

# the office

*It's the epicentre of their work, a place rarely seen by the public. Libbi Gorr steps into the private domains of four influential Australians to find out what goes on behind closed doors.*

## STEVE BRACKS, PREMIER OF VICTORIA

Kalev is Premier Steve Bracks's orderly, a 183-centimetre human annex who tends to his boss's personal needs. An Eminem-meets-Lurch cross, he collects guests, procures newspapers and brings cups of tea. He steers me to the waiting room. The carpet is British racing green and the room is dominated by a display of previous Victorian premiers. There's Henry Bolte, Rupert Hamer, Lindsay Thompson, John Cain, Joan Kirner and Jeff Kennett.

But the office, says Bracks, 50, is greater than the man. "A lot of people have held this office and I don't think any of them are still here breathing down my neck." He sat here as an adviser to John Cain in the '80s and, like Cain, he prefers to do business around the polished wooden dining table (as opposed to the more traditional adversarial positions on either side

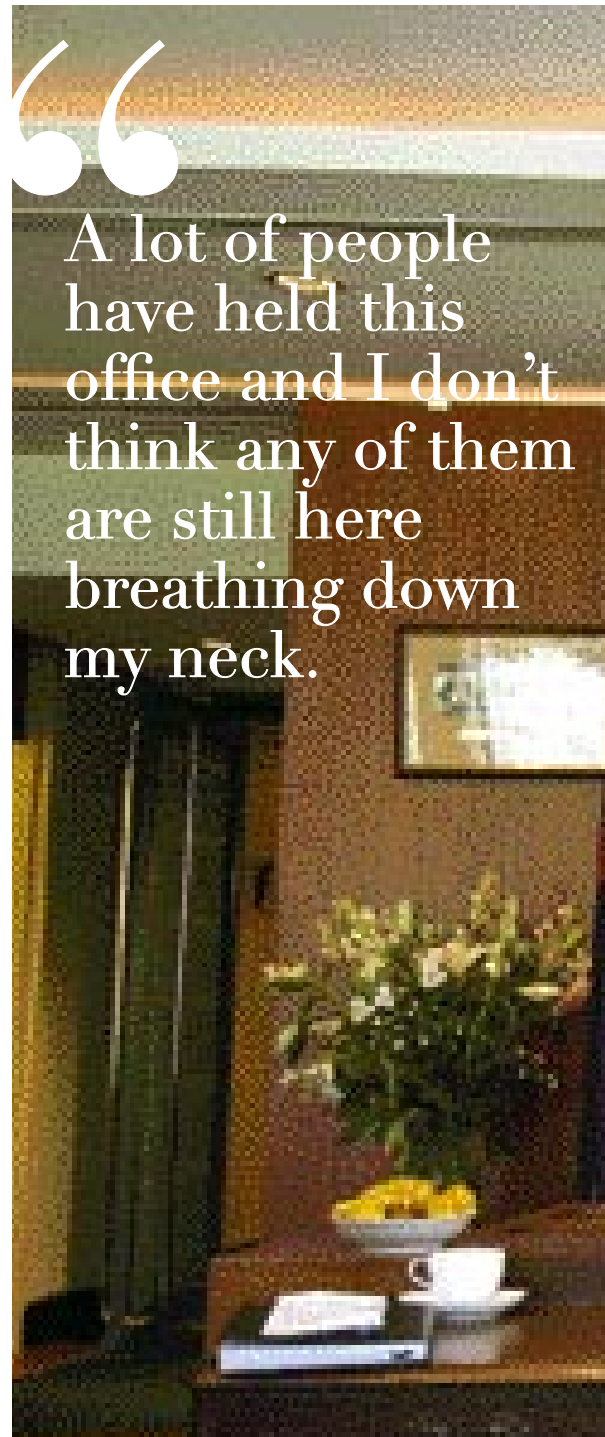
of the imposing mahogany desk). The plump floral couches to the side are for visitors and the tea – mine English breakfast, his suspiciously herbal – is served in fine bone china.

