



## ONE MORE NAIL

### *Chapter Eighteen*

## **Experiences in Parliament**

I have been in Parliament for 19 years, so you would think that I would have little difficulty in giving many examples of my decisive interventions or the brilliantly witty things I have said. But being more of a plodder than a high stepper, I have to admit that my parliamentary performance was rather dull. It wasn't that I lacked example. In my first parliament I sat alongside Roy Wheeler, the member for Mitchell. Arthur Calwell, the deputy Leader of the Opposition, was one day giving tongue about his dislike of the imperial honours system. "I don't believe in these Georgian traditions, in these Victorian customs, in these Edwardian ways," he complained. "Oh, leave Eddie out of this," the bored voice of Roy Wheeler came drawling across the Chamber. He was, of course, referring to the notorious Member for North Sydney, Eddie Ward. That is the kind of remark that I think of two weeks later, when I almost kick out the end of the bath with excitement at my cleverness.

Fred Daly was witty in a boring kind of way, but I thought that Clyde Cameron could be more devastating than Daly, probably because Daly was at it all the time. Menzies stood out above everybody — no one else was in the same class. Jim Cope had a fine wit and a fine drawling voice to frame it. Whitlam was brilliantly clever but cruel, he just couldn't keep his claws unsheathed. People will be surprised to hear that Paul Hasluck had a well honed, mordant sense of humour. I used to sit near him on the front bench and he often made up irreverent verses of poetry that were brilliantly funny. I wish I had kept some of these, they would have been a wonderful source of blackmail when Paul was Governor-General. Jim Killen has a great reputation for wit but he uses such long words that I have to spend too much time puzzling over his meaning. Malcolm Fraser is not notable for his sense of humour; if you see him smile you know that it is either wind or he has been working on a joke for a week. But a sense of humour is a great handicap to a leader. It is true that it would make him live longer but he generally would go further without it.

My most notable achievement was at a typically low level. When the Melbourne Cup was to be run in 1975, tempers were very frayed because we in the Opposition were holding up Supply and no one knew what the outcome was going to be. It is a tradition of Parliament that it is the Government's responsibility to "keep the House" which means that if a member calls attention to the state of the House and there are not the required numbers to form a quorum when the bells are rung to summons Members to the Chamber, it is the responsibility of the Government Members to obey the bells so that the House is not counted out. Drawing attention to the state of the House is almost always done by a Member of the Opposition and again almost always when a Government Member is speaking.

When the 1975 Melbourne Cup was about to be run we in the Opposition planned to call a quorum at exactly the critical time when government members, who we knew would be watching the race on T.V. in their party room, would be obliged to go into the House and would not be able to rush back to their party room in time to see the finish of the Cup. And we had Andrew Peacock to advise us as to the exact time to call the quorum, Andrew being an expert on these matters as his horse Leilani had come in second the year before. So we knew that we would get advice on timing which was almost straight from the horses mouth. But

unfortunately, as the critical moment loomed close, our Whip noticed that the Labour man who was speaking was slowing down, and that it seemed likely that it would be one of our side who was speaking when the critical moment arrived. So when the Labor man sat down and went into his party room to see the Cup run, I got to my feet and started to address an almost empty House which was, I admit, no novel experience. Then I heard an urgent whisper from behind me "Now!" so I told the Speaker that I was so impressed with what I was saying that I thought there should be more people to hear me so I drew his attention to the state of the House. So the quorum bells began ringing, and the Government members had to leave their T.V. set just when the race was getting interesting while our side wandered in after the race was over.

I suppose it all seems rather childish now but it seemed a good lark then, when everyone was sitting on the edge of their seats, as it were, with us only a week or so away from the Government's dismissal by Sir John Kerr.

Most of my most effective interventions in Parliament have been made at Question Time. I have recounted the more important tariff questions but there were a few others that may bear telling. One was again about the Melbourne Cup which is an event I have not yet seen, nor indeed do I wish to see. But in 1976 the Cup was won by a New Zealand horse and as we filed into the House after the race (they had the good sense this time not to try to run the Cup and Parliament together) I thought up a question which I did not have time to give to the Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs, John Howard, but I was not greatly concerned because Howard had previously demonstrated that he was fast on his feet. The question was: "Because of the consistently strong competition from New Zealand, will the Minister see what can be done to put a tariff on New Zealand horses in order to prevent them running through faster than our home-produced horses?" This brought the House down, and Howard floundered around so much that the Speaker, Billy Snedden, accused him of weighing in light!

