well understood by the AFL's chief rival, the National Rugby League. The NRL has had plenty of troubles over the years. For many Victorians, and it isn't a stretch to include a lot of the AFL's administrators, the NRL is viewed as a blokey, boofy, sometimes clumsy outfit.

But when it has had large-scale problems comparable with the ongoing drug controversy at Essendon, it has acted decisively.

Actions involving scandals and controversies taken against, variously, the Canterbury Bulldogs, Melbourne Storm and the Cronulla Sharks demonstrate that.

In the Essendon case, by contrast, matters have been left to drag along with bits and pieces of information either dribbling out or being prised out and appearing in the media. Little wonder, then, that Watson took matters into his own hands and turbo-charged the issue.

The decision could come at a very heavy price for the Essendon captain. If he did indeed take a banned drug last year, then there seems little question that his Brownlow Medal should be taken away from him. And a career-ending suspension would be a prospect too.

That he believed he was taking something that was legal under the relevant sporting guidelines is immaterial. If the drug was proscribed at the time he took it, then he cannot be allowed to retain the game's highest individual honour.

Were this to happen, it would of course be a tragedy for Watson, who is by all accounts a man of great quality. And I use the word "man" deliberately, in the old-fashioned way, because it took courage to 'fess up to taking AOD9604.

THAT is especially the case if it turns out that he was allowing himself to be injected with the stuff only after getting assurances that it was acceptable to do so by people entrusted with the task of looking after the best interests of the players and the club.

If that's so, those individuals should pay with their jobs.

Ultimately, this is all about responsibility and who shoulders it. One of the overwhelming issues within modern big-ticket sport is how to reconcile the big money that is paid to sportsmen with the reality that many of them, while technically adults, are treated like outsized children.

Most elite Australian footballers know they have a precious talent from an early age. As a result, they are treated as special by their families, teachers, coaches and friends. By early adulthood even journeymen players are making very good dough compared with their non-football peers.

Having concentrated on their football for most of their lives, they rely on club administrators to do a lot of their real-world thinking for them. All it takes is some bad advice to create a hell of a mess.

Having started out as sportsmen, the players become wealthy entertainers inside a system that's always looking for the next thing to provide an advantage, a little edge.

And yet, the public still sees it as sport and sport is worthless if it is not seen as being fair. The conviction that everyone is starting from the same place, that only natural ability and endeavour will decide the result, is what makes sport so compelling.

There's a moral dimension too. In sport, as in life, we expect people who do the wrong thing, however inadvertent it might have been, to own up and face the consequences.

Shaun Carney is a *Herald Sun* columnist

we're still a weird mob

be nearing its end, to one who is trying to kick-start his.

And he's using a fair dose of spin to make it happen.

On the same day Ms Gillard was opening a closed road, Nationals candidate for Mallee, Andrew Broad, was making an extraordinary call that the Mallee electorate should be called the "food capital of Australia".

This, he said, was because such a wide variety of food was grown and made in the Mallee.

"With the exception of coffee, every ingredient for every meal can be sourced from Mallee. Milk, cereal and orange juice for breakfast, Mallee lamb with vegetables and a glass of red for lunch, fresh fruit for afternoon tea, some cheese, almonds and sultanas for a snack and, if you can catch one, a Murray cod for dinner," Mr Broad said.

He said "not many other electorates could boast of the agricultural riches like Mallee".

Other than every other regional federal electorate in Victoria and southern NSW, he might almost be correct.

He sounds like the perfect politician in the making.

And he sure knows how to pick a fight, with statements like that.

And finally, jumping from federal politics to the more local variety, yet still on the vexed issue of catchy slogans for regions and towns.

Hamilton, in western Victoria, has always proudly claimed to be the wool capital of the world.

Of course, Goulburn in NSW also claims the same title, as do other cities and districts in the US and England. (It's a bit like every suburb and town seemingly has the "best fish and chips in the world".)

But Hamilton would be leading the wool title race. Or, it would have been if the Southern Grampians Shire hadn't given up the fight.

