

## PRIME OPINIONS

# Cole's ITB is building a better industry

**T**HE interim building task force — a legacy of the Cole Commission — was established to rout corruption and untoward practices in the building industry. The omens seem positive: the ITB appears to be on track.

Last week in Melbourne I chaired a forum on the progress of the IBT. Keynote speakers were IBT head Nigel Hadgkiss, IBT investigator Bill Laing and Kim Attwood — head of industrial relations for the Master Builders Victorian chapter.

Since the task force was established in October last year, there have been 896 enquiries that have culminated in 36 active investigations.

The lion's share of complaints centre on Victoria, NSW and Queensland, in that order.

Hadgkiss said Melbourne was chosen as the headquarters because Victoria was identified as being the most problematic jurisdiction. Little wonder: we were informed that 60 per cent of the national days lost due to industrial activity were in Victoria.

Six matters are before the Court, and four more prosecutions are imminent. Of those before the Court, four involve unions and two involve employers.

Hadgkiss recounted that a common sentiment imparted to him by so-called enlightened souls was that coercion and expediency in the building industry, were not unusual, and in the

"real world" could not be eradicated. He was more optimistic in his outlook, finding solace in the fact that, during the 1970s, there was a terrible police corruption problem in New York and it was stamped out by a concerted anti-corruption campaign.

His view was that it was "un-Australian" for people to have to live in fear of intimidation and coercion and questioned the tenets of a society that has to resign itself to that paradigm. Poignant sentiments indeed.

Hadgkiss says his team is increasing resources and gathering momentum.

The forum attendees — contractors and lawyers alike — were definitely left with the impression that the IBT means business and is intent on effecting change. But Hadgkiss and Laing were at pains to point out that one of the biggest difficulties was getting hard corroborative evidence.

Invariably it was a case of one person's word against another, which they agreed had serious corroborative limitations.

I, for one, find it worrying that so much of the evidence relies upon the willingness of the citizen or honest broker to go to court and give

evidence against those of the far-from-philosophical persuasion.

My sense of disquiet was compounded by the fact that there is no witness-protection dynamic, hence those who are of a mind to give evidence may be reluctant to report errant conduct for fear of attracting recriminations.

Kim Attwood, in her address, stated that there may be some signs of remission in industrial activity.

The audience feedback was that the IBT was working well and this augured well for the future. After reflecting upon the forum's findings I was reminded of the famous Confucius saying: "The way to start the long journey

is to take the first step". I have the feeling it is going to be a long journey, one that will require significant resources, both financial and human, and large measures of doggedness and resolve on the part of the Government and certain altruistic citizens.

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