The most effective question I ever asked was put to the Labor Treasurer, Jim Cairns, while we were in Opposition. There had been some criticism in our Party Room because the Leader and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition were getting all the questions, it being a convention that, if either of these stood, the Speaker would call them before any of us. And as the two leaders were hot on the scent of all kinds of scandals, they naturally had to hog question time more than some of us liked. I defended their right to do this, saying that we had elected them as leaders and we should let them get on with it, but I added that I was pregnant with the best question ever conceived and that I was jumping up and down trying to catch the Speaker's eye in a way that was positively dangerous to a man in my condition. So when I did at last get the call, everyone listened intently.

My question to the Treasurer was: "Last week the Treasurer told us about his policy of using deficit financing to lower the present level of unemployment. How is this solution of burying the unemployment problem under a mountain of money actually working out? If printing money is a good solution for the unemployment problem, why not print more of the stuff and get rid of the unemployment problem altogether?" And Jim Cairns, with his kind heart brimming over with love and affection, just could not resist agreeing with me and replied that that was just what the government had in mind. Many keen political observers pinpoint the beginning of Cairns' decline from that reply.

In September, 1964, the Government was contemplating imposing a levy on hens so as to discourage the production of more eggs than were necessary to supply the local market. The changeover from small flocks to the large intensive poultry houses had not yet taken place in South Australia as it had in the Eastern States. I asked the Minister for Primary Industries, Charlie Adermann, who was not noted for his sense of humour, this question: "Is the Minister

aware that most of the eggs produced in South Australia are produced from flocks containing less than 50 birds? Will this mean that each flock will have to be counted by an inspector? Will the Minister tell me how this will be done in my case as most of my fowls live either in the header or in the trees?" I thought[t] that Menzies would fall off the Prime Ministerial chair. The poultry levy scheme was delayed for about six months while they found an answer to that one.

In September, 1970, when John Gorton was Prime Minister, I got to hear that the executive officers (they used to be known as secretaries) of the high protection lobby groups that operate in Canberra had asked the Prime Minister to a lunch which I feared may have been intended to soften him up a bit. So I asked him this question on the previous day: "I understand that the lobbyists that work for secondary industry interests are wining and dining the Prime Minister tomorrow. Will the Prime Minister assure me that, as he tackles the oysters, he will not forget the parlous position of the rural sector of the economy whose development has been inhibited by carrying on their bent backs at least some of the interests at the feast? As he embarks on the roast duck, will he remember that the sound development of Australia depends on the ability of both primary and secondary industry to supply the exports that a developing economy demands and so depends on our having a cost structure low enough to enable us to compete with our overseas competitors? As the hot-house strawberries are ushered in, will he realize that a lot of other interests would love to give him a luscious meal and our only regret is that we cannot afford it?" This question and the P.M.'s cautious answer got a good run in the press the next morning and I understand were a dampening influence at the feast.

The same group had been kind enough to ask me to a similar lunch on another occasion. With a few exceptions, most of them behaved with impeccable good taste and tried not to make me feel too uncomfortable. But there was one who could not resist having a piece of me during the meal. But they spent more time arguing among themselves than with me.

A Member of Parliament always has to be careful that he is not duchessed on social occasions. It did not happen to me often, but on one occasion I was asked to inspect a large and important factory which was engaged in making some highly protected products and about which I had been critical in Parliament. I think that it was quite proper to ask me to make such a visit, and I went willingly, hoping that I could better understand the industry when next I spoke about it. After the factory inspection, they gave me a smashing lunch in the board room, with all the top brass present. That was nice of them too. But what wasn't nice was the enthusiastic way they hoed into me both during and after the meal. I stood this for some time and then said that if I had a disagreement with my shearers I didn't ask them into the drawing room to air it, and I thought their behaviour was in poor taste. And I added rather crudely that if they could tell me in which corner of the room they wanted their lunch left, I would do what I could to oblige. I guess that my reaction was unnecessarily sharp but I am not as refined as I should be. One of the directors was kind enough to offer to drive me home after the dust had settled, and when I said that I was sorry for getting so cross, he said he thought the behaviour of his group had been inexcusable. Shortly after this, I received by phone an invitation to visit the factory of another company in the same industry, again accompanied with an invitation to lunch. When I hesitated over the lunch invitation I was told that there was nothing to worry about and that they had heard about what happened on the other occasion and we could eat in their canteen. So I gladly went.

