



ONE MORE NAIL

Chapter Nineteen

Relationships with the Liberal Party

I have previously paid tribute to the way the Liberal Party made no attempt to bring me to heel when I was belting the Liberal-Country Party government about its tariff policy. Certainly I used to run into criticism from my colleagues that I was rocking the boat, but never from the Prime Ministers of the time, and certainly never from the Liberal Party hierarchy. This independence is something that we should cherish. I know, of course, that there are subtle ways that pressure could be brought to bear on a Liberal to make him toe the line, such as threatening to bring pressure to see that he doesn't get Liberal endorsement next time. But this kind of pressure is infrequent.

I was mostly left alone when the leadership struggles took place in the Party. All the other Party members seem to spend most of their time on the phone, being rung up by the good and great. I used to sometimes sit in the office hoping that this day one of the contestants or their helpers, would ring me to ask for my support. But very few did. I guess that this is a grave reflection on my ability as a politician. I have never become really interested in the party political processes in the way other members do, so there was clearly something lacking in my political make-up. I guess that this is another reason why I was beaten by Giles for pre-selection. When the newspapers were buzzing with rumours as to who was going to support who, I used to have to read the papers to find out what was going on, and who my colleagues were going to support. But I didn't have to read the paper to find out how I was going to vote; I could make up my own mind.

My relationships with the Liberal branches in the Wakefield electorate were always good. There was some criticism that I spent too much time in the Northern Territory and Public Works business, but nothing to worry about. And the State organisations were always helpful. In the last years there was a painful split with the Liberal Movement party and this made people hate one another and was very unpleasant for a great many people. But not for me who didn't seem to get caught up in it.

Again, as far as the Federal side of the Liberal Party was concerned, my relationships were close and cordial. I have been a member of the Federal Rural Committee since 1959 and some of my most rewarding and valuable work has been on that committee. It is composed of the chairmen of each State Rural Committee together with "observers" from the Federal Parliament. It has always had good chairmen. I served under Don McKinnon, Senator Peter Sim, Malcolm Fraser, Tony Street and Bill Weatherly. They were all good and they all believed in the virtue of making decisions that were soundly based. And we have always been prepared to embark on an argument with the Liberal Party Manufacturing Committee which used to have some rather ultra-protectionist ideas. But when the two committees met together reason usually prevailed. I have usually found that most secondary industry spokesmen behave quite sensibly when cornered or when held firmly to the facts of the case. Certainly the Federal Reserve Committee has had, and will, I hope, continue to have a responsible attitude to the tariff question. I am sure that this will be so while our present chairman, Bill Weatherly, is driving the committee.

But the heart and soul of the party is found in the party room. When I first became a member I was startled and impressed by the vigour of the party room discussions. These were almost always joint meetings of both the Country Party and the Liberals. In these meetings no proper holds were barred and there was a great deal of frank and uninhibited comment which impressed me very much at the beginning. If a Minister was introducing some new legislation to the party room, he almost always took the precaution of clearing it with the government members' committee that was covering that area. If there was an overwhelming majority of the committee against it, then the Minister would usually take it back to Cabinet. If Cabinet insisted that the legislation was necessary, then there would usually be a series of meetings with the committee, while the rough spots were rubbed off. Then the revised draft would come back to the party room again and agreement usually obtained. But if a member still objected, he was expected to state his disagreement to the party room and to warn the Prime Minister that he did not find it possible to support the government. Or if he had not yet finally made up his mind how he intended to vote, he would say that he reserved his position on this matter. There were very few formal votes taken at party meetings, mostly the Prime Minister weighed up the feelings of the meeting as best he could, or as best suited him. The procedure was quite different to the way the Labor Party went about their business. They always had votes, and were much more formal than we were.

There was another great difference between the two Party rooms. The Labor Party always had a separate chairman who was not the leader of the Parliamentary Party as was our practise. Our practice can give an almost unfair advantage to the leader of the our party because he can call for members to speak in the order that suits him. For instance, if the argument appeared to be running against the leader, it is easy for him to select as the next speaker either a good speaker for his side or a bad speaker from the other side. I have seen this done by all the party leaders under whom I served and I admit that the Labor practice is purer in the democratic sense. All the same, although I have suffered under the present system, I would still prefer it to the other. You can worship at the altar of democracy, but you have to be prepared to cut a few corners to make it work.