It has decided that the wool capital of the world slogan will be replaced by "Greater Hamilton — one place, many possibilities".

The shire's rationale is that wool has perhaps had its day and is not as relevant to the city as it once was.

To which critics point out that there's not much gold found in Ballarat nowadays, but it sure knows how to milk its heritage.

Hamilton appears to be forgetting the old adage — if you've got it, flaunt it.

So, there you have it, just a snapshot of one week of weirdness in the political paradise called Australia.

Ed Gannon is editor of *The Weekly Times*

Healing can start with a conversation

SEVENTEEN years ago today I lost my best mate. He drew his last breath after collapsing on to the cold floor of the family bathroom and died as the sun came up. He was only 17.

So today marks another lifetime past for somebody who was, but wasn't quite. A sad symmetry for a life borrowed at its most brief — a friend who has been gone from this Earth longer than he was ever on it.

It's been 17 years since paramedics cut through his favourite T-shirt and pumped his chest, desperate for a pulse.

Seventeen years since my father picked up the phone and his son listened awkwardly in the hallway.

Seventeen years since we found ourselves in a hospital emergency room looking at the lifeless body of a once charismatic kid. It was a tragedy shared by a mother who should never have had to bury a son and a brother who tried so desperately to save him.

The local newspaper wrote of the death of an inspiring senior student. He was no scholar but he was popular and passionate. We played his favourite music at his funeral. The pastor did his best to reconcile the loss. Friends formed a guard of honour and then we lowered his coffin into its final resting place beside the grandmother he'd never met.

Aaron Langmaid

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

We all cried like we never had before. But this was the kind of grief experienced each and every day since by the same sorts of kids carrying the same sorts of coffins.

Somewhere in Australia today, heartache and burden have tightened their grip around the family of a reckless teen on his P-plates, another victim of an alcohol-fuelled fight or just the smartest of kids in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The difference here was in those final moments on that cold winter morning, my mate might have known what was coming. Only days after his funeral, a coroner would reveal that this had not been a brain haemorrhage, no twist of fate. It was a death intended.

His body had been overcome by a common pharmaceutical drug. Scores of small white pills had dissolved into his blood stream. So many in fact, that some still sat whole in his stomach.

Death is hard to comprehend but one like that seemed so much harder. This was no teenager lost in the night but somebody who appeared to have walked willingly into it.

Yet here was a happy and confident young man who had planned his 18th birthday six months in advance.

He was competitive but could be equally carefree, even careless. He was witty. He would beep his car horn at strangers and wave in the other direction.

He possessed a charitable streak beyond his years and could lay down the charm like a seasoned politician. He was likeable and loved. Which made it harder to understand.

Many of his friends were never told the true circumstances of his death. It was easier to point to a death uncontrolled and unsuspected than one so unexplainable.

The questions of how and why sometimes still wake us in the night. There they lay beside us all, tangled and unanswered.

Seventeen years later my mate's voice and features have faded. But the sadness sure hasn't.

Seventeen years on, suicide remains the leading cause of death among 15-to-24-year-olds.

Latest ABS data shows it still accounts for one in four deaths among young Aussies.

In 2011, 321 families were left to pick up the pieces. That's more lives lost to suicide than any state road toll annually.

A decision that same year by the Press Council to ease restrictions on how it was reported has helped.

But police and reporters still tend to give these deaths a wide berth. Often they are avoided for good reason.

Sometimes they shouldn't be.

For a while I thought I'd failed my best mate. That somebody who knew him best maybe didn't know him at all.

He had mastered much in adolescence, but was yet to learn a lesson many are only granted in adulthood: that there is not a single problem that cannot be overcome by simply starting a conversation.

Nor could he have known how one split-second decision, made in an acute emotional window of self-doubt, could reverberate far beyond his lifetime.

These are the lessons learned by all those he left behind. They are the hardest lessons of all.

Need to speak to somebody? Start the conversation. See headspace.org.au or call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Aaron Langmaid is a *Herald Sun* journalist