

CITATION: *David Hambleton as joint and several Liquidator of Sky 5 Pty Ltd and Anor v Tuxford (No 8) [2012] QCATA 96*

PARTIES: David Hambleton as joint and several Liquidator of Sky 5 Pty Ltd
(First Applicant)
Realeaf Pty Ltd
(Second Applicant)
v
Stanley Gordon Tuxford
(Respondent)

APPLICATION NUMBER: APL477-11

MATTER TYPE: Appeals

HEARING DATE: 5 April 2012

HEARD AT: Brisbane

DECISION OF: **Mr Charles Brabazon QC, Member**

DELIVERED ON: 28 May 2012

DELIVERED AT: Brisbane

ORDERS MADE:

- [1] **The appeal is dismissed.**
- [2] **The orders made by this Tribunal on 14 November 2011 are affirmed.**
- [3] **To the extent necessary the time limit fixed for making a claim under the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000* is extended.**
- [4] **Pursuant to s 530 of the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000*, the Chief Executive of the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation must pay to Realeaf Pty Ltd the sum of \$19,846.05.**
- [5] **Pursuant to s 488(3)(c) of the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000* declare that the respondent Stanley Gordon Tuxford is named as the person who contravened the terms of s 470(i) of that Act, and is liable for the financial loss of Realeaf Pty Ltd.**
- [6] **Upon payment of the sum of**

\$19,846.05 from the Claim Fund to Realeaf Pty Ltd, Stanley Gordon Tuxford is liable to reimburse the Claim Fund by paying that sum to the Chief Executive of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation.

CATCHWORDS:

PROPERTY AGENTS AND MOTOR DEALERS – Claim against the fund by liquidator – whether event caused financial loss – who suffered loss – payment of dividend

*Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000, ss 469, 470, 476, 488, 530, 574
Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 2009, ss 42, 61*

APPEARANCES and REPRESENTATION (if any):

APPLICANT: Mr Steele of counsel for the liquidator

REASONS FOR DECISION

The issues

- [1] There are two issues in this appeal. The company Sky 5 Pty Ltd is in liquidation. The liquidator is Mr David Hambleton. He cannot agree with the Chief Executive of the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (the Office of Fair Trading – OFT). Their dispute is about money – \$19,846.05. The Chief Executive will not hand that money over to Mr Hambleton. First, he says that the fund he controls is not liable to pay the money. Secondly, he says that any money has to go directly to the creditor of Sky 5, Realeaf Pty Ltd. Who is right?
- [2] A short explanation of their different views is necessary. The details can be found in the judgment of this Tribunal dated 14 November 2011. There is not much dispute about the basic facts.
- [3] The directors of Sky 5, Mr Hutchinson and his daughter, wanted to make money. The idea was to sell blocks of land in the Waverly View Estate, owned by Land Equity Pty Ltd. Sky 5 was to act as the vendor, and obtain contracts with purchasers, in its own name. At settlement (called a “back to back” settlement) Sky 5 would use the purchasers’ money to pay for the land, and keep as its profit the mark-up on Land Equity’s wholesale price.
- [4] Originally, Sky 5’s plans were probably genuine ones. But, by around 2006, things went seriously wrong. Sky 5 appointed a real estate agent, Mr Gordon Tuxford to sell lots in the estate. He knew that any deposits from purchasers had to go into a trust account until settlement. He made around twenty sales, including this one. He had no trust account. Sky 5

did not have a real estate corporation licence and did not maintain a trust account.