The lighting, however, is decidedly '90s, as are the venetians. "It was renovated by Mr Kennett. I haven't changed much – the furniture's the same..." In fact, in the almost six years Bracks has occupied the Treasury Place office, in Melbourne's CBD, he's been happy to inhabit Kennett's space pretty much as he found it. "The only thing I changed when I got here was that I got an ergonomic chair for my back."

There is no sign of Kennett-esque hustle and bustle, though. The only person who has visibly been here of late is Mr Sheen. Bracks agreeably slides open the right top drawer of what could be a showroom desk. That's when the bulldog clips growl



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into prominence. Every size and neatly ordered. Lines of them. Spooning each other. "I am neat," he concedes. "I'm teased mercilessly about it."

The most endearing feature in his office is a Geelong Football Club montage that his daughter, Amy, and her classmates made for him when he became Labor leader in 1999. "There's me with Gary Ablett [snr] at the back, saying, 'Hey Bracksy, have you got room for me on the bench?' That's actually stayed with me for a long time, that one."

The rest of the stuff fades into variations of pewter given to him at important occasions. When folk visit, do you swap things around? "Often. Particularly someone from overseas, they'll give you a present, you give them one and often they go into government repositories for no one to ever see. But you drag it out when they come back."



Steve Bracks

Outside his office sits Rosa, his personal secretary of five years. She is very close, he says, as we pace it out together, “about nine steps”. “Don’t forget, you can always use the phone, Premier,” Rosa deadpans. “I do phone usually,” he reassures me. “Shall I do it for you?” In one ring, Rosa answers. “Rosa, I’m just checking how instantaneous the communication is,” puffs Bracks. “It’s very good, Premier,” she replies. Rosa calls you Premier? “Yes, she does but I must say most people call me Steve.”

Despite the phone of many buttons, there’s no hotline to anyone in particular. “The whole board’s a hotline, really. I’ve got the ministers, the department heads and some of the key advisers here so all I do is press a button and instantaneously I’m on to them.” And home? “Yeah, home’s in there, too. It’s probably the least quick because Amy or Nick could

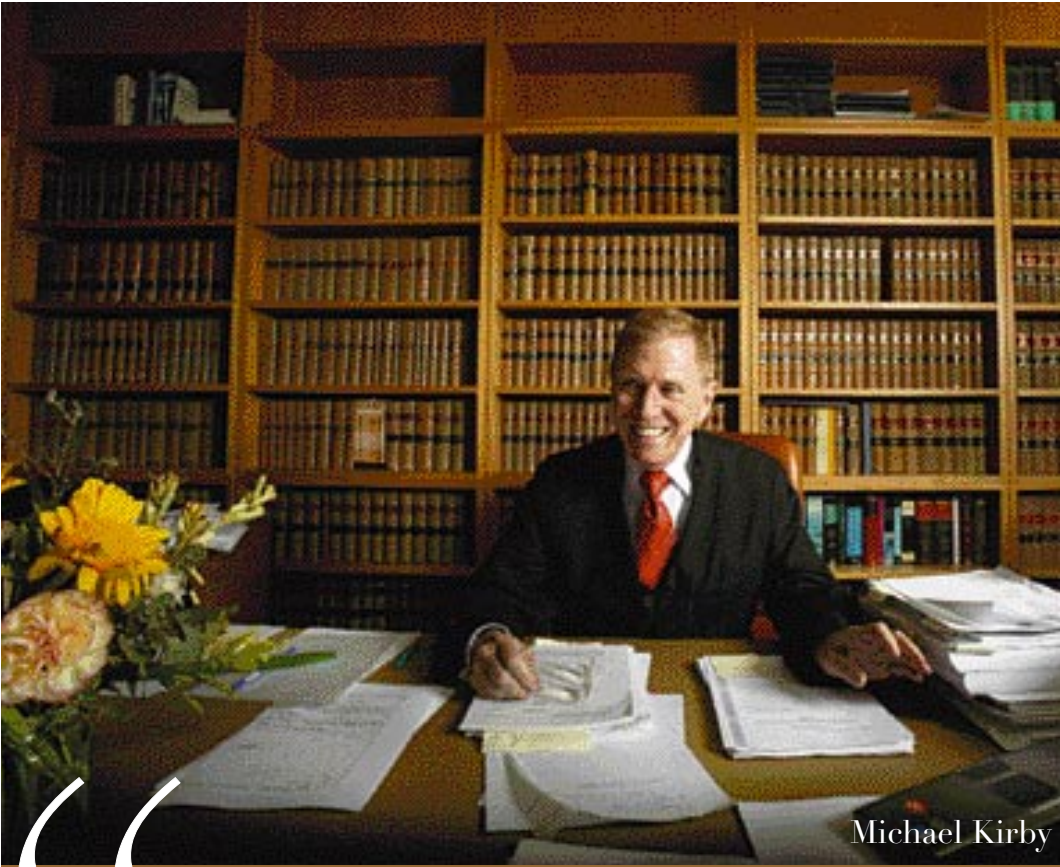
have been on the phone for the past 15 minutes...”

