

Coronavirus quarantine fiasco: Two-minute call that left career in ruins

By **EWIN HANNAN**
WORKPLACE EDITOR
Follow [@EwinHannan](#)

8:36PM OCTOBER 12, 2020
9 COMMENTS



Former secretary of the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet Chris Eccles.

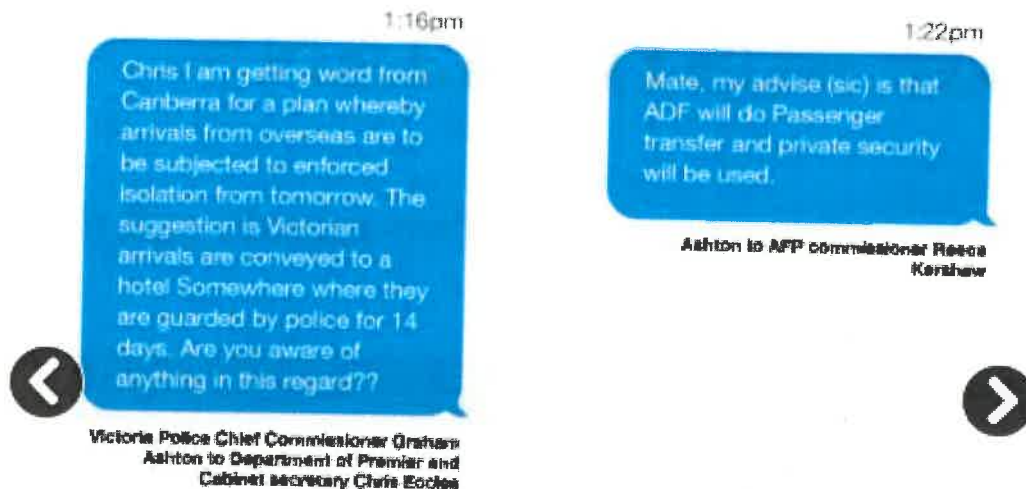
It is the two-minute phone call that ended a glittering public service career.

But the admission by Daniel Andrews' right-hand man, Chris Eccles, that he did speak to former top cop Graham Ashton during what is now known to Victorians as the "missing six minutes" only came to light after the hotel quarantine inquiry made the belated decision to request his phone records.

Mr Ashton texted Mr Eccles at 1.16pm on the day the national cabinet set up the scheme, asking whether he was aware of suggestions that Victoria Police would be required to guard overseas arrivals in hotel quarantine.

At 1.22pm, Mr Ashton texted Australian Federal Police Commissioner Reece Kershaw, saying he had been advised that the "ADF will do passenger transfer and private security will be used".

Ten minutes later, Mr Ashton again texted Mr Kershaw: "I think that's the deal set up by our DPC."



In short, between 1.16pm and 1.22pm, Mr Ashton received a phone call advising of arrangements to use private security.

But Mr Ashton has maintained he could not remember who spoke to him, while Mr Eccles gave sworn evidence that he did not recall receiving Mr Ashton's text message.

Under cross-examination, he described himself as a "courteous individual", saying if he received a message from the chief commissioner of police, his normal practice would be to respond.

While he did not recall ringing Mr Ashton, he could have. But he said he had "interrogated" his phone records and they did not show contact with Mr Ashton - although he was not certain how complete the records were.

Following the request by the board of inquiry on Saturday, Mr Eccles sought detailed telephone records from his telecommunications carrier.

"These records show I called Mr Ashton at 1.17pm and that I spoke with him for just over two minutes," he said, although he insisted the records "do not in any way demonstrate that I, or indeed anyone else in DPC, made a decision that private security be used in the hotel quarantine program."

But a senior police source said the 1.17pm call supported speculation the decision to use private security guards was made within the DPC, and not, as the counsel assisting the inquiry proposed, the result of a creeping assumption influenced by police.

“It’s not like Ashton knew this (the use of security guards) was going to be controversial so invented some text message at the time. He’s not Nostradamus,” one police source said.

“He sent the text messages referencing private security because he was led to believe that was the decision. The (Eccles) phone call accords with his text messages.”

Mr Eccles was the constant in Mr Andrews’ working life as Premier, his trusted right-hand man and top bureaucrat for almost six years.

Mr Eccles was appointed secretary of the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet in December 2014, after serving in similar positions in South Australia and NSW over the previous five years. The appointment by Mr Andrews marked a return to Victoria for Mr Eccles, where he had held two deputy secretary positions in the Premier’s Department between 2007 and 2009.

He also held leadership roles in the ACT Chief Minister’s Department, at the Australian National Training Authority and worked as an associate director at KPMG, where he headed its national education consulting practice.

As he detailed in his witness statement to the hotel quarantine inquiry, Mr Eccles was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2017 for “distinguished service to public administration, to innovative policy development and sound governance, and to the delivery of reform in the areas of training, education and disability”.

Until Monday, Mr Eccles maintained his only error during the quarantine debacle had been not passing on an offer of Australian Defence Force support made by Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet secretary Phil Gaetjens in an April 8 email.

Before the pandemic, it is believed Mr Eccles was planning to leave his position but agreed to stay on to help lead the state’s response to the health crisis.