



## *Rear Window*

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**Byline:** Mark Di Stefano and Myriam Robin

## **Body**

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Prize behind Mark McGowan's fifth job

Frontier Energy is one of those ASX-listed renewable energy companies longer on dreams than revenue. And yet, it still managed to recruit one of the country's most powerful recent premiers, Mark McGowan, as its new non-executive chairman.

Frontier's chief executive Adam Kiley announced McGowan's appointment yesterday as the company seeks to develop a parcel of land 120 kilometres south of Perth for a solar project. The recruiting coup was celebrated by the solar shillers at the Smart Energy Council as a "major milestone".

How did Frontier get onto McGowan's radar? We can take a stab. Frontier's largest shareholder is mining Perthonality Grant Davey, who owns about 10 per cent of the renewable explorer's stock, and until yesterday was the company's chairman.

In 2022, Davey was among the millionaires and billionaires at the WA Telethon Ball, the state's premier charity commandeered by Kerry Stokes. That year, the top prize was a private lunch with Stokes and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, with the winner ferried across the Nullarbor on a private jet donated by Tim Roberts. Davey bid for it, but Roberts - no fan of the mining entrepreneur - gazumped him, bidding \$525,000 for the pleasure.

That left Davey instead bidding on a private audience with (who else) McGowan. Did a charity event to raise money for sick kids facilitate a meet-cute that ended up with a cushy post-political job on the board of a new energy company? Please dial down the Perthiness of it all.

McGowan getting poached into non-executive director land doesn't come free. Signing on, he was handed 2 million share options, vesting over the next two years at levels between 20¢ and 40¢.

They are already in the money, and on the news of McGowan's recruitment, the share price jumped another 9 per cent to 50¢. Nice business for Davey and the other members of the board, including Dixie Marshall, the former Nine newsreader who left journalism last decade to run Colin Barnett's media operation.

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Has anyone sought more mileage so quickly in their post-political life than McGowan? The Frontier gig is his fifth since announcing his shock exit from the premier's residence in May last year.

They're hardly benevolent public service roles either: he is now an adviser to BHP, Chris Ellison's Mineral Resources, the soon-to-be private APM (which flew him to the Melbourne Cup for some reason), and on the roster of Joe Hockey's Bondi Partners.

The public knows veteran politicians will seek private sector careers to make the kind of money they couldn't get while in office. That it's often adjacent to their past responsibilities is part of the uncomfortable bargain. Whatever McGowan's doing (so soon after proffering up excuses of being "burned out" and "exhausted"), is beginning to look like a wind-up.

Twiggy fills the ranks

with his PhD advisers

For billionaires, nothing counts so much as loyalty.

That's no doubt a large part of why **Fortescue** founder Andrew Forrest is pursuing former employees through the courts, where his case against former **Fortescue** scientists Bartlomiej Kolodziejczyk and Bjorn Winther-Jensen opened yesterday.

And it's probably why his current scientific team has been bolstered by those he can trust. Chief among them are those who have seen him through academia's best instrument of torture. We speak, of course, of the PhD.

In 2019, Forrest was one of a few Australians to survive (and secure) a doctorate. In said document, he thanked a number of academics and technicians, a startling number of which later ended up involved in his corporate-philanthropic empire.

There's Dr Shanta Barley, who was thanked for providing "technical, logistic, intellectual and moral support". She now works at **Fortescue** in the role of chief climate scientist, having first been hired by Forrest's philanthropic Minderoo Foundation in 2020.

Professor Sarah Dunlop was, at the time of Forrest's PhD, a head of school at the University of Western Australia. She's also with Minderoo now, where she heads up the Plastics and Human Health division.

Forrest also thanked Professor Daniel Pauly, who doesn't appear to work directly for Forrest. But Seas Around Us, the research institute he heads, worked with Minderoo on its Global Fishing Index.

Forrest's PhD also notes the fieldwork and in-house technicians at the Centre for Marine Futures. Of the five names he thanked, fully three (Alex McLennan, Claire Raphael and Nikki De Campe) have, in the five years since, worked or work for Minderoo.

There's nothing untoward about any of this. Minderoo is a charity shaped by Forrest's interests, and he likes marine biology enough that he did a PhD on it.

Billionaires always fill their courts with shiny personages that enter their orbit, and while few entourages look like this, relatively few billionaires have spent much time on campus.

Then, there's the trust thing, and Forrest has, by virtue of familiarity, more reason to put stock in this group of scientists than the ones he reckons ran off with **Fortescue**'s trade secrets to start hydrogen start-up Horizon Zero (they are defending the case).

Before being convinced to undertake his PhD, Forrest donated \$65 million to the University of Western Australia, funding a new residential hall, scholarships and post-doctoral fellowships. The university can't begrudge him luring away a few star academics. Though, not the biggest star. The person most integral to his PhD was Professor

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Jessica Meeuwig, whose parents he effusively thanked in its first page ("this immense character can only wellspring from enlightened and encouraging parenting", he gushed).

Dr Meeuwig has never worked for Fortescue. Though Forrest briefly invested in Buru Energy, the gas business founded and, until Friday, chaired by her husband.

Gabby RBA spills

its press flacks

Last week, Labor hack turned lobbyist Stephen Conroy called deputy Reserve Bank governor Andrew Hauser "a failed ideologue", "wrong", and "a wanker". Or a "tosser", he added, translating for the British recruit.

This childish tirade was sparked by a spicy speech in which Hauser lamented the "extraordinary certainty" of the "gurus and charlatans, geniuses and buffoons" quoted on the path of interest rates.

Conroy - whose TG Public Affairs lobbies for embattled telcos and unpopular supermarket chains - could be precisely the kind of overconfident, underqualified commentator Hauser was thinking of. Still, if the intention is for Reserve Bank figures to keep giving interesting speeches, its figureheads are going to need some serious PR support.

No one could realise this better than newish chief communications officer Sally Cray, a former political headkicker who used to be Malcolm Turnbull's principal private secretary.

Nearly two weeks ago, she embarked on a root-and-branch restructure of the two dozen-strong RBA comms team. It has effectively spilled their jobs, forcing all of them to reapply for new, reconfigured roles in the Hunger Games arena. All are now waiting to find out if they've been successful. May the odds be ever in their favour.

Seasoned insiders described this whole process as very unlike the central bank. Though, surely, that's the point. The review of the bank, commissioned by federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers last year, spends a whole chapter on the RBA's communications strategy, in the aim of radically boosting the central bank's transparency and accessibility.

The government ordered the review in the wash-up of former governor Phil Lowe's disastrous prediction interests rates wouldn't rise until this year. But no political good deed goes unrewarded. Now, the newly chatty bank is using the press conferences the government forced upon it to discuss everything from government spending to the nature of public interest rate debate.

It's the kind of thing oppositions love, and it's driving the government crazy. Can you believe it asked for this?

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