

Features;Feature

## Lame excuses on the way to the lock-up

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HOW will the budget shift public opinion? Is the Government's new-found optimism delusional? Has the gloss gone off Kevin Rudd?

All fascinating questions and the talk of Parliament House. I could fill this space with convincing theories -- actually, semi-educated guesses -- on how the recent political tumult will wash through the populace, but there'll be more erudite analysis elsewhere.

So I've decided to dedicate a column to my foot. Stay with me, it's not entirely unrelated to the budget.

After covering the ALP conference, I boarded an evening flight from Sydney to Perth. As usual, I kicked off my shoes under the seat in front. On landing, I put them on, gathered my bags and headed home.

On arrival I removed my left shoe and instantly felt a pain, like a bee sting. It was annoying at first and the irritation continued into the night. After a restless sleep, I awoke to a swollen foot and headed to the doctor. She recognised the condition as cellulitis, a potentially serious skin infection. As ex-GP Brendan Nelson later noted, rather too cheerfully: "Jeez, you can die from that."

The doctor prescribed oral antibiotics and instructed me to lie low. For 36 hours it became increasingly swollen and sore until the drugs kicked in. The condition became less painful but dreadfully inconvenient. I was scheduled to be in Melbourne for an appearance on ABC television's *Insiders* en route to the budget.

The doctor reluctantly gave the all-clear to fly, along with a dose of stronger antibiotics and a warning to stay off my feet. I hobbled on the plane, flew to Melbourne and appeared on TV wearing one shoe. Sunday afternoon was spent on a hotel bed, watching my football team getting thumped.

It was about this time I made a serious mistake. On hearing I'd be in Melbourne, a friend from Channel 7 invited me to the Logies. She knew of the foot situation, but I was assured the ticket would remain spare if I wanted to attend.

I entertained no delusion of getting sloshed or dancing the night away and went very close to giving the invitation a miss. But the foot seemed OK so I donned a dinner suit and headed to Crown Casino.

It was late when I arrived and hundreds of people had gathered to gape at the red carpet strollers. I limped towards security and inquired about a back entrance, but there was none; it was red carpet or bust.

Wearing one shoe and two socks, I took a deep breath and began the marathon hobble. Red carpet stretched way beyond the hotel entrance, winding 100m into the foyer until it reached the escalator. Crowds 10 deep gathered either side, necks craning for a glimpse of famous and beautiful people. Of which I am neither.

Most late arrivals were A-listers attracting maximum attention; I'm sure I passed Jennifer Hawkins in the melee. This was no time to stop, I looked and felt ridiculous, sidling conspicuously and crookedly through all the cameras and celebrities, trying to draw minimum attention to myself. I was not entirely successful.

"Look at that bloke in the sock," I heard one punter exclaim. Security guards demanded a double-check of my invitation. Quite right, too. I must have looked like Kaiser Soze, the lame villain from *The Usual Suspects*, sneaking into TV's night of nights to set off a bomb.

Eventually I reached the end of the eternal red carpet and found my table. It was a good night; more entertaining, I suspect, than watching it on TV. I was in excellent company, seated in a perch with terrific gawking views. The room was full of unfeasibly glamorous people, but I'm willing to bet I was the only person wearing one shoe. Actually, that's not quite true. Comedian compere Adam Hills did a routine based on his own misfortune: the Spicks and Specks host boasts a missing foot. Which got me thinking nervously about my condition, which wasn't painful but didn't seem to be improving. Having been seated, leg up, all night, I meandered into the after party. It looked terrific fun; fighting fit I'd have lingered until dawn. I stayed just long enough to gawk close up before returning to the hotel.

By next morning -- budget eve -- the foot was still swollen and I decided to seek medical advice. The Alfred Hospital was close by, so I packed my bags and wandered into emergency at about 9am. Astonishingly, the waiting room was empty.

I showed doctors and nurses the foot and informed them I needed to be in Canberra the following afternoon. They were unfailingly diligent and sympathetic, but sceptical about whether I could travel. My best bet, they said, was to be admitted for a course of intravenous antibiotics. With nothing else pressing, I checked into the emergency ward's short-stay unit.

If this sounds drastic, it was actually rather relaxing being among the drug victims and other unfortunates. Friends visited that night, utterly horrified, but we were soon exploding with laughter at the contrast: from the Logies to ER in 24 hours. The food was dreadful but I slept well and on budget morning awaited the verdict.

A very accommodating doctor suggested I leave the intravenous device in my arm and take a heavy dose of antibiotics to Canberra to continue treatment. The nurses were horrified, but under instructions they bandaged up the cannula for the trip. I informed airport security I'd be travelling with drugs and syringes, but nobody at Tullamarine seemed bothered. My bag of medical paraphernalia -- all free, incidentally -- passed through X-ray without query.

I eventually made the budget lock-up and spent the afternoon studying Peter Costello's opus with hoof aloft. Over the next few days a nursing friend administered the intravenous drugs and the foot, not yet perfect, is improving. This column is being constructed while stretched across three seats on a Qantas flight; I'm convinced the infection was sparked by an insect that crawled into my shoe on the way home from the ALP conference.

As an aside, there seems to be a mysterious podiatric curse in political media circles. The Australian's budget veteran Alan Wood missed 2007 with a serious double break. Michael Brissenden, The 7.30 Report's Canberra correspondent, is recovering from a fall. Former colleague John Kerin, now with the Australian Financial Review, spent several months carrying a bad foot injury.

As you can see, I've been rather distracted during budget week, but my guess is punters will be more sympathetic to Rudd -- who's struggled this past fortnight -- than the punditry. But I know a few things for sure. Lovely, talented musical mother **Deborah Conway** is a big Insiders fan. Hospital staff are underpaid and underappreciated. Check your shoes for stray insects. And never ever mess with cellulitis.

pricem@theaustralian.com.au

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