We always had the problem of party room leaks. I know that good political reporters of both sexes are experts at wheedling information out of members as to what transpired at party meetings. They would usually begin by saying that they already had a pretty clear picture as to what had transpired, but they were anxious to check up one or two things. For instance, if tariffs had been on the party room agenda, they would be pretty safe in coming to me and telling me that they had heard I had got badly rolled, but they didn't want to write this without giving me the change to rebut this allegation. And if I were foolish or innocent enough to fall for this ploy, I would tell them what I had said and then they were well away. They then would go to a man who had been mentioned by me and tell him the same story, adding a few tit-bits that they had got from me, and soon the second person would be adding his small contribution to mine. Soon it wouldn't be long before the bucket held quite a lot of milk, perhaps with some froth at the top. So it is true that all the information appearing in the papers the day after a party meeting was not given to the journalists as leaks, but there is no doubt that a lot of it was.

We were always trying to catch the villains who were doing the leaking. We used to watch for chaps taking notes or we would pay particular attention to someone who we thought was getting particularly favourable treatment from a newspaper. This we thought might be a reward for service rendered. But our detective work was complicated by the fact that we knew the Prime Ministers were not above doing a little leaking on their own account if they thought it was worthwhile to fly a kite to see which was the political winds were blowing. Because of the danger of being mis-reported, some of my colleagues refused to attend party meetings, but I was never quite certain whether this was the real reason or whether they were just bored with

the whole business. Party meetings did become boring after a few years. There were always a few members who were always on their feet and it didn't take long to memorise their speeches. At the beginning of each session we used to get pep talks from the Leader about the virtues of loyalty and earnest endeavour and that kind of thing. One of the best things about not being in Parliament is not going to party meetings.

When we went into Opposition we had a rush of blood to the head and decided to have an elected front bench. Here again an elected front bench, either in Opposition or in Government, may be in accordance with the finest democratic ideals and the only trouble with the system is that it doesn't work well; otherwise it is splendid. Up till then the responsibility of the Prime Minister who had the awful task of balancing one man against another and whether a particular State needed particular treatment, and so on. There had always been murmurs that this system gave too much power to the P.M. and also encouraged members to fawn on the leader too much.

So when we went into Opposition then we decided to jettison the old system and opted for an elected front bench. So we spent one awful day going through an exhaustive and exhausting ballot. The final result was, most of us thought, very much the same as would have followed the leader doing the job. But as we watched the Labor ministry deteriorate because of the performance of ministers who the Prime Minister could not sack, we realised we had made a mistake so we went back to the old system before we were elected to government again. I moved the motion in the party room that we change back again and I am certain that I was right, though I admit that it gives a great deal of power to a Prime Minister. But the elected ministry idea, though it may indeed be democratic, just doesn't work well.

The Labor Party gave themselves an additional handicap by having all their ministers in the Cabinet. We, on the other hand, have always favoured having a first and second eleven, the first eleven being the Cabinet and the rest making up the full Ministry. Whitlam tried to get our system adopted by the Labor Party because only those who have listened to a group of 27 Ministers arguing over everything could realise what an awful handicap this would impose on any government. But the Labor Party would not accept this, dedicated as they are to the ideals of democracy, at least when it suits them. I am well aware that the position of a Minister in the second eleven is an invidious one, as he has to support government decisions with which he may not only disagree but even worse, he may not have had the opportunity to oppose. But, as I said before, you have to cut a few corners to make democracy work.

We only had three years in Opposition and it didn't take us long to find out that it was a lot harder than being in government. We had had so long being serviced by a competent civil service whose duty it was to back up their Ministers, that it was quite a shock to us to find that amount of what that was required of us in Opposition. The Labor Party had been telling us this for years, but we were not impressed until we had a dose of Opposition medicine ourselves. No one works harder than a good Opposition front bencher.

