

HOME TRUTHS
JASON GAGLIARDI

Taxing trials in a
Kafkaesque world

It is meant to be the season to be jolly. But fa la la la la me sideways, my festive joy has been severely undermined by the taxman. Now don't start thinking I'm a slippery tax-avoider or some kind of grand-scale rorter — I am a simple wage slave who waves bye-bye to an obscenely large chunk of his salary before he ever sees it, like millions of other Australians.

My problem is not avoiding tax. My problem is paying my tax, or rather the simple act of filing a tax return. And the sanity-sapping, patience-testing, nerve fibre-shredding, hair-tearing frustration of dealing with bureaucratic ineptitude, inefficiency and bizarreness on a level even Franz Kafka would applaud.

Indeed, Kafka's name came up in a piece I penned for this paper upon returning to Australia after 25 years abroad, detailing the frustrations I had getting back into the system, with particular reference to the difficulties I had prising my tax file number out of the aforementioned ATO.

I had needed to prove my existence with three pieces of identification, totalling the mystical score of 100 points. I needed a driver's licence (unlikely, since I hadn't driven in a quarter of a century), an Australian property rental tenancy agreement (impossible on my first full day in the country) or utility bills (ditto).

Almost two months of running around later, including three wasted weeks while Centrelink screwed up my Medicare card application, I finally ascended to the ranks of PAYG-ing true-blue Aussies. Or so I thought.

That fantasy was shattered a couple of months back when I traipsed off to my local accountant to lodge a tax return. "Computer says no," the nice lady told me when she tried to generate my statement. Apparently the ATO, in the excitement of seeing me crash through the 100 points barrier, had forgotten to actually activate my tax file number.

A two-hour wait in telephone auto-response hell, including a Lewis Carroll-esque conversation with the person manning the phones on the main ATO information line who had no idea if there was an actual ATO shopfront in the Sydney CBD, but helpfully directed me to Wagga Wagga and Forster, finally convinced me there was no hope of sorting things out over the blower.

So off I traipsed again to Martin Place where, miracle of miracles, the ATO shopfront survived (apparently they are in the midst of reducing taxpayer-facing bricks and mortar so everything can be done online and they never have to actually see an angry taxpayer's face again).

After confirming my tax file number had never been activated, I was told I had to fill out a tax file application form again, and provide my three pieces of ID. Fine, I said, brandishing my precious 100 points' worth of papers, let's get it over with. The tax office person's face lit up as she told me, oh no, we don't actually keep those forms here. You will have to fill out another form to apply for the application form, and we will send that to you by snail mail. Then when you have filled that out and sent it back to us, you will have to wait another 28 days for it to be processed.

I wandered out of Martin Place in a daze. If it's this difficult for an average schmuck to fill out the standard form to tick the boxes over tax he's already had gouged from his salary, what hope in hell does the ATO have of bringing the Googles and the Facebooks to heel, or stopping the great tide of cash payments to tradies, or catching the alleged army of rorting landlords and dodgy deduction claimers? Will they send their court summonses by carrier pigeon, after having had them back-translated into Swahili and inscribed in invisible ink after encoding them in some kind of enigma machine?

Of course, by the time things are eventually sorted out and my return is filed, it will be late and I'll probably get hit with a fine. Thank you, Mr Taxman, for my own personal magical mystery tour of the outer reaches of stupidity and for putting the silly in my season.



Justine Armstrong knows what it's like to feel that heart-pounding, sweaty-palmed, sick-to-the-stomach fear that makes your hands shake, your cheeks blush and renders speech impossible.

The psychologist and founder of public-speaking and presentation-skills training company Fearless Speaking spent her childhood and teenage years too frightened to share her thoughts and opinions, even with those closest to her.

"One of my boyfriends once asked me, 'Justine, how come you never have an opinion about anything?'"

Never wanting to upset anyone or draw attention to herself, Armstrong experienced what she describes as "shyness, mixed in with a sort of low-level anxiety and a lack of confidence in myself. I was too fearful.

"There were kids at school who I might have liked to talk to but I didn't feel competent enough to do that, so I missed out on connecting with more people socially."

Armstrong believes being shy almost prevented her from taking part in some of the most rewarding experiences of her life.

In her early 20s, a friend asked her to help organise a concert to raise money for Ethiopia.

"I just felt like I had nothing to offer at all, so I said no."

Her friend persisted and Armstrong says it took all her courage just to show up for the meeting. Close to 20 people attended, each volunteering to perform several tasks.

