

The slayer of protectionism

Bob Day

3 November 2012

The Modest Member: The Life and Times of Bert Kelly *Hal G.P. Colebatch*

In November 1969 Prime Minister John Gorton dropped Bert Kelly, the Member for Wakefield, from his post as Minister for the Navy. Freed from the constraints of collective responsibility, Kelly was able to take up his pen and start writing his influential Modest Member columns in the *Australian Financial Review*. They were published on Fridays and the circulation of the *AFR* increased on Fridays as a consequence.

Kelly was thus returning to the task he believed had been set for him by Charles Hawker, the war hero who became the Member for Wakefield in 1929 and was tragically killed in an air crash at Mt Dandenong in October 1938. Hawker was a frequent visitor to the Kelly home and had told Bert that he should be ready to take up the burden of political life when the need arose. Bert's second mentor was his father, W.S. (Stan) Kelly, who had served on the Tariff Board during the 1930s and was well acquainted with the harm the 'tariff touts', as Jack Lang described them, were doing.

When the Modest Member columns appeared, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade John 'Black Jack' McEwen arranged for one of his parliamentary colleagues to ask him a question in the House, asking him whether he was aware that the newspaper columnist known as the Modest Member was in fact The Honourable Bert Kelly, Member for Wakefield. McEwen replied that, yes, he was aware of that, and that the pseudonym Kelly had adopted was particularly appropriate because 'he had much to be modest about'.

That well-prepared comment by one of the most powerful politicians in Australia's history, about an MP who had recently been dumped as a minister, clearly illustrates how a backbench parliamentarian, with the aid of a small group of supporters, brought to an end protectionism in Australia.

It is difficult for us, 20 years after protectionism was finally defeated, to understand how deeply entrenched in the Australian psyche it was. Historian Sir Keith Hancock, writing in 1930, described it thus:

Protection in Australia has been more than a policy: it has been a faith and dogma. Its critics, during the second decade of the twentieth century, dwindled into a despised and detested sect suspected of nursing an anti-national heresy. For Protection is interwoven with almost every strand of Australia's Democratic nationalism. It is a policy of power; it professes to be a policy of plenty.

Thus Bert entered, to quote author Ernest Howe, 'a long and bitter conflict against contemporary sentiment and interests of gigantic power'.

Bert went into politics knowing what needed to be done, and for the next 20 years educated his colleagues and the nation about the evils of protectionism. His leadership in this area was so

successful everyone thought protectionism would be irreversible. They were wrong, of course. It was not irreversible. Many years after the protectionist debate was over, Bert was still on guard. 'The really bad ideas,' he said, 'never go away.'

One of the keys to Bert's success was that he was not 'party political'. He never played partisan politics. He didn't care who got the credit, and the results are there for all to see. The first big drop in protectionism was during the Whitlam period. There was then a rise during the Fraser years, followed by a reduction again under Hawke and Keating. Since the end of the Labor government in the mid-1990s there has been virtually no change in the level of protection.

Bert's non-partisan approach was an important part of his strategy.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Director of Communications John McTernan is reported as saying: 'If you get to a senior position in the party, you have to be able to kill your opponents. It is not pretty, it's not pleasant, but if those at the top can't kill, then those at the bottom certainly cannot. High politics demands this.' When the Spanish patriot leader Narváez was on his deathbed, he was asked by the priest if he had forgiven his enemies. 'I haven't got any enemies,' said Narváez. 'I shot them all.'

Bert Kelly, however, represented a different kind of leadership. He concentrated on the policy, and although his dry, laconic observations did sometimes sting, he never played the man. He never set out to destroy a political opponent and never engaged in cheap point-scoring. This allowed people across the chamber to listen to what he was saying. Many among the more experienced MPs, Clyde Cameron for example, had great respect for him, and many people on the other side liked him. In short, argument — real argument — is party-neutral.

In this book Hal G.P. Colebatch has brought together the strands of Bert Kelly's political career and we now have a detailed account of how this 'modest' backbencher was able to defeat McEwen, the Goliath of his day, and create the climate of opinion which led to the unwinding of the long established protectionist policy which had been impoverishing Australia since Federation.

The Bert Kelly story is a story of courage, but it is also an account of a political genius at work. Kelly was able to turn self-deprecation into a deadly political weapon.

The book is also a story of our parliament at work. We have inherited from Britain a system of government which is now going through a very bad patch. But the story of Bert Kelly tells us that the powers of regeneration within the parliament are just below the surface, and one of those signs of future regeneration is the reformation of the Society of Modest Members, a group of younger MPs committed to free trade who see Bert Kelly as a model for their own careers.

We will always have rent-seekers among us. We now have the Bert Kelly story to inspire us to block them whenever they appear.

Bob Day AO is chairman of the Bert Kelly Research Centre

