

HORRORSCOPE FOR THE SPRING MONTHS OF 2016:

To allow for the vagaries of the universe and interpretive inexactitude, it might pay to read everyone else's stars as well.

GEMINI

You could be under the influence of the Venus-Mars humanity or if you're gay, the Bernardi-Abetz mendacity. There'll be no legal conjunction for you until some basic cosmic decency returns to parliament. This might involve waiting out the current three year lunar cycle as we lurch from Cazimi to "Cor Blimey".

CANCER

Avoid communication gaps this month, move to Canberra, or wherever the telco executives live with their blisteringly-fast soapy downloads. Telstra mandarins especially, should be sent to some remote place about which they care not a whit where the reception is 24/7 shouse. Anywhere on our block would qualify.

LEO

Your dominant planet is Combust, that's conjunct the Sun within 8½° of orb, but do not confuse this with Gonebust, which is when a company director with 1° in smarm and 2's in public misfeasance is pleading loss of memory and everybody's hard-earned dosh.

VIRGO

How's your credit card maxing? Only a few hundred over? Oh bad luck. Try to get it to more than \$8000 in the red and then a whole world of exciting, smiling debt consolidation agents, as seen on TV, will make your life a joy. Honestly, just go on a binge and then it's as easy as picking up the phone.

LIBRA

The planet Pluto symbolises power, lust, obsession, tenacity, concentration, death, rebirth, transformation, secrets, the Great Mysteries, the occult, and the Shadow (what we don't want to face in

ourselves). It has recently been expelled from the solar system as a warning to the other planets to, 'just chill, man'. Take from this what you will as we orbit the refrigerator in a corpulent direction.

SCORPIO

Around about now for you Saturn transits through Scorpio in a retrograde mode while the front bar patrons transit through in a reprobate mood. Is your glass half full ... or are you? Are you seeing the world through rosé-coloured glasses? Sober can be fun.

SAGITTARIUS

You are now in a parallel universe. On the television you see actual reports of a man running for President of the Ugliest Scary Arsenal of nuclear weapons ever assembled; and whose mantra is, "You're fired!". Buddha, Jesus, Krishna and Allah help us if he gets to the war room with the big button.



CAPRICORN

You may see the writing on the wall this month, especially if you have young children. It's just a cute phase and only slightly likely to lead to wearing baseball caps reversed, buying spray cans and redecorating Sydney Trains with once again adorable, oddly indecipherable squiggles.

AQUARIUS

As you know, the collection of planetary energies is very powerful and complex. Find the right person this month and you might experience multiple conjunctions, even without using the AAA batteries. If you're two signs apart it's sextile, but if that's too hard or cold, try on the carpet.

PISCES

This month singles may suffer burning or tingling on an area of skin on the trunk ... what? Oh, sorry I thought you said shingles — giz another drink. Herpes, god of, "I'll tell you about the partners I've had some day — gosh you won't believe it", might lead to a frank discussion about dedicated relationships.

ARIES

Jupiter will belch through your 2nd house and stupider will spew forth in the Upper House as our legislative future runs the gauntlet of a ward culture not seen since 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'. Senators with One Notion: "fish and chips hooray — falafel go home!"

TAURUS

Tea leaves in the cup, cat across your path, stars in the heavens surrounding us all. Pretenders in the parliament, crooks in the boardroom, cheats on the sports field heading for a fall. We can make our own destinies, or wait around to be told what's in store for us. Hmm?

Power games

IPART sets regulated gas prices, provides guidance on solar feed-in tariffs and monitors the competitiveness of the retail electricity market.

To get the best deal we need to explore our options

Let's talk a bit about fairness. Imagine you are at the counter and the person in front of gets his take-away coffee and the barista says, "That'll be \$3.75".

When you get your coffee she says, "\$4.25 thanks".

"What?" you exclaim. "You charged the other bloke 50¢ less."

"Ah yes, but he's on our 'Coffee-plus' plan," she says while wiping the milk spout. "It's all there on the net if you go to 'coffeemadeeasy.com'. You have to shop around these days you know."

That's what it's come to with energy prices since NSW deregulated them in 2014. Of course we do have IPART, the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, to keep an eye on how it's working out.

As it says on its website:

IPART provides independent regulatory decisions and advice to protect the ongoing interests of the consumers, taxpayers and citizens of NSW.

A draft report has been released by IPART to explain how it's all going and calling for submissions. I hope many people read it and make submissions.

Here's a sample:

Some take the view that 'if you pay more because you don't shop around, the market isn't working'. We consider that if you can pay a lower price by shopping around, the market is working. [Their emphasis] A number of competitive markets demonstrate this. For example, customers can make substantial savings by shopping around when buying flights, consumer electronics, insurance, cars and mobile plans.

Yes, well, some might take the view that unlike the consumer items they list, electricity is a non-discretionary purchase that even internet-poor or uninterested people must buy.

But if you are paying too much for your energy it's all your own fault and IPART doesn't have much sympathy.

Customers have a role to play in improving the performance and competitiveness of a market. The more well-informed and engaged customers are, the more pressure there is on retailers to offer competitive prices and services.