"And everyone had gone around the room three times and taken on three different roles, and I'd said nothing. And at the very end, my friend said, 'We need someone to sort out a venue'.

"And there was this dead silence because everyone was overloaded with roles and I hadn't spoken. Everyone was looking at me and I was too scared to even speak."

Armstrong reluctantly agreed and to this day is deeply proud of her involvement.

"We ended up raising over a million dollars for Ethiopia in project aid. It ended up being one of the best experiences of my life and something I'm really proud of. But I almost missed out on that."

"And I've missed out on probably God knows how many other things because of that fear of putting my hand up and having faith that I could actually come through with something."

Shyness is categorised as apprehension, a lack of self-confidence and fear of being humiliated or ridiculed. Characteristics can vary from feeling worried and anxious to physical responses such as blushing, perspiring, nausea, difficulty speaking and a racing heartbeat.

University of New England associate professor of psychology John Malouff says shyness affects "several per cent" of children and is caused by a combination of genetic and lifestyle factors, which can begin in utero.

"It's a combination of genetic predisposition and actual experiences," Malouff says.

"There are other factors that can play into it, too, such as what happens in utero and other biological effects in early childhood. The mother can get stressed and send stress hormones, which may affect the foetus.

"Babies and children also observe what other people are doing, particularly their parents, siblings and friends, who might be shy. Others become shy after a bad experience like people laughing at them or ridiculing them, particularly if they're family members or classmates. Those sorts of things can have a serious effect."

There are early indications that a baby or young child will become introverted, he says. Some babies who are difficult to comfort may be

There are young AFL stars in backwards baseball caps. And billionaires' daughters without a care. There's a killer sunset somewhere out near Rottnest behind the glorious Norfolk Island pines in silhouette. And families, singles, mates, lovers ... Somewhere, set back from the beachfront in modest mansions, are Captains of Industry, captaining. There are bikers on Marine Parade with exhaust systems that surely compensate for something. There's a queue outside the OBH (that's the Ocean Beach Hotel) where the Sunday Sesh is in full swing; it's all so outrageously Cott. Or Cottesloe, as we Easterners call it.

And there's pizza. Pizza the likes of which Cott, and probably even Perth, hasn't seen before. An Italian beach experience? That's so not Cott, unless you include the perennially Euro-cool Il Lido down the road a few hundred metres, owned by the same two guys. Neither of whom is Italian but both of which have a proper handle on Italian food, wine and breezy hospitality.

The Pitch

Quality pizzeria, first and foremost, on a splendid corner site that allows plenty of footpath seating and great views of everything going on outside, which is usually plenty. Proprietors Lyndon Waples and Dan Wegener would not be the first, and won't be the last, to figure that pizza, done right, is a timeless money-spinner. It's the "done right" bit that's hard. It involves hardware, consumables, intellectual property, technique and good culinary sense. You don't just buy a pizza oven, turn it on and start cooking. To that end, they brought in consultant pizza whisperer Ettore Bertoni from his Adelaide base to consult on setting up and curing the oven, making and proving the doughs and cooking the individual pizza. When it comes to Neapolitan pizza, Bertoni is the uomo (you can also eat the impact of his consultancy at Melbourne's excellent SPQR).

The reality

With the seaside feel of an Italian

lido pizzeria, Canteen is a rollicking, informal bag of laughs. It doesn't take itself too seriously, but the pizza ... I took a mate, a Perth local, well-travelled, well-versed. "This is the best pizza I have ever eaten in Perth," he spluttered with a mouth full of mozzarella. Who cares what he thinks, this is the best pizza I've ever eaten in Perth, too, and seriously world class.

The cuisine

Italian, obviously, and fairly simple. Beside a list of classic pizza styles, both "rossa" and "bianca", are several "pesce", antipasti and "porchetta", two different cuts of free-range Yorkshire black pig available in three sizes with salsa verde and tomato/pepper sauce. It's a particularly well thought-through and flexible menu.

