



## ONE MORE NAIL

### *Chapter Four* **Into Parliament**

During the 1930's I used to go to Melbourne sometimes, perhaps to take sheep to the Melbourne Show or at the end of harvest for a short holiday. Occasionally I used to sit in on Tariff Board enquiries and I was continually exposed to my father's enthusiasm which he always had for any interest he had in hand. And I was also exposed to the influence of the then Member for Wakefield, Charles Hawker.

Charles Hawker was indeed a remarkable man and it is interesting that Harold Holt gave Hawker the credit as the man who influenced him most. He certainly had a great influence on me. He sometimes used to stay in Melbourne over weekends, instead of going on to Adelaide by train as Members of Parliament had to in those days. On some of these occasions he would come out to my parents' home and there would be considerable discussion about tariffs and their effect on farmers in particular, and the economy in general. So I had a general grounding in tariffs but I was really much more interested in farming and in my young family.

Occasionally Charles Hawker used to call in at the farm and on one such occasion he suggested that I should prepare myself to succeed him in Wakefield. This scared me badly because I was then very much engrossed in trying to make myself a better farmer. I was also very much involved with the farmers' extension service which was careful to be non-political. It is true that I had been elected as vice-president of the district Liberal and Country League (L.C.L.) committee and I realise now that they had marked me down as a possible political aspirant. But when Hawker told me what he had in mind for me I disappeared into the bush, protesting that my life was far too full to waste time in Parliament and I hated the very idea. I well remember Hawker's reply — "I am not asking you what you want, Bert," he said, "I am telling you where your duty lies." This admonition, coming from Hawker, was powerful indeed, with him all smashed up with war injuries. But he was killed soon after, in 1939, in a tragic air accident. I remember planting a small grove of trees to keep his memory fresh but this was not necessary for those of us who knew him well.

Being badly frightened by Hawker's suggestion that I should prepare myself for a political career, I was careful to give all things political a wide berth for the next 20 years. But in 1958 the then Member for Wakefield, Sir Philip McBride, announced his impending retirement, and, as is common with blue ribbon seats such as Wakefield, attention focussed on who would be his successor. I was interested in this question also, not as a possible candidate, but because I had an uneasy feeling that Charles Hawker's ghost was watching rather critically. So I and other concerned citizens sought out possible candidates but the ones we wanted were all too busy or not attracted to the idea. Then people started to look rather expectantly at me, so I quickly explained that I was not interested and, in any case, wasn't even a member of the L.C.L. so clearly couldn't stand as a candidate. But the secretary of the local branch soon disposed of this argument by reminding me that I had signed a bank order 20 years before which instructed the bank to pay my membership subscription on a certain date each year.

Then my father started to lean on me as well as Charles Hawker's ghost. My father's experience in Canberra taught him to hold Members of Parliament in rather low regard. For instance, if he

thought that any of his progeny were talking loosely he used to say accusingly that we were sounding just like a Member of Parliament and this comment was meant to wound. So I was surprised at my father's willingness to see me offered upon the political altar until I realised that he didn't really care which party I was in as long as I was in there somewhere fighting the battle to get tariffs lowered. I didn't feel as deeply about this as did my father but my conscience and Hawker's ghost were certainly troubling me.

On my next visit to Adelaide then I went into the head office of the L.C.L. and asked the very decent and efficient secretary, Reg Wilson, if he could tell me how to go about nominating as the L.C.L. candidate for Wakefield. He then asked all the usual questions, such as was I a member of the League and if so, which branch, and so on. Then he gave me a nomination form but cautioned me that Wakefield was a blue ribbon L.C.L. seat and there was sure to be a large number of high quality candidates and he thought I ought to know this. "And Mr ... I am sorry I have forgotten your name again ...". So I told him again that my name was Kelly. So he went on, "And Mr Kelly the rules of the L.C.L. say that you must get six members to sign your nomination form and this may not be as easy in your case when you have had so little to do with politics for so long. I don't want to see you hurt, so think about it before you finally make up your mind." Then he gave me a form, asked my name yet again and left me to make up my muddled mind.