That’s two of his three children. Their photos rest inside the imposing book cabinet. “Nick’s the eldest – he’s about to turn 18. Amy’s 15. She’s just been overseas on exchange with a host family in France. And Will’s 10.” Pause. Where’s your wife, Terry? Tenser pause. “Good question,” he falters, looking worried. “Good question.” But it only takes a moment and the man is literally triumphant with his answer. “Terry is not prominent on my desk but she is prominent in my heart at all times,” he states, proud as punch. “Print that. Otherwise I’m in trouble.”

Has there been any other trouble in the Premier’s office? “The most disrespectful act here was not me doing the act,” he recalls. “We’d been commissioned to form a government after a stand-off for three months and the caretaker period. We arrived in the

new chauffeured cars. Bill Scales, the head of the department at the time, met me and I came up here with a few of the then commissioned ministers – John Brumby, John Thwaites, Rob Hulls and a few of the others. And I looked at the office and thought, ‘Gee, this is pretty good.’ Then I remember John Thwaites – as an act of treachery – used the toilet before anyone else did.” That’s an innately primal act, isn’t it? “It is a bit.” And you didn’t take that as a warning of a future coup or any latent leadership ambitions on behalf of your deputy? “Well,” he says smoothly, “it hasn’t happened yet.” Neat answer.

**JUSTICE MICHAEL KIRBY, HIGH COURT JUDGE**  
Justice Michael Kirby’s office glows golden in the dappled Canberra light. “Some of the chambers have got dark wood but I believe this is Tasmanian wood →



Michael Kirby



“European judges always have flowers. They remind you of the beauty outside the law.”

and it's beautifully light,” says the High Court judge. “I like that. I think we should all be uplifted. They’ve found that when they paint supermarkets in yellow, sales go up enormously because people feel happier. Sometimes the law is rather gloomy and grumpy. Whereas this is, I think, optimistic and happy, as we should be in Australia. We have so many blessings.”

A vase of gerberas on his desk, still smiling despite a few days in party mode, continue the yellow theme. “Look how beautiful they are. My mother taught me that: the beauty of flowers. European judges always have flowers but it’s a very un-Australian thing to do. They remind you of the beauty of the world outside the law, which isn’t always beautiful.” He winks. “It’s a hard life.”

As a member of the seven-strong High Court, Kirby has been deliberating constitutional issues and other cases that have reached the nation’s highest court for the past nine years. His work lies in stacks on his unprepossessing desk. It’s not mahogany, it’s not intimidating; it’s just a plain work desk. It’s the work on top that’s rich in content. “These are special-leave books where people are trying to have their case heard in the Court.” His job is to decide their eligibility. “That is an article I’ve got to write for a conference in Tehran, on rape in war.” And the next? “That’s on patenting the human genome. And this,”

he gestures forebodingly, “this is the judgement I am working on. I’ve got it all in my brain but I’ve got to get it out of there, to paper.” The top drawer of his desk is empty. “Everything I am doing is out in front of me. That’s so I won’t go home until I’ve done it.”

