



## WITNESS STATEMENT OF THE HON ANDREW ROBB AO

I, Andrew Robb, say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.
- 2 I hold a Bachelor of Economics (Hons) from Latrobe University and a Diploma of Agricultural Science from Dookie Agricultural College.
- 3 I was the Federal Member of Parliament for Goldstein between 2004 and 2016. As a Member of Parliament, I was the Chairman of the Government's Workplace Relations Taskforce, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Vocational and Further Education. I was the Minister for Trade and Investment from September 2013 until my retirement from politics in February 2016.
- 4 In Opposition between 2007 and 2013, I was the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and Climate Change, Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader of the Opposition on Emissions Trading Design and Shadow Minister for Finance, Deregulation and Debt Reduction.
- 5 Prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, I held a number of positions in the Liberal Party, including Chief of Staff to the Leader of the Opposition and Federal Director. Prior to this I was an agricultural economist, and also held positions at the National Farmers' Federation and the Cattle Council of Australia.
- 6 I am currently a board member of the Kidman Cattle Enterprise, Chair of Asialink and Asialink Business, Chair of CNS Dose and a strategic advisor to Beef Innovations Australia, as well as a range of national and international businesses.

### **My morning problem**

- 7 Before I was diagnosed with depression in my mid-fifties, I experienced and managed what I previously described as my 'morning problem' for forty years.
- 8 From the age of 12, I began to experience a black mood each morning. I'm not sure what caused my shift in mood, but from around this time I found myself each morning waking up and feeling deeply depressed and unable to engage with people. There was a running joke in my family that I was not a morning person.

- 9 Growing up, I felt like I would go to sleep feeling ready to take on the world. I always studied hard and would finish an essay and feel happy with what I had achieved. I would fall asleep feeling very positive. However, by the morning those positive feelings would be gone, and I would wake and feel as though I was descending in an elevator, my mood going down from where I'd been. I would just wait until I hit the bottom. I had that feeling every morning for the next forty years. I felt lacking every day, and lacking in confidence.
- 10 At an early age, the negative feeling would last until around 8.00am. By mid-morning I would feel better. However, as I got older, the period of time I felt down lasted longer in the mornings.
- 11 I developed many strategies to manage my morning mood. I came to realise I would feel better with stimuli or endorphins. I was conscious of my diet, I exercised daily and had a number of self-management techniques to help lift my mood. For example, I would try and make myself laugh, a belly laugh was the most effective. I often sneeze when I look at the sun, so driving to work I would pull over and look at the sun. I read somewhere that smiling released endorphins, so I would sometimes drive to work with a pen in my mouth to trick my brain into thinking I was smiling.
- 12 I also realised that I felt better during stressful or high pressure situations that caused me to release adrenaline. If I was feeling down or lacking confidence in a meeting, I would push myself to engage and make a statement. The adrenaline would then start pumping and I would feel better.
- 13 I tried to structure my work day around my morning feeling. For example, my assistant knew to try to avoid booking meetings in the morning, and to not let the staff into my office to see me too early in the day. Sometimes this was not possible, and I would just have to manage. Some days I would be sitting in my office just waiting for the cloud to lift. Once it had lifted, I would be back to normal again, on the phone furiously busy and productive. I would be able to achieve things throughout the afternoon that I wasn't able to achieve in the morning.
- 14 During the course of writing my book *Black Dog Daze* (2011), which discusses in detail my journey with depression, I came to realise that my morning problem had, to some extent, influenced my career choices. For example, on reflection, I think I enjoyed my role at the National Farmers' Federation because it was so demanding and intense. The adrenalin rush I experienced from this role made me feel better. I was forced to engage, often very publicly.
- 15 By my mid-fifties, my morning mood was lasting longer and affecting me much later into the day. I recall one afternoon I was scheduled to appear on Lateline. I found out at around 5pm, and for the next few hours I was frantically preparing. By the time I reached the

studio that night I was not in a good place. I was exhausted from the preparation and anxiety. After this happened a few times, I realised that I might be experiencing something more than just 'not being a morning person'.

### Seeking help

- 16 I first reached out for help by booking an appointment with my general practitioner. I described to him how I had been feeling. He didn't really engage with my problem, but gave me the name of a local psychologist.
- 17 Seeing that particular psychologist was not for me. I felt uncomfortable lying on the couch and didn't relate to the questions I was asked, which seemed disconnected with what I was experiencing. I left shortly after I arrived.
- 18 I told myself that I needed to toughen up and get back to work. I told myself to pull it together, and to just get on top of how I was feeling. I told myself this because every day, at some point during the day, I *eventually* did get on top of it.
- 19 In June 2009, I was Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and Climate change, and there was growing discontent within the Liberal party regarding its leader Malcolm Turnbull, particularly on the issue of climate change policy. I was approached within the party to challenge for the leadership. I was considering doing so, but I was concerned that my morning problem would impact on my ability to perform. I told those in the party that I was interested, but that I needed to think about it.
- 20 In July 2009, I travelled to Washington and Beijing. I attended something like 42 meetings in two weeks. It was exhausting and I spent a lot of time by myself which gave me time to think. I felt terrible. I realised I needed a plan to deal with what I was experiencing.
- 21 I returned home and rang Jeff Kennett, who is a friend, and who at the time was the chair of Beyond Blue. He suggested I see a psychiatrist. I saw the psychiatrist that he recommended, the following week.
- 22 At the appointment, after about ten minutes, the psychiatrist interrupted me and told me what I had was fixable. It was the best moment of my life. For the first time I thought I could have a different life.
- 23 At the end of the appointment, he gave me a prescription for certain medication but advised me that there may be side effects from taking the medication, including feeling suicidal (which was also on the box). I barely listened about the side effects and left the appointment thinking I was fixed. However, the next month on the medication was the worst time of my life.

