike Baird's NSW Government, scoring a perfect 10 with its textbook triple backwards somersault with full twist for its reversal of a total ban on greyhound racing in his state following a huge backlash from the industry.

Mike, a doggie bag full of humble pie is on its way, all yours to eat. Enjoy!

DILL OF THE YEAR INSIDE every public person there is a dill waiting to escape. Only a brain snap could explain South Australian water minister Ian Hunter's foul-mouthed tirade against Victorian counterpart Lisa Neville and Barnaby Joyce at a Murray Darling Basin function. He told them to "f--- off" and even called Ms Neville the C word before storming out.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority deserves a special mention after spending more than \$18,000 on an artist-in-residence's four-week glass-blowing project. Irrigation communities are in dire straits as a result of the Commonwealth water buy back but hey, a nice piece of glass art should cheer them up.

But the winner has to be Victoria's ex-Corrections minister, Steve Herbert, for using his taxpayer-funded government car and driver to ferry his dogs, Patch and Ted, from his city digs to his country getaway at Trentham. He doesn't know how many times because there is no column marked for "pet taxis" in the log book. Steve, a fine trophy of a pair of noddling dogs for the dash of your next government car is all yours to treasure.

THE WHAT THE...? AWARD WE ALL know truth is stranger than fiction but we still continue to be gobsmacked by the weird stuff people do.

This year, grown adults all over the world became obsessed with computer game Pokemon Go, risking life and limb as they chased fictional characters across freeways with their eyes glued to their smartphones.

A bloke jumped from a plane at 8000m without a parachute, to land in a net; and a New Zealand dairy farmer didn't realise someone had stolen 500 cows from his herd until weeks later.

But the winner is British man Thomas Thwaites who spent six days pretending to be a goat. Thomas wanted to know what it was like to graze the hillsides of Switzerland with a herd of 60 goats, even having special prosthetic goat legs made up for the purpose.

THE TURKEY AWARD THERE are always plenty of contenders for the best piece of bureaucratic gobbledygook.

Local government always competes at the elite level and this year we had a fine entry from South Gippsland Shire Council. It knocked back a planning permit to establish a memorial tree park at Jumbunna, where people could scatter the ashes of their loved ones, claiming "it would result in negative amenity impacts on neighbouring dwellings". Just what those impacts are is hard to say — unless they mean potential haunting by wandering ghosts?

But this year's winner is dairy processor Fonterra for inventing what must be the most nonsensical job title in history. In June, Fonterra announced Judith Swales as its new chief operating officer for "Velocity and Innovation".

Yes, Judith would manage its "transformation and disruption agenda" and take "a strategic view on developing game-changing business models". And no, we have no idea what it means either.

THE GOLDEN GUMBOOT GAFFE OF THE YEAR THE award for the Gaffe of the Year is for that perfect foot-in-mouth moment. Social media and poorly addressed emails have proved fertile ground for these as immigration minister Peter Dutton found out when he dubbed a female journalist a "mad f---ing witch" in a message he accidentally sent to another journalist.

Member for Mallee Andrew Broad angered the gay community with a crack about gay marriage — "I can put the rams out in the paddock and they might mount one another but no lambs will come out".

But the winner is Sophie Mirabella's car-crash moment during her campaign for Indi when she announced at a public forum that the government withheld \$10 million from Wangaratta Hospital because voters dumped her for Cathy McGowan.

It pretty much killed her campaign for re-election stone dead there and then.

MAD SCIENCE DO CATS miaow in different accents? Scientists in Sweden thought this worthy of serious research so set about trying to see if cats from different cities have different dialects like their owners — just one of many weird projects conducted by mad scientists around the world.

In another “study”, Dutch scientists analysed 90 mammal species for pet “suitability” and decided Sika deer, the Agile wallaby, Tamar wallaby, llama and Asian palm civet would make much better pets than a plain old mutt or moggy.

An Egyptian researcher made synthetic and natural underwear for rats to wear in an experiment to see their effect on reproductive capacity. Apparently synthetics are a no go if you want to make little rats.

But the winner has to be CSIRO’s Dr Ken McColl for his weird but useful solution to rid our waters of those rats with fins — the European carp: good old herpes. The government hopes the release of Cyprinid herpesvirus 3 (CyHV-3) into Australian rivers in 2018 will be as dramatic as myxomatosis and calicivirus was to the rabbit.

THOMAS AUSTIN AWARD SADLY there is never a shortage of contenders for the award given to the organisation or person who makes the least contribution to Australian agriculture, named in honour of Thomas Austin, the man who introduced our best feral animal success story — the rabbit.

The dead hand of bureaucracy is always a favourite and this year the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning ruled that landholder Neville Perry would have to pay \$1.25 million to remove 60 trees from his bush block — that’s nearly \$21,000 a tree.

Murray Goulburn was a close second for its breathtaking performance in making a tough road for dairy farmers even tougher with its incompetent handling of milk prices.

But the winner is the Federal Government and every other nitwit polly who stuck their oar in to the debacle that was the backpacker tax.

Led by chief meddler Scott Morrison, the Government managed to create months of unnecessary chaos and anxiety for farmers who rely on holiday-makers for their harvest labour, as they made a dog’s breakfast of a policy that should have just been left alone.

"A lot of facts got lost in this debate, for sure, and I think the general level of ignorance among a lot of the social commentary was played upon politically."S Kidman and Co managing director Greg Campbell after the Federal Government rejected a Chinese-backed bid to buy the pastoral giant, May 11.

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