

# It's a guy thing

*One Tuesday every month in Melbourne, men from all walks of life gather at a local pub to eat the \$10 special, drink beer and talk about the unimportant things in life. David Astle reports on the Reclaim The Pants movement.*

Three civilised men – Mr Mauve, Mr Apricot and Mr Cerise – are standing around a barbecue in North Fitzroy, Melbourne, talking about Shane Warne, *Get Smart*, Kate Winslet and whatever else men talk about when the sausages burn to a crisp. In a word, crap. The men themselves admit it. “Crap is good,” says Mr Mauve. “You don’t have to understand how the other male thinks or feels but you definitely strike a bond.”

Mr Mauve, 47, aka Stuart McArthur, adjusts his glasses. He sits knee-to-knee with a coffee table, the hectic evidence of fatherhood around him – a son reading aloud, a daughter doing irrational fractions, another son wolfing jelly, his wife, Kerrie, rinsing lunchboxes, a dog – a black Staffordshire terrier in a mauve collar – with a ball in need of throwing.

“Guys will never really understand other guys but through crap, they have a feeling that they do,” adds McArthur. “Women love sharing secrets [with other women] but men have different needs. Intimacy for guys means sharing a sense of humour.”

His insight was a thunderclap, back in 2002, as the sausages spat on the grill. “We were on such a roll, talking rubbish, outdoing each other and then came the call to bring out the salad or check on the kids.”

One female interruption and the magic sputtered. The bullshit evaporated. Collecting the meat, the men returned to their usual roles – loving dad, good husband. Over lunch, *Get Smart* morphed into interest rates and that new Thai place – and McArthur started musing.

What if men could meet – no rules, no expectations – and talk useless rubbish all night? No pretext. No

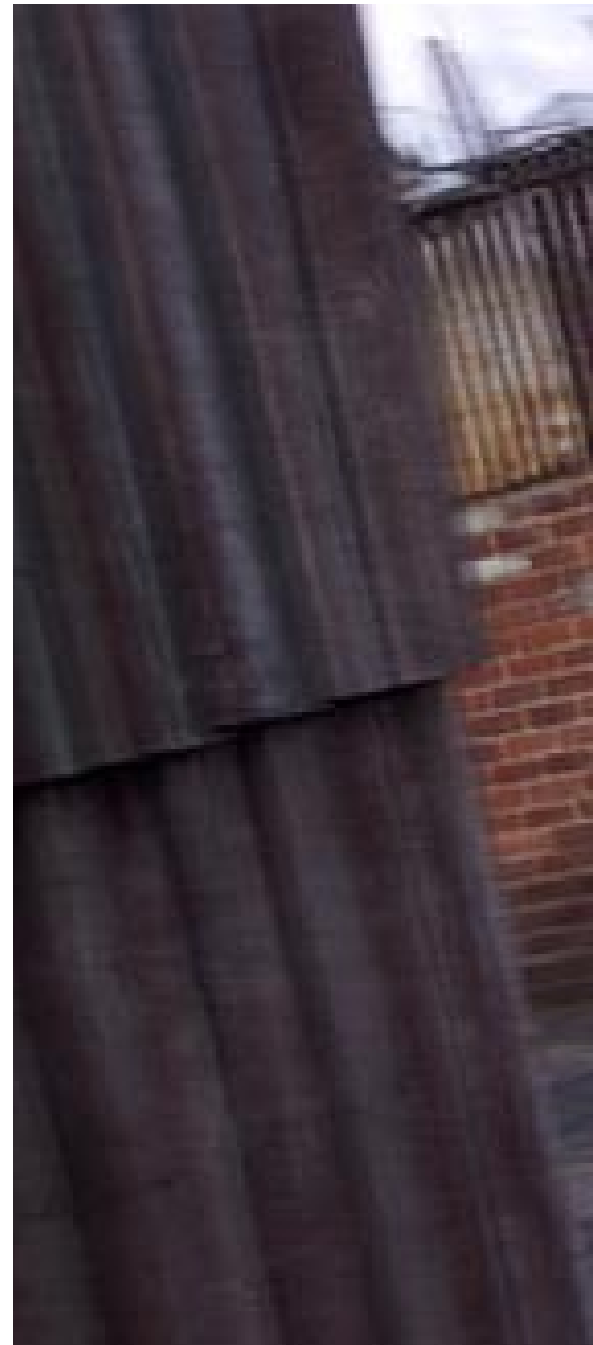
agenda. No potato salad. Galileo copped a prison term for a lesser heresy. “Women tend to make the networks,” says McArthur, “and guys tend to go along to women’s events.”