That'll teach you for telling that pesky person who rang while you were cooking dinner to, "stuff off and leave you alone". That wasn't just an unsolicited nuisance call, that was capitalism going out of its way to save you your hard-earned moolah. You idiot!

Surely, you think, even if I don't go with all the churning [changing your supplier] and bargaining I won't be too badly off. Think again.

Some customers do not participate in the market and miss out on price discounts and other benefits on offer. For some, the cost of their time to switch to a cheaper deal outweighs their potential benefit from a lower bill.

And just to rub it in.

We consider these price differentials is a sign that the market is working, and support innovation and dynamic efficiency. By some customers paying more than they need to, retailers are able to offer lower prices to others who do shop around.

Cop that! Not only is your neighbour paying less than you but you are subsidising the whole circus by paying 'more than you need to'.

I can't see how IPART feels it is, 'protecting the ongoing interests of the consumers, taxpayers and citizens of NSW' while overseeing an approach to civil administration that



towards the future by Paul Cockram

seems more like, 'the quick and the dead'.

People who simply can't keep up with this whole charade have not been entirely forgotten though. The draft report adds:

There are some customers who have difficulty engaging in the market because of language or other barriers. In our view there is an opportunity for retailers to assist these customers, along with targeted government assistance programs such as those already provided by the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW.

It's hard to believe that IPART would seriously suggest that utility companies will invest much effort in getting as many of their their customers as possible to pay less money.

If you had a call from a utility company that started off, "How would you like to pay less than we're currently charging you", what would you say?

"Is that a rhetorical question?" or, "Are you kidding me?" are two responses that spring to mind. Can't they just do it for everyone evenly and without being asked?

No, I guess not. It's not the way of the modern competitive world. Some readers, if you've got this far, might think I'm just whingeing or dreaming of a soppy utopia where no-one tries to get the jump on anyone else.

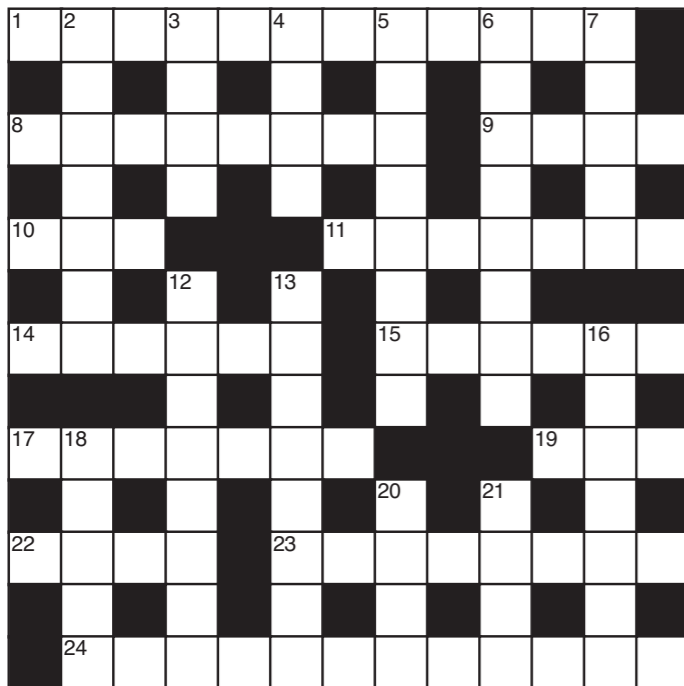
Fortunately, there is a solution that would keep everyone happy — collective bargaining. In a town like Braidwood we could present ourselves as an aggregate of customers who demand the best deal.

We pick an energy company — maybe one from the 8% of the trade energy companies that's not in the big three's 92% stranglehold — and offer them all our business.

We should get a good deal, everyone can relax and once again have the satisfaction of telling call centres to rack off.

We could also sleep at night safe in the knowledge that we are looking after our own community; the elderly, the computerless, the shy and anyone else who can't, or doesn't want to, live by a compulsory new-age ethos: 'If you don't pay you pay'.

BRAIDWOOD BAFFLER #10



ACROSS

- 1. A Steinway, for instance. (7,5)
- 8. Sacred or secular composition for voice and instruments (8)
- 9. In toward (4)
- 10. Sweet or savoury filling inside a pastry casing (3)
- 11. Musical effect, adding expression (7)
- 14. In one voice (6)
- 15. Sort out your health claims with this (6)
- 17. She descends rock faces like this (7)
- 19. Period in time (3)
- 22. Fish with a very deep voice? (4)
- 23. Provider (8)
- 24. The most famous fiddle? (12)

DOWN

- 2. Applause (7)
- 3. Adduce (4)
- 4. Percentage, velocity (4)

- 5. Medley, gallimaufry (8)
- 6. Music on hallucinogens? (4,4)
- 7. Ensemble for instruments and voices or just a few bits? (5)
- 12. He evaluates (8)
- 13. 12D did this to do his job (8)
- 16. Upstart (7)
- 18. Category of instrument or money (col.) (5)
- 20. Wide boy (4)
- 21. Blot on the escutcheon (4)

SOLUTION TO BAFFLER #9