I am afraid that we found it hard, when we were in Opposition, not to oppose everything that the government brought forward. We were always being told that it was our task to oppose the government, but I think that we sometimes opposed them even when we thought they were right. This made us look a bit ridiculous in the eyes of the populace, but, even worse, in our own eyes also. I remember our criticism of the first Labor devaluation which was, goodness knows, well overdue. And reaction to their 25% tariff cut falls into the same category.

We were always likely to behave in a somewhat childish way in Opposition. I guess the main reason for this is that we had spent most of our recent years in government so we have not

really learnt how to behave in opposition as this incident demonstrates. When Labor took over in December 1972, the Prime Minister's suite and the Cabinet room were being rebuilt, so in the interim another Cabinet room was found which was about as far as possible from the House of Representatives Chamber. So Whitlam asked us to agree to extend the time required to answer the Quorum bells so as to give Ministers, closeted in the far-away Cabinet room, time to reach the Chamber. But we decided that we were in Opposition so our task was to oppose everything and to make it as difficult as possible for the government to operate. This was a measure of our political immaturity.

Both when we were in Opposition and in government, we set great store on the work of the various committees which were always composed of Country Party as well as Liberals. Some of these committees were good, some fair and some awful. The chairmen and secretaries were usually bright and ambitious young men who were always regarded as spokesmen on any subject related to their committee work. I never tried for any of these official positions which again was a reflection of my lack of political ambition of which I had none. Also, I guess I felt that such activities may interfere with my main object in life, namely getting tariffs down. But I served on many such Liberal and Country Party committees. But it is important to remember that these were not committees of the Parliament which had official standing and which were almost always composed of members from both side of the Parliament. These Parliamentary committees were usually excellent.

I suppose the most interesting and influential unofficial committee on which I served was the Rail Gauge Committee which Bill Wentworth drove with great enthusiasm. But its big breakthrough, the standardisation of the line between Albury and Melbourne, was achieved before I entered Parliament. Our greatest achievement in our time was to get the government to agree to the standardisation of the line between Broken Hill and Port Pirie which is now operating efficiently. The standardisation of the line between Port Pirie and Adelaide has been agreed to by everyone, but the commencement of work has been delayed. The committee did not have a big influence on the decision to build a new line between Tarcola and Alice Springs. The succession of exceptionally wet years which made the old line via Marree inoperable for months on end made political pressure almost unnecessary. But the success of the rail gauge committee rested on Bill Wentworth the chairman, and David Fairbairn the secretary. Most of the rest of us didn't do much except take the credit for things.

I served on the National Development Committee and it was a bad committee. We used to go on highly publicised safaris every winter recess and we mostly travelled with our mouths open and our eyes and ears shut. We would issue press statements at the drop of a hat and think we measured the value of our contribution in column inches. One of the fruits of our endeavour was the Ord dam. We took all the credit for this white elephant while it was popular, but we haven't heard much about it lately.

The Trade Committee ran under different names and it generally performed poorly. I used to doggedly attend to make sure that they were not up to anything bad. Sometimes I used to attend the manufacturing industry committee meetings which were held when we were in Opposition. I used to sit there like a ghost at a feast and they hated me for reasons which I can well understand.

When our leaders started to sniff the political breezes and could smell an election coming on, the various party committees would be driven into a frenzy of activity so that each could have its policies ready to unveil to the disinterested populace at election time. I have said before that at each election I used to feel a dam coming on and this was typical of the silly half baked promises we used to make when the election fever hit us. This is how we got lumbered with

the abolition of the means test, with our commitment to continuing wage indexation and so on. Socialism has not been fostered so much by the Labor Party as by the Liberal Party encouragement of policies which are thought to be attractive to the people at election time. Once we have propounded them, these then became part of our doctrine, even if we know that they are in direct conflict with principles of self help and self reliance in which we say we always believe. The main plank in our platform is that it is essential to keep Labor out of government, which is a nicer way of saying keeping us in. This may be an understandable and pragmatic way to behave, but no one would call it a philosophy for which one dies on the barricades. So we continue to wander down the welfare state road, eloquently protesting our belief in free enterprise as we go. Our opponents have known for years that we do not believe in our own protestations, but now we also are beginning to be sceptical of our own eloquence and this is the beginning of the end of any political party. I repeat, the main principle in which we believe is the utter necessity of keeping Labor out of government and in the pursuit of this end we are prepared to compete bitterly with the Labor Party in propounding socialist policies. Australia would be far better government if we didn't have these sudden rushes to the head at election time.

