

SE General
HD **I f Colin Barnett needed a glimpse of what life could look like should Dean...**
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I f Colin Barnett needed a glimpse of what life could look like should Dean Nalder remain in his Cabinet, he got it yesterday when a press conference about mental health turned into another exploration of his minister's business activities.

No, the Premier was not aware until yesterday that his Finance Minister shared property with an accused corporate shyster enmeshed in a \$4.3 **billion** international banking scandal.

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And yes, Nalder's fate would continue to rest with a Department of Premier and Cabinet review into his disclosures under the ministerial code of conduct.

A shrewd political operator, Barnett was smart to deflect the original questions about Nalder's 27.5 per cent **stake** in a car leasing **company** which targets public servants through salary packaging deals by ordering the DPC review.

But the review, ordered last Thursday after questions from this newspaper's Nick Evans and Neale Prior, is to be revealed any day and when it is it will be Barnett's standards, not Nalder's, which will be under the microscope.

We already learnt quite a bit about them yesterday when media was finally able to subject the Premier to prolonged questioning about the week's revelations.

Barnett has split the swirling issues into two broad groups — the disclosures of the minister's business interests under the code, and the dinner at the **Chinese** consulate to which Nalder made sure his business partner was invited.

The disclosures are in the "wait-and-see" box courtesy of the DPC review, which Barnett said would be completed either late yesterday or this morning, though he didn't commit to releasing its findings this week.

But the dinner has already been settled in his mind, and it wasn't a sackable offence.

"In terms of the guest list and the way that unfolded, that was an error of judgment by Dean. He has apologised to me about that and I have accepted that apology," Barnett said yesterday.

This is revealing.

To many people, including several on the Liberal backbench canvassed by Inside State yesterday, the dinner was a more glaring conflict than Nalder's business holdings.

Despite acknowledging Nalder "mixed up his ministerial role with his business interests" by securing an invitation for Metier Asia Pty Ltd chief executive Darryll Ashworth, Barnett played down this as inexperience.

"A new minister, new member of Parliament who made a mistake," he said.

Never mind the fact that it was the Premier who put Nalder in the ministry barely a year after he was elected.

To admit that the elevation was too soon would be to admit he made a mistake, and contrition is not how this Premier rolls. It is for the same reason that the DPC review is unlikely to hang Nalder.

If, as he claims, Nalder followed DPC advice in declaring his interests in the first place, then the department is hardly going to find its own advice was deficient.

DPC's involvement in itself is something of a red herring.

The ultimate arbiter of what constitutes a conflict — real, perceived or potential — under the ministerial code of conduct is the Premier of the day.

A further insight into his standards yesterday was a suggestion from Barnett that actual conflicts matter a lot more to him than the perceived or potential ones.

He said there was "a lot of suspicion around" about Nalder but queried whether he had actually made any ministerial decisions which benefited him personally.

"I look at concrete facts, has a decision been made," he asked the media pack.

This appears to be a direct reference to the circumstances surrounding the last Cabinet minister to be forced out of the ministry because of a conflict.

In 2005, former Labor seniors minister Bob Kucera fell on his sword after failing to absent himself during Cabinet deliberations which resulted in **energy company** Alinta receiving an \$88 **million** grant towards building the Dampier to Bunbury gas pipeline.

Kucera's wife held Alinta shares in a superannuation fund, managed at arms length by a financial adviser, but it was enough for then premier Geoff Gallop to decide a breach of the ministerial code had occurred.

Barnett's language yesterday suggested he will be focusing heavily on whether Nalder made any decisions as Finance Minister relating to the State fleet while owning the **stake** in the Fleet Network car leasing **company**.

Similarly, did Nalder remain during any Cabinet decisions relating to public projects including Elizabeth Quay and Perth Cultural Centre which resulted in a benefit for the Metier group?

The one clear decision Nalder did make as minister which resulted in a benefit — a dinner invitation to the consulate for a business partner aiming to invest in **China** — has already been given the all-clear by Barnett.

It appears more likely than not that Nalder will survive.

The few times Barnett has demoted ministers, for example Kim Hames over his expenses bungle, it has been done swiftly.

The next question is whether Nalder can be rehabilitated enough to be future leadership material.

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