But a Member of Parliament has to be more careful than other people because there are usually many groups or persons hoping to catch him out. But in the last resort a Member does have some kind of protection because of the laws and privileges of Parliament. I never invoked these but went very close to doing so on one occasion. In November, 1964, a friend of mine in the firm of Horwood Bagshaw Ltd. tipped me off that an officer of the Customs department was

conducting a search to find what shareholdings, if any, I had in that company. I had been conducting an examination of the effect of the customs tariff on self propelled headers. Why the Customs people should have connected this activity with any shareholding of mine in the company was, and still is, a mystery to me but I think that Customs officials are given a special course in how to be suspicious when they the Department and from then on they spend a lot of time practising. I considered the departmental action inexcusable so I wrote to tell the newly appointed Minister for Customs, Senator Ken Anderson. When I took the letter to the Prime Minister's office in Parliament House, his secretary read it through quickly and then said in horrified tones: "Oh, no, they couldn't have been as silly as that, and particularly to you, of all people. We will certainly have the matter investigated immediately." An hour later I was asked whether I would go round to the Minister's office where, besides the Minister, were the departmental heads, all looking very sad. They then admitted that they had indeed made such an enquiry and that it was the action of an enthusiastic and newly appointed officer and they were very sorry and could assure me that nothing like this will ever happen again. I considered this reply for a while and then gave them a lecture about the Privileges Committee of Parliament and how, only a few years ago, a journalist had been imprisoned for violating Parliamentary privilege. I wasn't quite sure what I was talking about but it had a fine threatening ring about it. Then they all apologised again, particularly the officer who was most likely to end up in prison. I then said that I would retire and consult my advisers which sounded pretty impressive. So I stalked out and found Frank Davis, my general mentor. He agreed that I was write to be cross but thought there was no need to take the matter much further. "Just a few more turns of the thumb-screw, Bert, and then let the beggars go." So I went back to the Minister's office, gave them another lecture about the proper way to behave and then graciously announced that, provided I received a proper written apology, then I would let the matter drop, out of the goodness of my heart. When the letter of apology arrived, I sent it back as not being sufficiently subservient. Quickly another entirely satisfactory letter came along, so I let the matter rest, though I used to contrive to let each new incoming Minister for Customs know how magnanimous I had BEEN.

Apart from this incident, the Customs Department always treated me with great courtesy, probably more than I deserved. I remember, when I was Deputy Whip, and so was responsible for the smooth running of the House which I wasn't doing very well, I had kept a group of Customs officials hanging around for what must have seemed to them an inordinate length of time. So they came to me and complained in mild and polite manner. I replied that as long as they were in the precincts of Parliament House waiting for their item of business to be dealt with, at least I knew that they were not back in their offices raising duties even higher. This was a mean remark which certainly the general consideration I had received from the Department did not deserve.

When Labor were in government I conducted a running campaign with the Prime Minister, trying to persuade him to cease the practice of telling the press what was decided in Cabinet before he told Parliament. Whitlam knew that this was wrong as he had often complained when our government behaved in this way. So, on May 15, 1973, I asked him this question: "Does the Prime Minister realise that his practice of making announcements of policy and personnel changes to press conferences rather than to Parliament denies members the opportunity of hearing of these changes at first hand and effectively prevents discussion of them? Does he recall his criticisms of other Prime Ministers at other times when they departed to any small extent from the cardinal principle that, when the Parliament is in session, Parliament must be told of these matters directly and not second-hand? Does not the Prime Minister recognise that a continuation of this practice must denigrate the position of Parliament in the democratic system? For these good reasons would he please cease this practice?" Whitlam replied "The Honourable Gentleman has quite rightly caught me out on this. I do not suppose that anyone

who used to so consistently quote Sir Robert Menzies on the principle that matters of government policy should be announced in Parliament when the Parliament is sitting. There are many instances where I have said that in Sir Robert's time and in the time of his three successors. I must admit that I have departed from it. I can only plead that, before the election, I undertook that I would have a press conference every Tuesday when I was in Canberra." Whitlam then went on to explain the reasons why he felt he had to continue a practice he knew was wrong.

I followed the matter up in the budget session by attending one of these press conferences in my position as a newspaper correspondent. I asked Whitlam there why he had made it necessary for me to come to the press conference to obtain information which I ought to be given in Parliament? And on September 17 I asked another question in Parliament along the same lines, and again the answer was unsatisfactory and Whitlam knew it. But unfortunately he had started riding this television tiger and he just didn't know how to get off it. And it pretty well ate him in the end.

I can imagine how heady must have been the wine of adulation that was Whitlam's lot when he was newly elected as Prime Minister. Even before then, when we were running up to the 1972 election with Mr McMahon as our leader, Whitlam was doing poor Billy like a dinner, both in the House and on T.V. It was not surprising then that Whitlam seemed unable to resist the lure of the box. I am sure I wouldn't either if I had been able to perform even half as well as he did. So he had these press conferences every week and it was wonderful when he was kicking with the wind, when everything was going his way. But when things started to go sour as they inevitably do, no matter how well the Government is performing, then the practice of having the conferences became an awful cross to carry. You can imagine the trouble that Moses would have had if he had had to face a press conference every night as he led the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses would perhaps look a bit bedraggled after a hard day on the hoof and that would not pass unnoticed. Then some bright young reporter would want to know how far they had come today, and how far they would go tomorrow, and was he sure there wasn't a short cut somewhere? And then the quality and quantity of the manna would be criticised and so on. The task of leading a democratic country is made immeasurably more difficult now that T.V. rules us as it does. I am sure that Fraser is right not to make himself too readily accessible to the media. Menzies didn't either and ran the country all the better as a result.

