

## David Collard's effort to make friends

# MARLES COMES CLEAN ON COLLARD



David Collard appears in Manhattan Supreme Court in February.

### Luke Griffiths

Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles has broken his silence on the collapse of a Geelong company headed by disgraced businessman David Collard.

Mr Marles enthusiastically and regularly spruiked start-up Scale Facilitation to high-level audiences prior to its North Geelong base being raided by federal agents in June 2023.

This included the company's glitzy opening of its New York offices on the 82nd floor of the One World Trade Center, an event also attended by federal Opposition Leader Peter Dutton.

The Corio MP's speech at a May 2023 American Chamber of Commerce event in Adelaide, where he again lauded "Dave", particularly angered many former Scale employees because they hadn't been paid for more than a month.

One seasoned Canberra observer with knowledge of Scale's activities said of that speech: "It was quite bizarre in how strong he was on Collard. People weren't getting paid in

February and that was in May."

Scale Facilitation received no state or federal funding.

Mr Marles said his role as a local MP meant he regularly advocated on behalf of Geelong businesses. "The entire Geelong community was shocked when the revelations surrounding Scale Facilitation were made public," he said in a statement on Friday.

Mr Collard made a special effort to court senior politicians, not only in Australia, but also in the US and UK.

Far and away, his closest political contact was Mr Marles.

The pair were introduced in 2021 by the MP's former partner and one-time Geelong radio identity Roxie Bennett, who first met Mr Collard two years prior at a Cats game.

"It was more about the fact, introducing him, not so much from a business perspective, but as a Geelong guy doing extraordinary stuff in the US," Ms Bennett said.

Ms Bennett, who commenced work for Scale in late 2021, said the job of any local member was to "pump up the tyres" of someone providing

opportunity in their electorate.

She said Mr Marles would not have been aware of the non-payment of Scale employees and that any criticism of his support for the company and Mr Collard was unfair.

Mr Marles' comments were prompted by questions from the Addy after several former employees said his public backing should not have occurred without greater knowledge of Scale's inner workings.

A multi-agency federal investigation into Scale and Mr Collard remains ongoing.

It is based around allegations of tax fraud involving allegedly false research and development claims worth tens of millions of dollars.

Many former employees continue to assist investigators.

Mr Collard did not respond to a series of questions.

### EMPLOYEE ANGER

For some employees, Mr Marles' support of Scale and seemingly close relationship with Mr Collard gave them confidence, at least initially, that despite warning bells, everything would ultimately be OK.

## in high places did pay off, for a while



Richard Marles, Libby Coker, David Hay (Recharge Industries), Ed Husic, and Rob Fitzpatrick (Recharge) visiting the proposed site of the 'gigafactory' at Avalon precinct.

That view was reinforced by support from Mr Dutton at the NY launch, where he said Mr Collard "has the ability to see around corners and over the horizon".

Mr Dutton, who had his flights and accommodation paid for by Scale, did not respond to questions.

Other notable figures at the launch included former NSW premier and Australian Consul-General in NY Nick Greiner, and former Liberal senator and Australian Ambassador to the UN Mitch Fifield.

The employees' sentiment was shared by at least two Geelong businessmen whom the Addy spoke to – both were left out of pocket after Scale subsidiary Sanitex Global went into liquidation last November.

"What an absolute embarrassment – two ... senior leaders conned simultaneously," a for-

mer Scale executive and Geelong local said.

"I'm angry that neither of them have come out in support of the employees, local businesses, community, and charities who've been ripped off."

Jeremy Bowtell, a former St Joseph's College Geelong classmate of Mr Collard, is producing a documentary on the entire saga.

"My impression is that the endorsements by Marles and Dutton gave a lot of confidence to employees, partners and suppliers that Collard and his ventures were rock solid," he said.

"While former staff don't blame Marles or Dutton per se, their public admiration of Collard has certainly raised more than a few eyebrows."

It is understood Mr Marles has met privately with several Scale staff who were impacted.

### COURTING CANBERRA

It was not so much an occasional humble brag. It was out and out gloating that was first designed to impress, and later reassure worried employees and investors that everything would be OK.

Mr Collard made no secret of his high-level political connections. Quite the opposite.

"He'd constantly try to leverage these relationships," a former Scale executive said.

"He'd drop names in official conversations, emails and messages."

Sean Johnson runs the Open Politics blog, which is focused on increasing public scrutiny of federal politicians.

"It's normal for a local member to help a local business, but the extent of the relationship with Marles is very unusual," he said.

The former Liberal minis-

terial adviser and public affairs consultant said Mr Collard "found the perfect mark (and) he played on Marles's hawkish, anti-China instincts".

"The hide of the guy, given the equipment to make the batteries was made in China, and he never paid the Chinese."

### FLAT BATTERIES

Mr Collard's grand plans revolved around the development of two massive lithium-ion battery manufacturing and energy storage sites – one in Avalon, the other in northeast England.

The Addy reported repeatedly about the upcoming project at the time.

There was enormous political appetite for both projects and Mr Collard knew it.

Scale subsidiary Recharge Production's bid for the UK Britishvolt site fell flat in April

this year after the company defaulted on the sale agreement.

The Avalon project promised up to 500 jobs but it never realistically got close to getting off the ground.

It is unclear whether Mr Marles, Corangamite MP Libby Coker, and Industry Minister Ed Husic were aware that no lease had been signed for the site when they visited in May last year. Mr Husic and Ms Coker said they never met Mr Collard.

A well-connected Canberra figure said: "Why did Marles jump in? Geelong boy made good, I think."

That Geelong boy is now the subject of multiple investigations and things are certainly far from good for a long list of people who got caught up along the way.