- [5] On 27 November 2007 Realeaf's money was paid into an account controlled by Tuxford, called Operation Homebuy (Australia). Mr R Lindell, the company's director, expected that the money would be put into a trust account. Tuxford said to him that the money would be transferred to a trust account after first being paid to the Operation Homebuy account. That transfer was one of several curious ways in which Tuxford dealt with the transaction. However, Mr Lindell had been introduced to Tuxford by a friend, and it is apparent that he trusted him.
- [6] Tuxford had asked Mr Lindell to pay a \$29,998.42 deposit, according to a contract of sale for lot 71, which he agreed to buy for \$255,000. The vendor is described as Sky Pty Ltd on page 1 and Sky 5 Pty Ltd in Annexure A to the contract of sale. It appears that Sky 5 Pty Ltd was a company controlled by Hutchinson, while there was no company simply called 'Sky Pty Ltd'. It may be assumed that any dealings were meant to be with the existing Sky 5 Pty Ltd.
- [7] The deposit has disappeared, contrary to Tuxford's obligation to see it safe in a trust account. According to Tuxford, all such deposits found their way into Hutchinson's hands.
- [8] His conduct amounted to an "event" contrary to s 470(1)(e) of the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000* (PAMDA). Realeaf's money was entrusted to him.
- [9] Hutchinson was experienced in real estate matters. The facts strongly suggest that he and Mr Tuxford acted together. The liquidator's conclusion is probably quite right – "I have no doubt but Hutchinson and Tuxford were working together to secure the benefit of the deposits ... Sky 5 could not complete the purchase of the allotments from Land Equity Pty Ltd without the deposit funds ... I believe that the process was a sham arrangement conducted by Hutchinson and Tuxford."
- [10] The OFT appointed an inspector to investigate this claim, together with numerous other claims. With respect to this claim, he concluded, on 11 January 2011:
- "On the balance of probabilities there appears to be sufficient evidence to substantiate that Tuxford breached the provisions of PAMDA ..."
- Realeaf has recovered a dividend of \$10,152.37 from the liquidator, and has suffered a net financial loss of \$19,846.05.
- [11] The member's judgement says that there was insufficient evidence to find that Mr Hutchinson was acting as a "relevant person", in relation to this sale. That finding seems to have been based on the OFT's submission, that Hutchinson was not "a relevant person". That conclusion, or assumption, may be doubted, and it is not considered further in these reasons.

- [12] Hutchinson and his daughter have disappeared. Tuxford has a solicitor, but nothing else.
- [13] Those unhappy events mean that the innocent parties were entitled to assistance from the fund maintained under PAMDA. They qualify because there is an “event” according to s 470 of the Act. This Tribunal may allow a claim when there is such an event – see s 488. There must be “financial loss because of the happening of the event.” The ‘event’ in this case was Tuxford’s failure to put the deposits into a trust account.
- [14] The Chief Executive may refer claims to the Tribunal. That has happened. All the necessary legal and procedural requirements have been satisfied to put the resolution of claims by the innocent parties in the hands of this Tribunal.
- [15] It was submitted here, that the event was a failure to observe the requirements of s 11(d) of the *Land Sales Act 1984*. There are some difficulties with that. The section refers to, “the owner of land to which that act applies.” Sky 5 did not own the land. The Act applies to a proposed subdivision of land.
- [16] It is more appropriate to apply s 470(1)(e) of PAMDA –
- “(1) A person may make a claim against the fund if the person suffers financial loss because of the happening of any of the following events—
- (e) a stealing, misappropriation or misapplication by a relevant person of property entrusted to the person as agent for someone else in the person’s capacity as a relevant person.”
- [17] Mr Hambleton was appointed liquidator on 5 June 2008. He says that the first step should be to put all the funds in his hands. The individual claimants would then be creditors of the company. There are some other creditors. He proposes to make a final distribution of the company’s assets. Some other monies have come into his hands. There has already been a distribution of about one third of these claims. He predicts that the claimants will receive a large proportion of their claims, in a final dividend.
- [18] The Chief Executive opposes the liquidator’s scheme. He says that the claimants should be paid directly from the fund and recover 100% of their losses, after taking into account dividends paid by the liquidator.
- [19] It is necessary to say something about the OFT’s allegation that the company was responsible for the failures of Hutchinson and Tuxford – that the company would not have suffered any loss but for neglect or default of its directors and agent.
- [20] For the liquidator, in a comprehensive written submission, it was said that the misbehaviour of the company’s director Mr Hutchinson, and its agent, Mr Tuxford, is no barrier to its claim. The company and its directors are separate entities, and the effect of that separation is reinforced by decisions of the courts. Mention was made of *Dennis Wilcox Pty*

Ltd v FCT (1988) 79 ALR 267 at 274; *Industrial Equity v Blackburn* (1977) 137 CLR 567; *McLeod v R* (2003) 214 CLR 230.

[21] In the *McLeod* decision, the High Court put it this way:

“... a company has rights, interests and duties which differ from those of its directors, officers and members. The conduct or state of mind of the latter is not always to be attributed to the former; this is particularly evident upon an insolvent winding up.” (at para 28, Gleeson CJ, Gummow and Hayne JJ).

“Even when the shares of a company are closely held for purposes (or interests) of the body corporate are not synonymous with the interests of the person or persons in control.” (McHugh J).

[22] Therefore, it was submitted that the company should not be penalised for its directors’ misconduct, that the liquidator is now in proper control of the company and that the full amount of the various claims should be paid out, with no deduction for the amount of the dividends already paid. (The last submission is unarguable – any dividends must be deducted first).