Highlights

Pizza. It goes without saying. All the backstory is useless without the result on the table. And the result is there. The classic whole-greater-than-the-sum Margherita

comes straight from the fire, a smoky, puffed crust, zingy tomato, creamy mozzarella blobs and leaves of fresh basil. Equally well cooked is another with n'duja and fresh rocket with a turban of creamy stracciatella at the centre, although I'd edit out the red onion. A whole baked spotted emperor is super-fresh, as it should be, nicely seasoned/crisp-skinned and served with an olive oil/herb salsa, fresh dill, parsley and lemon wedges. Equally fishy but without heat (of course) is their wild kingfish carpaccio with pomegranate, black radish, green chilli and lime wedges, although I'd prefer a heavier chilli hand. There are also some rather splendid pistachio-crustated baked goat's cheese "nuggets" served with vincotto, a kind of savoury orange jam and fresh, lightly textured honeycomb. Another plus? Because an



BRITTA CAMPION

Justine Armstrong successfully took action to overcome her shyness when she realised it was making her deeply unhappy

Shyness can be discouraged in childhood and overcome among adults

CLARA PIRANI

WELL
BEING

more likely to become shy than calm babies. Shy children often look at the ground, remain silent around unfamiliar people and refuse to speak even when spoken to. They will be reluctant to try new activities and to participate in group activities.

"The fear of rejection and humiliation can last from childhood all the way through life for some people and it really impairs them," he says.

The father of a shy child, Malouff developed strategies that parents can employ to help their child feel more confident. They include showing empathy when the child is afraid to interact, never calling the child shy and asking other adults not to describe them as shy, exposing children to unfamiliar settings and people, and leading by example by being outgoing in front of their children.

However, he warns that some

parents become obsessed with their child's introversion, especially if they were also shy in childhood. "They can get so focused on this one problem they lose track and forget that their child is very bright or very nice, or whatever. They focus on this one issue which seems like a big flaw. They think that they lost out of many opportunities as a child or young adult and they want everything to be just right for their child, but life is tougher than that."

Clinical psychologist Catherine Madigan says there are programs that help shy adults become more confident, particularly in social settings, using a method known as "gradual exposure".

"I want my clients to go toward the social situation rather than away from it, and then try to join in and see what happens," she says. "You don't have to be the life of the party and entertain everyone but

you can do a little bit more, and if you keep persisting you start to get used to it or you might start to build up your confidence.

"When people with social anxiety do go to social functions they usually use what we call safety behaviours. If you're going to a party you might only talk to the people that you already know. You might avoid eye contact, fold your arms or hide in the corner. So you are limiting the amount of interaction you have and doing things to prevent what you consider to be catastrophes like blushing, sweating or shaking. Or you worry people will think you're boring, or reject you or there being a pause in the conversation. But doing those safety behaviours sort of maintains the social phobia.

"So we try to get them to think differently, to not be so focused on what might go wrong and their own status. We urge them to think,

"Can I do something that might make somebody happy? Like how about if I go speak to the shy-looking person?"

After suffering through shyness for several decades, Armstrong is now at ease on stage speaking in front of more than 1000 people. But she admits it took years to develop self-confidence and her transformation did not begin until she admitted that being shy was making her unhappy.

"What helped me overcome my shyness was firstly a decision to be happier. I felt dissatisfied and wanted something more for myself than feeling restricted so often," she says.

"Over a period of decades, I hired various therapists, counsellors and mentors. The one thing I learned consistently was how to really own and embrace all of myself — my flaws, my vulnerabilities, my strengths, my passions."

Armstrong argues that strong presentation skills are increasingly an essential skill for any senior manager and it's not uncommon for many high-profile, successful executives to feel panic at the mere thought of speaking in front of a group of employees.

"I mainly work with business owners and CEOs and executives who are really great at what they do, who want to make a positive contribution and are high-quality people, but they're just freaking out speaking in front of even sometimes more than three people. I've got a CEO who went into a panic attack in front of six of his own staff," she says.

"I actually think it's really unfair that often the most high-calibre, highly experienced person who's the most genuine, authentic person will miss out on opportunities because someone else who can talk a good talk comes in and gets it. And they're not necessarily the best person for that job. I missed out on a lot of opportunities for that very reason."

owner is also a sommelier by trade, the wines here are really well-chosen and appropriate, if a little pricey ("you're in Perth, mate, whattaya expect?" asks my local). True. Service staff try hard.

Lowlights

A Sicilian-style eggplant caponata is heavy and one dimensional, out of balance. And crickey this place gets noisy at full-song.

Will I need a food dictionary

No. The wording is clear, concise and written to communicate with consumers, not chefs.

The damage

The food is very fair. But some of the wine prices are silly (I'm looking at you A Mano Rosato at \$60).

In summary

Fun. Authentic. Well-run. And predictably busy as hell.

More at: canteen.pizza

A slice of
the real deal
by the beach

Canteen Pizza, Cottesloe, WA

JOHN LETHLEAN

QUICK
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3.5/5