When we were in a rather stunned state after our defeat in 1972, both the Liberals and the Country Party decided to have separate shadow spokesmen and separate committees to service them. How the Country Party managed during this uneasy interval I cannot remember, but we Liberals stuck manfully to our task of servicing our committees. There is one duty a true Liberal never shirks and that is serving on a committee. Don Chipp had been Minister for Customs when we were in government so he was the natural choice to head up the Liberal committee on Tariffs and Trade. When he was Customs Minister he was always approachable and open to argument, but his departmental head, Alan Carmody, was the high priest of protection and Chipp was only a junior minister and not in cabinet. So while he was Minister of Customs, things went along much as usual.

But when Chipp became Liberal spokesman for tariffs and trade, and was away from Carmody's influence, the logic of the low tariff argument began to alter his thinking. And our committee used to get some very competent and persuasive economists to talk to us and it wasn't long before Chipp was being influenced by their logic and common sense. I kept very quiet while this conversion was in progress because it would never have done for it to be thought that I was behind it all.

But this refreshing change of attitude must have filtered back to Bill Sneddon who was then Leader of the Opposition. So when the decision was made to join with our colleagues in the Country Party and have joint spokesmen and joint committees, the opportunity was taken to make Chipp spokesman for Social Security. The Trade Committee was made into an abortion of an affair with two leaders, Bob Cotton and Harry Edwards. Both of these were inclined to waffle when on their own, but when there was a degree of competition in waffling, the result was like a couple of magpies warbling; it was nice to listen to, but it was hard to understand what they were really saying. I remember saying rather sourly to Harry Edwards, who used to be a professor of economics before he entered politics, that I could see that he and I were likely to publicly disagree about tariffs, but I thought he ought to know that he didn't really look very formidable after Jack McEwen!

One of the reasons for having so many of these unofficial committees and for painting them in such glowing colours is that they give back-benchers something useful to do and so prevent them getting into mischief. If the devil finds work for idle hands to do, you ought to see him employing idle politicians. But a good committee is an unrivalled place in which to acquire information because experts in every field are anxious to come to talk to such committees so

that there is a lot of predigesting of information done for you. But I am always sceptical of policies evolved by committees. I remember all too clearly the proverb that a camel is a horse designed by a committee.

Some Ministers are past masters at kidding committees that they are making a powerful contribution to the government of the country. The Minister usually begins by telling the committee how much he values their past contributions and how confident he is that this high standard will continue in the future. I was present at one such performance and I wrote a cynical note to the man alongside me which he has been kind enough to keep and give to me:

You should be watching and learning from this performance. When the Minister feels that he is likely to have to face some unpleasant facts he gets some poor tired unrelated hare out of its squat and off we trot after it. When it disappears over the horizon we come back panting to the subject which, in the meantime, has wandered away.

I regret to have to tell you that this note was headed "Pure Kelly".

Political leaders often treat these party committees with some cynicism. For instance, when we were in Opposition I attended every meeting of the Trade and Commerce Committee which was under the chairmanship of Senator Cotton. I did so because I wanted to make sure they did not propound high protection policies. So I fought every policy statement with which I disagreed and there were many such. The policy, when finalised, met with my approval. But when Mr Fraser made his election policy speech in November 1975, he made commitments to high protection that were quite at variance with the committee's agreed policy. I was electioneering in the bush when the election speech was made and I immediately sent Mr Fraser a telegram expressing my concern and disagreement, and followed this with a letter which eventually brought forth the usual cynical reply. But I guess Fraser knew that it would be very difficult for me to rock the boat by disagreeing publicly with my political leader in the middle of an election campaign.

Summing up my relationship with the Liberal Party, both in the State and the Federal areas, I thought that I received very fair and friendly treatment, even when I was clobbering some of their leaders and policies. And certainly the Party machine made no attempt to gag me.