Married guys have two modes – work and family. While wives share these modes, they somehow wangle headspace to make a friendly phone call, write a “get well” card, read a book for a book club, organise barbecues. Men are either lazy or dysfunctional in that regard. We neglect birthdays and old mates. We lapse into a corporate-cum-domestic trance, not unhappily, and put out the garbage on Wednesday nights.

But clump us boys together and it’s a different story. Among our fellows, away from the office and the P&T nights, we discover our voices. We talk about stuff that girls never get, like the aesthetic divide between Ginger and Mary Ann on *Gilligan’s Island*. Or why Kasper is the perfect foil for Dizzy. Or how Talking Heads are a thinking man’s R.E.M. Or why Michelangelo (the Ninja turtle) could outmuscle Donatello any day of the week.

Such crap holds a special place in the male heart. Trivia and banter are unique male dialects that too often flirt with extinction for want of oxygen. In March 2002, months after the brainstorming barbie, McArthur and a dozen pals met in a pub down the road. Hardly a headline but hey there, Mister, when was the last time you did that yourself, made a date with X number of mates to revive the old crapese?

“Our wives were in on the joke,” says McArthur. “They love it. Since women had Reclaim The Night a few years back, we decided to call ourselves



Reclaim The Pants.” The member’s creed says it all: “I believe in a world where no one has to get up off their fat arse, where empty pontifications are duly admired, where the principle of ‘all talk, no action’ prevails and where these truths are held to be self-evident, so help me God.”

*The New Yorker* writer and social observer Malcolm Gladwell would describe Stuart McArthur as a “pollinator”, one who connects people and spreads ideas. In his current incarnation, the former English teacher runs a mobile cocktail service – Something Wicked Cocktails – mixing blue lagoons for Melbourne parties and clubs just as he mixes assorted blokes together.

Maximus, the gladiator played by Russell Crowe, provided a tailor-made logo for Reclaim The Pants. McArthur ran off T-shirts for the maiden meeting, the image of Rusty looking all macho with sword and scowl and cute leather skirt. Another film –



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*Reservoir Dogs* – inspired the plastic box that sits on the table. For a terrifying moment I think Mr Mauve is out to sell me Tupperware but then he lifts the lid.

Inside is a secret society. The colours grab you first – dashes of gold and tangerine. Each colour is a badge with a name below it: Mr Silver, Mr Cream, Mr Bone, Mr Terracotta. I see Mr Shiraz and Mr Teflon-Grey. One badge, with a hole in the centre, belongs to Mr Transparent.

Those au fait with *Reservoir Dogs* (and what bloke isn't?) won't need too much coaching. The Tarantino flick deals with a bunch of goons tasked to rob a diamond store. In the name of anonymity, the gang's boss assigns each felon a colour. Steve Buscemi, aka Mr Pink, takes exception to his new handle. "Why can't we choose our own names?" he bleats. "No," says the boss. "I tried it before and it didn't work! I had four guys fighting over Mr Black."

"Black," says Mr Mauve, "is the only colour we

won't allow." This seems to be the only rule among the Pantsmen, the anarchy working a treat. In the past three years, from Meeting I to tonight's Meeting XXXII, the founding fathers of Mauve, Apricot, Puce, Buttercup and Cerise have seen the spectrum swell to 110 members. Make that 111, as tonight I'm answering to Mr Amber.

So why amber? One, it wasn't taken. Two, it makes me think of beer and caution, both of which loom large as I walk into the backroom of a suburban hotel in inner-Melbourne, engulfed by amicable strangers. The meetings are monthly – same pub, same weeknight – and the membership is free. Mr Buff is here. Mr Dusky-Pink. Mr Charcoal and Mr Cobalt. Mr Navy Blue sends his apologies as he failed to devise an exit strategy from his Domestic Situation. All up, there are 30 blokes, aged 35 to 55, making the most of the parmigiana-and-beer deal and the chance to yak.

Mr Canary, a haematologist, is as chirpy as his name. He tells me the day he twigged his life had changed: "Saturday morning, a few years ago, I was walking out of Safeways with a three-year-old stepson on one side, a pregnant partner on the other and about \$300 worth of groceries in the trolley. We were walking towards the world's most boring car – a Mitsubishi Magna – and I thought, 'If I was still single I'd be in bed.'"