- 24 The medication made me feel a lot worse than the underlying condition. I was deeply depressed 24/7. I was feeling suicidal. I called my psychiatrist and he said that it was a common side effect. My wife had to keep an eye on me. I was feeling depressed, such that when we went to the beach for the weekend and I just could not get out of bed. My wife took me for a drive and I just stared out the window, unable to engage.
- 25 At the end of that weekend, Parliament sat. At the time, I was still grappling with the decision of whether to challenge for the leadership of the Liberal party. I recall one occasion in the party room I was in a really bad way. Malcolm Turnbull called on me to speak at the meeting, and as I was walking up to speak I felt like I wanted the floor to open up and for me to fall into it. However, as I started to speak, I felt the adrenalin surge within me. I spoke for around 10 minutes, dealt with the issue being discussed and felt good. I then sat down and immediately felt depressed again. Despite performing when called on to speak, I had never felt so bad in my life. I realised I had to make a decision. I knew I could not continue the treatment without telling people what was going on.
- 26 At the time I thought it was the end of my career. I went to Malcolm Turnbull that night. I said I needed three months out of cabinet. He was very good about it and compassionate. I approached Laurie Oakes and asked him to write an article about my battle with depression. I was interviewed by Neil Mitchell shortly after about the story. I chose to publically disclose the nature of my mental health challenge as I wanted people to know the reason I was taking time off.

### **Naming what was happening to me**

- 27 The idea that what I was experiencing was depression was in the back of my mind for a long time. I could tell that my feelings of not being a morning person were progressively merging into something more troubling.
- 28 I found it hard to come to grips with how I was feeling and I didn't want to admit I had depression. One of the reasons I didn't want to admit to myself I had depression was because of my perception of depression. Prior to my diagnosis, my impression of a person with depression was someone who was not in control, who was under the table, not thinking clearly – all the things I felt. I thought people with depression had a character weakness, they were often crying or could not get out of bed. They were someone who would let you down; you could not count on them in a crisis – you'd look over your shoulder and they wouldn't be there. I was also conscious of the strong stigma associated with depression. I also thought that the stigma spreads to the family. I thought that no one would want to be associated with someone with a mental illness.
- 29 Because I felt bad in the morning and would feel better later in the day, I told myself that something else was happening with me. I also didn't think I had depression because there

were lots of reasons why I should have been happy. I was enjoying politics, and knew that I was at my best, not my worst, in dealing with and handling crisis situations.

- 30 Two months after my interviews, a publisher rang me to ask if I was interested in writing a book about my experience. Nothing was further from my mind. I just said I was interested, but would have to think about it. Two weeks later, my psychiatrist told me that he had recently attended a conference of psychiatrists and his colleagues had been saying that over the last two months, there had been a surge in men over 40 seeking assistance. I understood from what he was saying that by publicising my condition I had helped people seek help. I telephoned the publisher and told her that if I found myself back in parliament I would write the book.
- 31 Most people were supportive of me when I announced what I was going through. I was struck by the number of people, including captains of industry and well known figures, who sent me messages, saying something to the effect of 'Welcome to the club'.
- 32 I received some negative messages too, about my fitness to be in public life.
- 33 I continued to see my psychiatrist and we continued to experiment with finding the right medication for me. I returned to the Shadow Cabinet in 2010, under the leadership of Tony Abbott. I deeply wish I had confronted my depression earlier. I can't help but think how much more effective I might have been.

### **My recommendations**

- 34 The message I always want to leave with people is "you have to confront it." Most people can do this without telling the world, just tell their loved ones who can give support and understanding. Not everyone gets fully fixed, but most are very likely to be able to manage it. It is just a chemical imbalance in the brain which is causing the problem. It is fixable, or manageable. I now know my depression is something that can be treated. I have had the best nine years of my life since I was thirteen years old because I am managing my depression.
- 35 It is a very big decision to confront depression. If people make the decision to confront their mental illness they need to receive proper treatment. This requires at least the following:
- (a) First, GPs need greater knowledge of mental illness and where to refer patients. They need to be resourced to obtain this knowledge;
  - (b) Second, initiatives are needed to attract people to train as psychologists or psychiatrists. People need to be able to access psychologists and psychiatrists - there is too much demand and not enough supply.

(c) Third, the program of 10 Medicare funded visits needs to be expanded to more visits, and very importantly to cover psychiatrists.

36 I think more needs to be done to create awareness of mental illness and particularly to reduce stigma. The perceived stigma remains the most potent factor discouraging people from confronting their demons. In this regard high profile people publicly discussing their problem is extremely effective in encouraging others. I think we are getting better, but more needs to be done.

37 Mental health has not received the attention it needs. For example, from 2004-2016, during my time as a parliamentarian with a local constituency in Melbourne of 150,000 people, every 3 or 4 weeks I would get a representation from some health groups who were justifiably making their case for more public money, for example for cancer research or diabetes research. For the first 7 years I did not get one representation for mental health.

38 The first person I recall coming in was Pat McGorry AO who subsequently became Australian of the year. The number of representations improved after that, however the brain has been greatly neglected in medical research.

39 There is now a lot of work being done – for example I look at how the AFL are talking about the issue of mental health in sport. I see them as normalising the condition, which is a good thing.

sign here ►  \_\_\_\_\_

print name Andrew Robb

date 26 June, 2019