I do not think the House of Representatives operates nearly as well as it should. There are many reasons for this but the chief one is the large numbers of Ministers compared to back benchers. The Government really rules the roost, when it should be Parliament which is in control. The Senate seems to manage much better. And the Parliament sits for only 70 days in a year, which is only about half the time they do in Ottawa and Westminster. And certainly we do not use the House of Reps Committees as well as they do in the Senate. And the Reps would operate far better when discussing the Committee stages of a detailed and controversial Bill, if we debated it in a truly committee manner, with departmental officials present to give technical answers to technical queries. As in Parliamentary Committee work generally, members of Parliament behave in a surprisingly sensible way if they think no one is watching them.

Now that I am not in Parliament I am more aware than ever of the low regard with which Parliament is regarded by the populace. Perhaps this is the effect of the broadcasting of Parliament. Yet in Canada they are going to televise it as well. I am afraid if we did this pre-selection for a safe seat would depend on looks, not brains.

Members of Parliament are by nature egotists; you have to be that way to go around asking people to vote for you. So we are always inclined to see ourselves in the centre of the world

stage, and with our electorate in particular hanging on every word we utter. I remember how, after a week in Parliament, we used to have great discussions in the aircraft as to whether we had won or lost the week's argument. If we had done well it was always somewhat of a let down for me to meet a friend in the street the next day and to have him ask "Have you been sitting this week in Canberra?" when I thought he would have been taking it all in with breathless interest. But before I became a member I never knew if Parliament was meeting and since I am no longer a member, I have been startled to find how indifferent I have become to the broadcast proceedings of Parliament. The main reason for this is that there is such a lot of rather infantile abuse bandied about. It used to give me some satisfaction while I was watching or participating in these verbal squabbles but now, listening to them from the outside, I just find them boring.

You[] should not be too surprised at the rather queer behaviour of your member of Parliament. If we weren't queer before we became members, we would be soon after. The very life we lead, shuttling across the face of the continent each weekend, going to meetings without end, being continually in the public eye or trying to be if we aren't, and frequently with family strains building up, all these things make us worse. So you should always expect your member to be a bit odd. But that is no reason why he should behave as badly as he does. Perhaps it is just that the atmosphere of the House upsets him. It did me. But I am afraid that we are getting worse and some of the blame for this must be laid at Mr Fraser's door. When he is broadcasting to the nation he behaves with exemplary decorum and good taste. If he is reading a set speech he is hard to fault except that he is inclined to be dull. But in Parliament, particularly at question time, he behaves quite differently. He seems to see Parliament as the setting for a gladiatorial contest which he is determined to win by fair means or foul, instead of a place where reasoned argument should take place. In parliament he does not behave as well as he should. Others don't either, but the Prime Minister should set a standard in these matters, particularly one as well bred as Malcolm Fraser. There is a surprisingly larrikin streak in him sometimes, particularly in Parliament.

But my most lasting feeling about Parliament was boredom. I unfortunately found most of the happenings in the House unutterably dull, except, of course, when I was speaking.

I kept a diary most of the time I was a member of Parliament, but not while I was a minister. It is very easy to do with these portable dictaphones and particularly with a secretary to type it all out. I used to dictate it most days in Canberra and frequently when working in Adelaide. I seldom read it and when I do, I am appalled at the trivia I have recorded. I guess that, if I had to write it all out in longhand, I would not have been so verbose. But having things written down is often handy and sometimes revealing. Some of my most confident assertions have proved to be utterly wrong.

But dull and plebian though my diary certainly is, I gather that it has some virtue in some people's eyes. A historian who I have known and respected for many years, challenged me that I had not done something she thought I have done. I protested that I had done it and I would find the entry in my diary to convince her. But when I returned to Adelaide and started to go through the diary, I became so sick of the job, that I decided to let the historian do the hard work. So I took the several volumes over to Canberra and let her loose on them, with stern injunctions that they were to be regarded as strictly confidential. But when she brought them back to me two weeks later she thanked me and then added wistfully that she couldn't wait for me to die! Evidently she felt that they would be of considerable help to researchers in 50 years time when they are writing the history of these times. I must admit that I get a certain sadistic pleasure out of the picture of some poor student winnowing his way through the great heap of cocky chaff to get a few grains of interest right at the bottom of the heap.

But the diaries of the younger, more brilliant members, particularly those who take more interest in political manoeuvring, would be of interest to themselves as well as to posterity. And even dull people like me can get some quiet satisfaction from the thought that we can get even with a few sods long after we are dead.