This was far from easy. I was immodest enough to know that if I did nominate I would probably win the contest. It was true that I had done nothing for the L.C.L. for 20 years but I had talked in almost every hall in the electorate, either as a member of the Advisory Board of Agriculture or the State Soil Conservation Committee, or as a returned Nuffield Scholar in Agriculture. But the real problem was with myself and my family, particularly Lorna who disliked the idea as much as I did. But my father was still there, leaning on me, and so was Hawker's ghost. So I signed the wretched form and took it in to Mr Wilson a week later. I even persuaded six members to support me. My reception this time was rather different; Mr Wilson had done a few soundings in the interval and he told me in a rather puzzled way that he understood that I was likely to win. And he didn't have last week's difficulty of continually forgetting my name.

There were six or seven other candidates for preselection and this was done in those days by the plebiscite system, that is, every member of the party got a postal vote, as well as a biographical description of each candidate. As there were about 7000 members of the party in Wakefield at that stage, it was clearly impossible to do more than call on a few of the more influential office bearers and to hope that the word would spread that you were really trying. In order to help the candidates become better known to the members, some of the branches arranged meetings of members at which the candidates were asked to speak. I think that there were five of these and I now realise that I was fortunate there were not more of them because I must have performed really badly. After one such meeting a lady came up to me and said, "Bert, we did so want you to win but you were awful!" And I was too, as I knew almost nothing about politics and I have always been a poor speaker even when I knew what I was talking about.

Eventually the time for counting the votes came round and I won comfortably, so I became the endorsed L.C.L. Candidate for Wakefield. But being so did not make me politically wise. I remember asking Sir Philip McBride, the retiring member, "What kind of a seat is it, Sir Philip?" and his reply, "Bert, even you couldn't lose it."

Then the election came round in November, 1958, with Mr Menzies as he then was leading our Party. In those days it was generally accepted that the election demanded election meetings so I had one of these on every weeknight of the campaign. The first one was programmed to be at

a little place called Houghton, in the Adelaide hills. Being anxious to create a good impression, I arrived at Houghton at 7.45 p.m. before the crowd had gathered. At 8.15 a chap drove up in a big black car and, seeing my wife and I standing there asked, "What's on here tonight?" I explained with typical modesty that it was tonight that Mr Kelly was to address the nation. "Cripes!" he said, and off he went and we never saw him again. At 8.45 the crowd had gathered; there was the chairman of the branch and the secretary who both felt that they had to be there, there was the village idiot who came to everything that was free, and there were three others who, I found out later, were doggedly determined to vote for me even after they heard me. And then there was a senator who was supporting me. As we filed into the hall I whispered to the senator, "What do we do now?" "What do you mean, what do we do? We talk to them, of course," he replied. "But you can't lecture a crowd as small as this" I protested, but his reply was prompt — "Look, Bert, you'll never get a crowd like this again." So the meeting ground into gear with me leading off. I had my speech written out on big sheets of paper and, after I had been going on for about ten minutes, I came to a bit in brackets "Pause for applause." I paused but there was no applause so I peered up over the piece of paper to see the two chaps sitting right in front of me were sound asleep already. They had evidently had a hard day in the field. Not being experienced in politics I was rather disconcerted by this, so I hurried to an early conclusion, to everyone's surprise and gratification. But the senator, pleased to find that he had some extra time to fill, went for an extra half an hour. At the end of the meeting I apologised to one of the audience for boring him but he said that he didn't mind, he expected to be bored when he came to political meetings!

The campaign dragged on with the inevitable result that I won comfortably as indeed have an orang-utan if he had got the L.C.L. endorsement for Wakefield with Mr Menzies leading us.

Then we were called to Canberra to go through the formalities of electing a leader and deputy leader. But on the way over I had to admit to Senator Rex Pearson, who had been on the Advisory Board of Agriculture with me, that I was uncertain as to whether I expected to be a member of the Country or the Liberal Party. He was rather startled at this display of the depth of my political ignorance which he begged me not to display to anyone else. But for a political innocent such as I it was a natural question. After all, the initials L.C.L. I knew stood for Liberal and Country League and how was I to know to which Party I owed allegiance in Canberra? But, looking back on it all, I must have been the most ignorant member who had ever represented a safe seat like Wakefield.

When Parliament opened in February 1959 I made my maiden speech, and, on reading it over now, it doesn't read too badly. But it was greatly helped by the advice I received from the present Speaker who persuaded me, in the kindest fashion, to leave out a lot of the worst parts. Anyhow I got it off my chest somehow, in spite of being desperately nervous. When I sat down everyone was kind enough to come and congratulate me and for a while I laboured under the delusion that I was the new Messiah. But the next time I rose to speak I noticed that almost every one walked out.