

Pioneering champion of free trade used power of the pen



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At first blush, Bert Kelly (1912-1997) was a modest man. He was a Methodist, a farmer, family man and Liberal member for the South Australian seat of Wakefield.

But, according to former Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam, “no private member has had as much influence in changing a major policy of the major parties”.

This influence was gained through Kelly penning, from the late 1960s, his Modest Member column for *The Australian Financial Review*, with its recurring theme of the need to cut protection to Australian industry.

“It was an unusual column,” recalls Vic Carroll, who was the paper’s editor and editor in chief during much of that period. “It was written in a hayseed fashion but, nevertheless, it had a big impact, a big following.”

There was the down-home wisdom about paying your way and Kelly artfully employed mythical figures such as “Fred” to pursue his arguments in a manner comprehensible to readers.

The head of the Centre for Independent Studies, Greg Lindsay, says Kelly “is primarily remembered for his commitment to the cause of free trade and economic good sense, but also for his ability to communicate his ideas clearly, incisively and, as was his style, with humour”.

But the Bert Kelly story is more textured than a simple morality tale.

It’s more than a story of a man on the land with firm views on how to run an economy, partly drawn from Wesleyan teachings about discipline and self-reliance, and who brought his views to a wider audience through a newspaper column.

Charles Robert (Bert) Kelly was born in 1912 into a farming family in Tarlee in South Australia. He loved farming but won Liberal preselection for Wakefield and became an MP at 46.

But his government connections went further. His father, Stan, had been a member of the Tariff Board in the 1920s. Stan had been disgusted by the Scullin Labor government's abject surrender to the advocates of protection – those people who journalist Warren Denning labelled "tariff touts" – during the tumultuous early stages of the Great Depression.

Titanic struggle

Half a century later, Bert Kelly was "imbibed" – as Gough Whitlam puts it – with his father's views on the evils of protection. He carried this into his Modest Member columns at the *AFR*, and was wise enough to understand the best way to influence people through the pen was not by relying on complex language and dense statistics. The struggle was titanic.

As historian Keith Hancock wrote: "Protection in Australia has been more than a policy: it has been a faith and dogma. Its critics, during the second decade of the 20th century, dwindled into a despised and detested sect suspected of nursing an anti-national heresy."

But as Lindsay points out: "The rational good sense of the Bert Kelly arguments, laced typically with rural humour, began to persuade and win over key people in parliament and outside. His Modest Member columns had an almost cult following."

It was an economic view of the world "profoundly influenced by a moral sense that was hardwired into the man".

"The battle for free trade against vested interests for Bert was a moral one. Much of this attitude was inspired by the Methodism of his upbringing. The early followers of John Wesley were free traders."

In 1973, the Whitlam government announced an across-the-board tariff cut of 25 per cent. A few months later, and in legislation that owed much to the lessons of Stan and Bert Kelly, Whitlam created the Industries Assistance Commission, which had the power to compulsorily inquire into, and report on, any claim for protection before the issue came before cabinet.

Thereafter, economic reform in Australia went into stasis for a decade. Bert Kelly left Parliament in 1977. Six years later, the Hawke Labor government floated the dollar and began cutting protection. Bert Kelly witnessed this before his death in 1997, at 84. But the *AFR*'s Modest Member lives on through books, lectures and highly readable columns.

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