His associate, Simona Gory, has an office adjacent to his chambers. “My door is always open. I don’t like buzzers. I don’t think that’s Australian. Anyway, it’s good exercise for a judge to get up and trot out and actually speak to human beings. One of the problems of the modern generation is they don’t speak to each other. Someone should write a play: the home phone never rang but the SMS was full!”

Michael Kirby has a telephone on his desk but won’t reveal whose numbers are programmed in. “I’m not going to tell you that,” he demurs. “No. Look what happened to Paris Hilton.”

Amid Kirby’s work for the world sit ornately framed photographs of his parents, brothers and sister, and his lifelong partner and fellow cat-lover, Johan van Vloten, “same age as me, 66”. “If you have photos behind you, it’s to show them to other people, whereas I’m showing them to myself.” Most poignant is a memento Kirby’s father gave him of “a pussy cat looking into a mirror and seeing a lion”. He chuckles. “I’m always hopeful.”

There’s a limit, he says, “on how much of one’s

own personality one can introduce to these chambers. They don’t really belong to me; they belong to the justices of the High Court. One goes and one comes. We are all just journeymen, serving for a time.” A deep taupe chair belonging to his predecessor, William Deane, sits in configuration with a comfy couch around a coffee table. “But it’s far too grand for me.” Can he feel Sir William’s legacy when he sits in it? “I feel his approach to law and society is very similar to my own but I don’t feel empathy to furniture. Furniture is things. It’s human beings that matter. And animals.”

There’s a photograph of Kirby and John Howard in London, another with Gough Whitlam. “They show my perfect equipoise between Australian leading politicians. And that’s the Dalai Lama. Yes, we are holding hands. He’s a very interesting personality. I’ve spoken to him over many years.” He pauses. “I hope that ultimately that is what people will say of me, that I was kind as well as a good judge and lawyer.”

But has the judge, who holds the highest record of dissent recorded in the highest court in the land, ever done anything even vaguely naughty in this room, with its panoramic views of both houses of Parliament? Popped his feet on the desk perhaps? “Oh no,” he admonishes. “It’s the Queen’s property.”

Associate Gory arrives with a pot of tea and a dish



“A producer said, ‘Hmm, I can smell the oestrogen in the air.’”

Courtney Gibson

of Ferrero Rocher chocolates for morning tea. “You have the odd chocolate biscuit at the desk, though, Judge,” she chides gently. “Oh yes,” admits Kirby, sheepishly, a stickler for the truth. “I suppose I do.”

#### COURTNEY GIBSON, TELEVISION EXECUTIVE

Courtney Gibson comes clean quickly. “I’ll be completely honest with you,” says the 39-year-old head of arts and entertainment at ABC TV. “This painting only came this week. I’ve been paying it off so I rang and asked if I could pick it up early. The catalyst to get stuff done is often something like this.”

The picture of which she speaks is a magnificent wall-length pop-art homage to the drum kit by Mark Hetherington entitled *Great Band Names I’ve Thought Of But Never Used (Two Ronnies Don’t Make A Right. C--- On Board)*. “If you get very bored here with me you can look at that and be amused,” she says dryly. “It’s like the perfect marriage of all the things we do in our department.”

Gibson’s surrounds are art and craft that’s colourful, raw and artfully rebellious – a reflection of Gibson herself. “This office has been through several stages. Over the past couple of years, it was the sloth’s den, then it was a teenage girl’s bedroom. Now I’m trying to seem more plausible.”

