

## **It's finally over: how Eddie McGuire went from bright star to unpresidential shambles**

*By the end of his cyclonic tenure as Collingwood president there was no one left to offend*



*Collingwood president Eddie McGuire announced his resignation after the release of a damning report that uncovered a culture of systemic racism at the AFL club.*

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When Eddie McGuire took over as Collingwood president, the club was in total disarray. The playing list was a joke. Victoria Park was falling apart. There was a legionnaires' disease outbreak in the spa. McGuire had just turned 34. He looked about a decade younger. He had the charm, the friends in high places and the vaulting ambition. He was Melbourne to a T. He was the city's brightest star.

By sheer force of personality, he turned the place around. But there was always drama. There were always bust-ups. Some of his conflicts of interest were laughable. Some of his public statements beggared belief. He once reportedly berated a cohort of senior players who had mucked up, saying he had sacrificed four of five Gold Logies for his love of the club.

The local media gave him a lot of rope over the years. "That's just Ed," they'd say. He was good copy. He was good for Collingwood. And he was

everywhere. But he was an incredibly difficult man to read. He could be humble, self-righteous, decent, haughty, knockabout and a complete and utter prick – sometimes in the one sentence.

But you crossed him at your peril. He loved a scrap. He never really countenanced opposing views. The face would redden. The eyes would narrow. As any sports editor could attest, he always came out swinging when someone wrote something that pissed him off. He read everything. He always gave as good as he got. He had a rare ability to go *whack*, and then quickly move on.

But as time went on, the faux pas piled up. The offensive remarks came thick and fast. His team couldn't go a yard. No one was watching his revamped Footy Show. He was subsisting on a crackpot diet of seaweed and cucumber slices. After the King Kong drama (did I actually just type that?), he was a broken man. His voice was cracking. His face was flushed. He said he could empathise with what Aboriginal people went through. Following the Caroline Wilson drowning controversy (did I actually just type that?), he said he was “emotionally and physically flattened”.

But it did not seem to diminish his career one jot. If anything, he was even more prolific. At a conservative estimate, he was now on TV or radio 16 hours a day – speaking sideways, settling scores, crapping on about this or that. He'd light spot fires here, and throw grenades there. He was in a permanently agitated state. By 7:30am, Eddie had usually been on air a couple of hours – back announcing Nickleback, discussing herd immunity, deconstructing fourth wave feminism and lamenting Collingwood's defensive structures.

He certainly didn't have the best pandemic. It was a difficult time for all of us. His former Footy Show co-host stormed the steps of state parliament in his tartan trousers, demanding to know why he couldn't wield his seven iron.

But McGuire had his own wars to fight. He was fighting on about half a dozen fronts, and wearing just as many hats. On breakfast radio, he'd launch into weird, lengthy, highly caffeinated rants. One minute he was trying to save the game, making rousing speeches over Zoom. The next he was proposing to dismantle it and start over again.

Meanwhile, the Héritier Lumumba issue simply would not go away. Increasingly, football clubs present themselves as all things to all issues. They throw around words like “connection”, “inclusiveness” and “vulnerability”. The language, and the environment, has shifted so much since Lumumba stopped playing. But when things get really complex, they often flounder. They stand revealed. Indeed, Collingwood has probably invested more in PR, in documentaries and in fly-on-the-wall type material, than any other club. But such stuff can only go so deep. And when things get really complicated –

when they go well beyond tracking a player's recovery from a torn ACL – it can blow up in your face.

Back in the day, this whole issue would have been conducted on McGuire's terms. He would have made a few calls, slapped a few backs and sorted it all out. Indeed, with a shred of decency, McGuire, Nathan Buckley and Collingwood could have sorted this out in 10 minutes. Instead, they dug in and deflected. They spun, scrambled, gaslighted and hoped the whole thing would go away.

But Lumumba was never going to go away. All he needed was his Twitter account. He calmly and very convincingly spelt out his case in dot point form. He was talking about issues this country has not remotely come to terms with. They are questions most of us are not qualified to talk about. They are questions that are tearing America apart as we speak. They are questions that a local footy club was clearly all at sea with. In doing so, Lumumba stared down the biggest and most powerful football club in Australia. He stared down one of the most successful, best connected and apparently untouchable men in Melbourne.

Last week's press conference was the final straw. It was a shambles. And it was pure McGuire – sweat-stained, red-faced, righteously indignant and decidedly unpresidential. He could not shout his way out of this. He wasn't going toe to toe with some third-rate hack. This wasn't an argument about refunding footy memberships. This was the story of our country, and very much the issue of our time.

These are anxious, censorious and cynical times. They certainly do not suit men like McGuire any more. This week there was an open letter – always cause for considerable concern. But he forfeited the right to the benefit of the doubt years ago. In the end, people were just sick of him. In the end, there was no-one left to offend. He was president for nearly a quarter of a century. What a cyclonic, utterly uninventable tenure it was. For everyone's sake, thank Christ it's finally over.