MATT CUNNINGHAM: Trust may be fleeting if Gunner’s Government offers up more surprises

CHIEF Minister Michael Gunner has headed off on a trade mission to Japan this week with his popularity skyrocketing after a landslide election win.

But popularity can be a fick- le friend, especially if you’re a politician. Just ask Malcolm Turnbull. Or Mike Baird. Or Daniel Andrews. These leaders all enjoyed soaring popularity upon taking office, only to see it disappear, in some cases on the back of a single bad decision.

Mr Gunner is enjoying lofty approval ratings thanks mostly to the good fortune of follow- ing the circus that was the pre- vious CLP administration. But if he needs a reminder of how quickly a leader can fall, he need only take a glance across the parliamentary chamber. There, on the backbench, he will find Terry Mills. The man who just four years ago swept to power with a whopping 16 seats, just two fewer than Labor holds today. Within seven months it had all fallen apart. Mills had lost his job and the CLP was on a fast track to self-destruction.

It would be a stretch to say that Michael Gunner is headed down the same path, but there were some similarities between his decision this week to bring in two half-day public holidays and the events that led to Mills’s downfall. Both in- volved the repayment of a debt owed to those who helped put them in power, and the break- ing of a key election promise.

Mills owed his debt to a group of CLP old boys who had backed his leadership. He re- garded them with positions on his Management Renewal Board and paid them $200,000 each for six-month contracts on the new razor gang. Voters were rightly furious. But the bigger folly was his broken promise. For months as oppo- sition leader Mills promised that he would bring down the cost of living. Then, just a few short months after taking of- fice – and on the advice of his new razor gang – he an- nounced the government would be jacking up power pri- ces by 30 per cent. The public’s trust was gone and with it went Mills’s chief ministership, rolled by Adam Giles while on a trade mission in Tokyo.

This week we saw Gunner repay his debt. It was owed to the unions who played a sig- nificant part in Labor’s election campaign, and in particular the SDA, of which Gunner has long been a member. The SDA, or “Shoppies” union, is one of the most secretive unions in the country. It’s also one of the most powerful. Behind the scenes it has been strident in its opposition to gay marriage and has been accused of doing deals with big business – in- cluding Coles, Woolworths, McDonald’s and Hungry Jack’s – that have seen some of the country’s poorest workers pay less than the award wage.

It was the repayment of this union debt that led to Gun- ner’s broken promise. Throughout the election campaign he had promised to con- sult with Territorians on the big decisions. He’d pledged that this would be a govern- ment of no surprises. So you can imagine the surprise – shock even – many Territori- ans would have felt when they turned on the Channel Nine News on Monday night to dis- cover we now had two new half-day public holidays. The chief minister’s subsequent claims that this was all part of a plan to boost the Territory’s population also made a mock- ery of pre-election promises to fudge substance over spin.

There is, of course, one big difference between the broken promises of these two chief ministers. Mills’s power price rose took money out of peo- ple’s pockets. Gunner’s public holidays will put money back in. And while business owners have been left fuming, the average punter will be happy to get a bit of extra cash for working on Christmas and New Year’s Eve.

The first surprise from the man who said “trust me” might not cost him too many votes. But too many more and that trust will soon be whittled away. Perhaps that’s some- thing for the new chief minis- ter to ponder while he’s in Japan.

of rank insensitivity

Ardent Leisure CEO Deborah Thomas and chairman Neil Balnaves address the company’s AGM

at times, fully comprehends the public’s concept of accountabil- ity. It is the same as the head of IBM this week breezily admit- ting that while his company might have completely stuffed up the entire census, not one person has been demoted or disciplined for this taxpayer-funded fiasco.

When it comes to corporate accountability, Ardent Leisure takes the cake. At its AGM, the company appeared to have had a wholly successful ethical by- pass. The average person strug- gles with the idea that anyone is worth an $843,000 bonus any- way, when they are already on a fixed annual salary of $670,000. Especially when the flagship business of the com- pany is covered with crime scene tape and a mountain of flowers at the main entrance.