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HD **Spot the black mark**
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ASK AGNES The Weekly Times 2014 Annual Dear Agnes, I'm in a bit of a black spot when it comes to telecommunications out here on the farm, so the internet, mobile and telly are a bit dodgy. I didn't get any newspapers because the mailman ran off with the missus and I don't get into town too often so I was wondering if you could bring me up to speed with what happened out there in the big wide world.

Donny, Dederang

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Dear Donny, Well, there's so much to tell and so little time.

Let's start with politics. So you remember we got a new federal government and PM Tony promised "no nasty surprises, and no lame excuses"?

Well, guess what? Yes, he's had to break a few promises. Who would have thought? Tony said the previous tenants had trashed the joint and it was going to cost a fortune to fix it up. Once the words "black hole" and "Labor's mess" were uttered we knew we were in for a horror budget and there were "nasty surprises" and "lame excuses" jumping out all over the place.

Treasure Smokin' Joe Hockey was soon flagging higher uni fees, petrol prices, medical bills and council rates, an increase in the pension age, and cuts to the public service, the ABC and Landcare.

To be fair, Tony said the ABC cut was not so much a cut as an "efficiency dividend" which I'll have to remember when I have to slash the grandkids' Christmas cash handout.

And remember how the Coalition was supposed to see a return to stable government? Well guess what? Federal parliament is still the badly run circus it was 18 months ago except there are some new clowns in the ring, led by chief bozo Clive "Chuckles" Palmer.

The circus wasn't much better at the state level. Being an election year it was like one big Muck Up day — mainly because Premier Denis refused to expel a very disruptive element called Geoff Shaw. The upshot was Denis got booted out and the other mob got in.

Out in the real world, SPC Ardmona lobbied for some government support for a re-vitalisation plan. Tony said no, but Denis said yes, putting up \$22 million.

Tony then said, "See, I told you they did not need anything from the Commonwealth". Tony is just like that bloke who always manages to avoid his shout at the pub.

Ironically, all the talk about SPC's woes actually got a lot of people buying SPC's product, giving it an enormous shot in the arm. Mind you, the fact that lead was found in imported tinned Chinese peaches didn't do SPC any harm.

In fact, it was a good year for food suppliers as the supermarkets agreed to more local content. The only fly in the ointment was country-of-origin labelling for fresh food, as many small retailers continued to flout

the rules. Mind you, if you are able to **buy** grapes and cherries in July, you'd think most people would cotton on they're not from Australia.

We also got three free-trade deals — with Japan, Korea and **China** — although for farmers, the Japan deal was not so much a “free” variety, as a “not-quite-as-restrictive-as-before-and-will-take-a-few-years-to-kick in” trade deal.

The Europeans were at it again making life difficult for the rest of the world, insisting we stop using their **cheese** names such as cheddar and parmesan. Well who cares? We should just call our cheeses Kevin and Bruce and Barry and Bill. Better still, let's stick it up them and just call it “The **Cheese** Formerly Known as Cheddar” or “I Can't Believe It's Not Camembert”.

The debate over the safety of open farm vehicles dragged on and there was a blue over what you call them — an ATV a UTV or SSV or some other acronym. I reckon they should just call them a BDSJGEV — Bloody Dangerous So Just Go Easy Vehicle.

The right to farm was a hot-button issue, with one farmer, John Watson, who farms on the edge of Echuca, coming under siege from the council and townspeople because they could smell cow poo. News flash, people: YOU'RE IN THE COUNTRY!

Backpacking farm workers got the raw end of the pineapple, not only getting paid badly by dodgy agents and farmers but having to sleep head to toe in dodgy accommodation. Still it was better than the deal on rock star Sting's farm in Tuscany. The backpackers staying there picking olives and grapes had to pay him \$350 a day.

Weather-wise we started the year with the same old bouts of heatwaves and fires. There was a blaze north of Melbourne and several fires in Gippsland, not to mention a fire in the open-cut mine at Morwell which burned for weeks. The Government got a little behind in its planned burn program, so it started talking about getting private companies involved. I'd be happy to form a **company** called Fires R Us or Jim's Blazing and set fire to the bush — how hard could it be?

There was a promising start to the season with good autumn rain, but then those two most feared words in the Spanish dictionary — El Niño — raised their ugly head. The weather gurus teased us for months with their on-again off-again prediction, but it eventually arrived, cutting short an otherwise promising season. The crops weren't much chop, everyone is selling stock, hay is going to be short and farmers are dusting the cobwebs off their water tankers — so it's back to normal really.

A drought-affected farmer couldn't even cheer himself up with a spot of trout fishing, because the little blighters have all gone AWOL — something about the willows all being pulled out.

Maybe that North-South Pipeline might come in handy after all. Labor pledged not to re-open it, but maybe it should. Labor could start up that white elephant of a desal plant and pump the water up the pipeline and let the Goulburn Valley farmers use it. And they could throw in a few trout just for good measure. Anyway, look on the bright side Donny, you shouldn't have to worry about being in a communications blackspot next year: the Government is going to fix them all — and that's a promise.

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