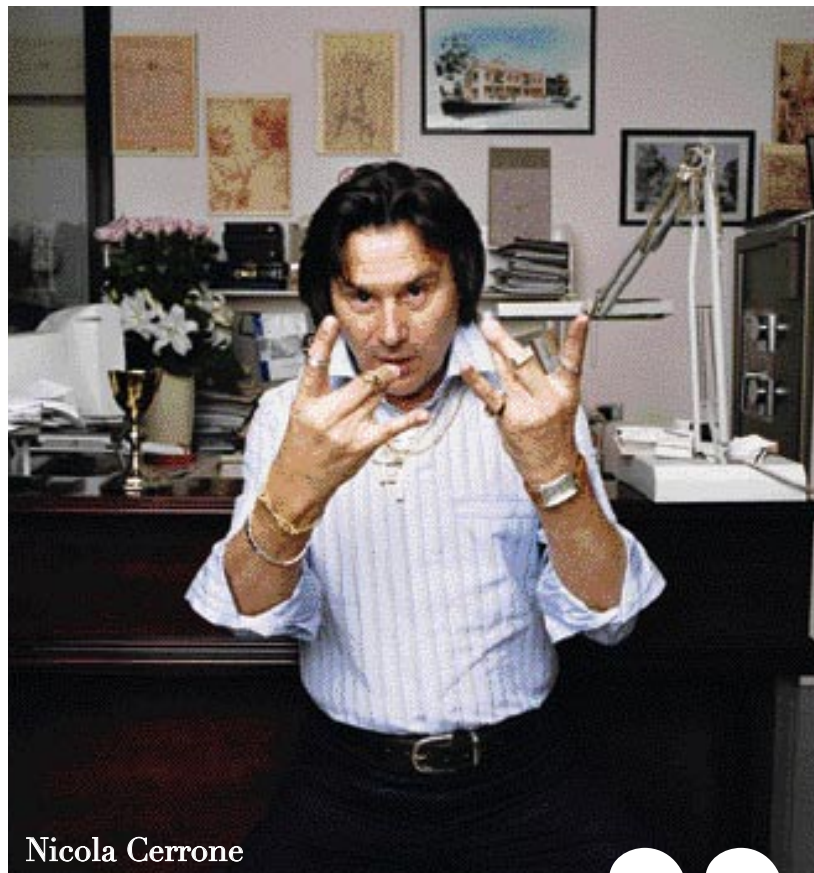
And, indeed, the inners of her office do much to

diffuse the formality of the ABC’s digs in Sydney’s Ultimo. Her executive assistant, Richard Braskill, is thrilled because he’s cleaned up her office for the visit. “He used to be the assistant to the head of communications at Britain’s counter-terrorism agency and also assistant to the head of communications for the Cleveland child-abuse inquiry so there is nothing unpleasant he hasn’t witnessed or endured.” Well-equipped to work in television? “Unflappable.”

So what’s survived Richard’s military-precision approach to office cleanliness? Pictures of her children, Ivy, 5, and Eddie, 3, for one. “Because they are cute and I don’t see enough of them.” There’s also some more artwork – “a girl with a cat because it reminds me of Ivy, as does this pen drawing by artist Joan Ross of a little girl praying with a piece of kangaroo fur cut into her hair.”

But what dominates are the spoils of a trip to a craft show. “There were all these little felt cakes, felt doughnuts, felt lemon butter and this little-girl dress by [artist] Trevor Smith, made of plastic lace beads and tiny photographs of cuts of meat made into a plaid check board.” It is satirical craft with a womanly slant. In fact, Gibson remarks, “A producer who is visiting today commented wryly, ‘Hmm, I can smell the oestrogen in the air.’”

Gibson spends more time at work than she does



Nicola Cerrone

“This is a passionate desk. Passionate people make love to their work.”

at home, she says, “so I like things around me that are beautiful and inspire me. You can spend a lot of time in a management vortex, if you let it happen.” There are no reference books in her office, otherwise “I’d sit here and answer emails all day and never get out and about. I have a management role in what is a labyrinthine bureaucracy. The subtext of all this around me is to give the veneer of something fun and ‘fripperous’ but the reality is, I’m a manager. There is no time. I am a boom-boom-boom person. That’s how I do things, make decisions, keep the traffic moving.”