[23] In my opinion, the principal submissions for the liquidator should be accepted. That is, the company and its director and agents are separate entities so that reprehensible conduct by those individuals should not be attributed to the company. That is this case. Sky 5, once under the independent control of the liquidator, and free of the misguided efforts of its directors and agent, is entitled to right the wrongs that have been done to it.

[24] The liquidator has lodged appropriate claims, it was submitted, and that there was no good reason for OFT refusing to pay them in full. It is said for the company that it suffered financial loss, by not being able to complete its contracts.

[25] Mr Hambleton has made every effort, to insist that he is the proper claimant of the fund, rather than the individuals who paid deposits. At the same time, it is clear that his claims are based entirely on the amounts paid by the purchasers, and nothing else. For example, see his submission to QCAT, dated 7 April 2011, the form containing a “statement of claim details”, and ex 3, a summary of the details of individual purchasers whose deposits were lost.

[26] The answer to the competing claims is this. It became clear that the company could not complete its undertaking, to sell land to the purchasers. When Land Equity called for settlement of the contracts, and there was no response, it rescinded them. They then became entitled to a refund of their deposits. The consideration for these deposits wholly failed, and they should have been repaid.

[27] Mr Hambleton is right to say that the disappearance of the deposits was a reason why the contracts could not be completed. It is another thing to claim that the result was a “financial loss” because Sky 5 could not complete the contracts. The deposits had not become the property of Sky 5. A deposit, intended to be held in a trust account, is the beneficial

property of the purchaser until settlement. Its disappearance was a financial loss for the purchaser, not Sky 5. Sky 5 was never entitled to the money.

- [28] For the company, it is not so clear what it had lost. The opportunity to settle the contracts was lost, but it is not possible to know the value of that lost opportunity. What costs were involved? What was the real market value of the blocks? In short, what did the company really lose?
- [29] What Sky 5 lost was the opportunity to complete the contracts. That opportunity may have been of some value. We do not know the amount of that loss, if any.
- [30] In the written submissions for the liquidator it is asserted that, "on paper, Sky 5 would have made about \$50,000 per lot, a far more significant sum than the amount claimed to have been misappropriated". If that claim could be proved, then it might be the foundation for some other claims against the fund. It does not affect the rights of the present claimants.
- [31] The OFT has been right in asserting that the individual purchasers are entitled to payments from the fund.
- [32] Realeaf has received \$10,152.37 from the liquidator. It is entitled to recover \$19,846.05 from the fund.
- [33] There may be issues about further distributions by the liquidator and further recovery for the fund. They can be dealt with, in a further application to QCAT.
- [34] Section 492(5) of PAMDA says, "Interest is not payable from the fund in relation to a claim allowed against the fund."
- [35] Those words seem clear enough. However there are decided cases which show that there may be exceptions, where a claim is for a lost opportunity, to use the funds. In that case, it is said, the claim is really a claim for damages, and so outside the apparent prohibition.
- [36] See the decisions in *Hungerford v Walker* (1989) 171 CLR 125 (High Court), *Chief Executive, Department of Tourism, Racing & Fair Trading v Hunter* [2002] QDC 272 (District Court), *Gettens v XFar Homes Pty Ltd* [2012] QCAT 150 and *Ryan v Ferrantino* [2010] QCAT 495. See also Judge McGill's decision in *Bieto v Triline Australia Pty Ltd (No 2)* [2003] QDC 307.
- [37] As that last decision shows, there should be evidence of the loss that has been suffered, by the unavailability of the money.
- [38] In the present proceedings, the various purchasers have not been active parties in the appeal. Any possible issues about interest as damages have not been dealt with.

- [39] It should be recorded that Mr Hambleton has done much good work for the benefit of many unfortunate purchasers who lost their deposits. Without his assistance, it is likely that some would not have recovered anything.
- [40] These are the orders of the Tribunal:
- (a) The appeal is dismissed.
 - (b) The orders made by this Tribunal on 14 November 2011 are affirmed.
 - (c) To the extent necessary the time limit fixed for making a claim under the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000* is extended.
 - (d) Pursuant to s 530 of the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000*, the Chief Executive of the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation must pay to Realeaf Pty Ltd the sum of \$19,846.05.
 - (e) Pursuant to s 488(3)(c) of the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000* declare that the respondent Stanley Gordon Tuxford is named as the person who contravened the terms of s 470(i) of that Act, and is liable for the financial loss of Realeaf Pty Ltd.
 - (f) Upon payment of the sum of \$19,846.05 from the Claim Fund to Realeaf Pty Ltd, Stanley Gordon Tuxford is liable to reimburse the Claim Fund by paying that sum to the Chief Executive of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation.