



ONE MORE NAIL

Chapter Twelve

Public Works Committee

The general elections were held on October 25th, 1969, and South Australia did not do nearly as well this time so I had a suspicion that my ministerial days might be numbered. But the government lost ground everywhere and there was a widespread dissatisfaction with Gorton's leadership. On October 31st I had to go to Canberra to a Naval Board meeting, as I was still Minister for the Navy. Then I received a message from Malcolm Fraser that he wanted to see me urgently, so I went across to Parliament House to find him and Dudley Erwin busily mustering support for John Gorton. David Fairbairn had just made a typically forthright attack on Gorton and had announced that he would not serve under him again. And I was told that Bill McMahon would be a contender for the leadership of the Liberal Party when we met in Canberra, after all the election results were finalised. Then David Fairbairn also announced that he too would be a candidate for the leadership.

So when I arrived at Parliament House on October 31, Fraser and Irwin were busy indeed. They started pressuring me, telling me that I ought to vote for Gorton. This rather got under my skin as I always resent being told how I ought to vote. So I turned on them and told them that, as far as I was concerned, they would serve Gorton better if they kept quiet and that I certainly did not need their advice on how to behave, and, if I did, I would ask for it. John Gorton came into the room in time to catch the tail-end of this tirade so asked me to come into his office because he wanted to have a talk with me. Then he told me that because South Australia had done particularly badly at the elections, he felt that I may not be in his ministry if he won the contest for leadership.

I was very impressed with the honesty of the man. He knew that there was going to be a leadership battle and he did not have to tell me that he was almost certainly going to sack me until after the leadership election. The fact that he had been so completely straightforward was one of the reasons why I voted for him when the vote took place on November 7th.

There is, however, a postscript to the story. Years later, when Fraser and Gorton had quarrelled and were bitter enemies, Fraser told me that Gorton behaved as he did with me because he thought, by treating me as one whose vote was not for sale, I would be so impressed by his honesty that I would be likely to vote for him anyway. Indeed, Fraser told me that, after I had gone, Gorton joined the other two and confidently announced that he was certain that my vote was in the bag. Politics is a funny business.