And thus, a rare moment for reflection in Gibson’s fast-paced life. “I’m a writer and TV producer at heart,” she says. “It’s only now that I’m about to turn 40 that you start to think, ‘Where am I going with this life?’ I haven’t actually plotted it out before.”

#### NICOLA CERRONE, JEWELLER

Nicola Cerrone is passionate about his business. Which may explain why it took some convincing for the 55-year-old jeweller to reveal the desk where he works – as distinct from the desk where he meets clients amid plush red carpet and the tidy slickness of discretion. “The real stuff?” says Cerrone, with a penetrating look. “You get dirty with the real stuff.”

Cerrone runs his manicured hands through his →

# “What happens at the desk is work. You can’t make a jungle of your life.”

shoulder-length hair. “This is the problems desk,” he explains. “*Il terremoto* [the earthquake]. There’s a lot of negotiation, a lot of discussion, a lot of explaining, a lot of headaches. There was another desk I had to remake because it was full of marks. That’s when I was younger. I’m trying to control it, which is more painful than when you explode.”

Pity the previous desk that bore the brunt of a steel canister, slammed down with great force when a seven-carat diamond was chipped during setting. Cerrone lays his scarred hands on the polished wood of this desk, unmarked from temper yet cluttered with paper jewellery packets. “I can tell you my teacher, a Swiss master jeweller, gave me canings across my fingers when I made mistakes in the early 1970s.” He sighs. “That was then. Now you must think first. You make a lot of mistakes by reacting too quickly.”

This desk, the one with the emotional reprieve, was carved by Cerrone’s father-in-law, Joseph Monticciollo, about 15 years ago. “This is a passionate desk,” says Cerrone. “Passionate people make love to their work. When we say making love,

it means whatever you do is deep in your soul.”

Do you make love on this desk? I venture. “If I have to, I will.”

The desk sits in a windowless corner of Cerrone’s palatial Leichhardt premises in Sydney’s inner-west. The glass-walled manufacturing area is to the left; overall-wearing jewellers bend over their desks like machinists with microscopes. Straight ahead, the retail shop sparkles with diamonds, gold, platinum and pearls. Overhead, TV monitors connect Cerrone with his multimillion-dollar jewellery empire – retail, wholesale, all separate, yet controlled from this central pocket. Austrade supports his push into Dubai, Asia and the US. The luscious stack of glossy overseas magazines – all within arm’s reach – feed Cerrone’s hunger to compete with the best.

“I know exactly what is happening every day. I’m in the centre of the building and at the centre of the world.” A “no excuses” sign dominates the back wall. “I don’t accept excuses from my staff. They can all come in here and discuss their problems because there is no door. We all make mistakes but I won’t give them excuses and I don’t want excuses.”

The top drawer of his desk is a scrabble of pens, scissors and envelopes. “Vitamins in the second drawer for when I don’t feel very strong. And the third drawer is the packets where we put the diamonds.” The desktop carries virtually everything else. Sentimentally outdated schoolgirl photos of daughters Desiree, now 26, and Dominique, 19, face him, balanced against the scales, calibrated to weigh the diamonds. “They will always be little girls,” he shrugs.

He eschews the direct phone line and keeps his mobile close by but switched off. “I concentrate on what I’m doing and I don’t like to be disturbed. We are striving for excellence here. I even say this to my staff: ‘If you are making love to your wife, your girlfriend, how would you like me to ring you and say, ‘Excuse me ... how’s that ring going?’ It’s not right. That’s why I tell them, ‘I’m free to take calls now or I don’t want to be disturbed.’”

Cerrone is gifted, volatile and controlling, with the unyielding discipline to keep things apart (even though he wants it all). He won’t take his cherished espresso at his desk, let alone eat there. “What happens at the desk is work. I don’t mix the two together. You can’t make a jungle of your life. You have to be able to turn off without other things intruding.”

Cerrone wears no jewellery himself. He doesn’t even own a wedding ring. Thankfully, Carmela, his business partner and his wife of more than 30 years, has plenty of diamonds. When making love at your desk every day is your passion, maybe it’s best to keep things separate. ●