Mr Sea-Green has a different spin on wedlock. "My father-in-law got it right. In his day he belonged to a cards club and a tennis club. One night he sees me ironing my shirt, the kids around me watching telly, and he says, 'Jeez, I feel sorry for you'. I had to laugh. Makes you realise the trick to keep things together is negotiating time to be on your own, with your own."

Mr Mauve puts a green form on the table. The sheet is entitled Guilty Top 40 Pleasures, asking for



songs you're ashamed to love. During the course of the next five hours, Mr Khaki, Mr Silver and Mr Cappuccino confess to a fetish for Love Is In The Air, Stayin' Alive, Band On The Run and Convoy.

Previous meetings have challenged members to name worst career moves (Tony Barber quitting Sale Of The Century, Dannii Minogue giving Kylie a gig on Young Talent Time), masterpieces-schmasterpieces (Blue Poles, Stairway To Heaven) and actors to preclude you from seeing a film (Adam Sandler, Whoopi Goldberg). For more acerbic samples you can visit the group's website at [www.reclaimthepants.com](http://www.reclaimthepants.com).

A waitress appears with a tray. She stalks the table yelling, "Melon and Atlantic salmon!" I take the remark for the cuisine on offer before Melon and his mate wave their hands.

Mr Fawn, alias Nick, 40, is a guitarist with Sonic

Screwdriver, a pop band aiming to escape their garage and hit the airwaves one day. With three young kids, including a two-month-old bub, he's allowed to dream. Until such limelight comes however, he keeps his calendar free for these lowbrow powwows. "Reclaim The Pants is on the edge of nerdy, no question. If this was a bunch of 28-year-olds, it would last five weeks."

But, he adds, "in the US, a guy might see a therapist to deal with psychological issues. In Australia we'd rather get together with our mates, crack a few gags, loosen up and say I did this and the other thing – I stuffed up here, had a win there. And everyone leaves thinking I'm just as normal as everyone else."

One phrase I fail to hear all night is "men's group". To a man, the Pantsters seem wary of men-group connotations – namely marriage counselling or pole-

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dancing with black shirts and thugby clubs in between. Or worse, says Mr Mauve, "those wussy sort of men's clubs from the '70s where guys went off to hold each other's dicks and jump through fire circles." Seems the modern fella finds idle chatter far more fertile ground.

Mr Mauve goes on: "Since starting the Pants, I've only heard of two similar male groups but they're nowhere near as organised. One's a group of mates who meet every month, but there's always a reason, like going out for a bet. There's another group that goes camping every year but they don't declare themselves as obviously. They don't actually state, 'We are a bunch of men who want to be away from women to sit and talk crap.' Of course, that's what they're doing but they don't actually come out and say that."

Aside from the occasional "speakers' club" for businessmen, the only other lighthearted Australian stag cell I come across is a shed club – [www.shedclub.com](http://www.shedclub.com) – which allows its members to congregate in a backyard haven of choice "to discuss ideas on tools and life". On the book-club registry of the Centre for Advanced Education, there's a snowballing list of 1069 groups in Victoria and NSW but only three are all-male.

Back to the world of colours. Every walk of life is here, from an unemployed baker to a Supreme Court judge. There are landscapers, accountants, IT workers, actors, builders, a blacksmith. Topics flit from dogs to smoking, from immigration papers to the travails of kayak-shoulder. Mr Thames-Mud, an ex-pat solicitor, revels in the evening's lack of process. "The whole reason we're here is because we're not doing our civic duty – it's an anti-process."

One night, vaguely suspicious of goings-on, Mrs Mauve (alias Kerry) and her girlfriend Mrs Apricot (Lyn) snuck down to the pub to see what their

husbands really did on the first Tuesday of every month. "They couldn't sit with us," laughs McArthur, "because they would have felt stupid. So they sat and had a beer on their own, watching 20 old farts mumbling about nothing. In the end they sauntered off home."

Mr Cerise, a 45-year-old barrister, adds his own shade of meaning. "Some people look at us and say, 'Isn't this sad? Why don't you go and do something useful or worthwhile with your time?' But the majority of us do that in our everyday life. This is our chance to be flippant, to be boys. We're not out to change the world or create a patriarchal society. We're not running for office. Half of us here are more inclined to run for the toilet."

Debate erupts at Mr Blue's end of the table. The argument pivots on whether Spandau Ballet's greatest hit was True or Gold. Soon the whole room is locked in dispute. Mr Cerise sees me scribbling notes and says, "Seriously, this is what we do. We meet every month. We drink beer. We eat a parm. We talk a whole lot of crap until midnight and tomorrow we invade Poland."