

Chapter 5

The World is Run by those who Show Up

Senator Bob Day

Early in July 2014 I asked my first question in the Senate. It was directed to the Minister for Employment and Leader of the Government in the Senate, Senator Eric Abetz (Lib, Tas). My question caused quite a stir in the chamber. I was told it was most unusual for a senator to be jeered and heckled whilst asking a first question. The President had to calm down the likes of Senator Doug Cameron (ALP, NSW) and Kim Carr (ALP, Vic) so I could finish the question. It went like this:

I refer to the Prime Minister's statement on 28 May this year [2014] when he said "People are more than capable of making decisions based on what is best for them", and also to the statement by the Minister for Social Services [Kevin Andrews] when he said, "The best form of welfare is a job". If both those statements are true, why then can a person over the age of 18 in my home of State of South Australia

- get married
- have children
- drive a motor vehicle
- fly an aeroplane
- buy a house
- take out a mortgage
- enter into a mobile phone contract
- travel to some of the most dangerous places on earth
- smoke cigarettes
- drink alcohol
- enlist in the armed forces and shoot enemy combatants, and, of course,
- vote

but NOT enter into an employment arrangement which, and I again quote the Prime Minister, "is best for them"?

I then asked two supplementary questions:

1. Given rising levels of unemployment in Australia and in particular tragically high levels of youth unemployment in my home State – over 40 per cent in some areas, will the Government please allow young people who want to, to "opt out" of the Fair Work Act and allow them to enter the workforce on their own terms if they so choose?

And:

2. Given the clear emergency that now exists with respect to youth unemployment, for those young people and their families who wish to, will the Government please allow these young people to fund their own job subsidy by allowing them to work at rates of pay and

under terms and conditions which they consider – and I again quote the Prime Minister, “is best for them”.

After Question Time, the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Penny Wong (ALP, SA), apologised for her side’s behaviour and took me around to Bill Shorten’s office for a cup of tea.

My plan as a senator was to keep a low profile and stay below the radar for the first six months to get the lie of the land. I was hoping I would not get noticed until next year. Things did not quite work out that way. In fact the plan fell apart on Day 1 – as the old saying goes, “No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy”.

I was picked up bright and early on my first day by the Comcar service. “Good morning, Senator” said the driver. “Good Morning, Peter”, I responded. Then he said something I was not expecting. He asked, “Will I take you into Parliament via the basement carpark to avoid the media, Senator?” I said, “Oh, is that what the others do?” He said, “Yes . . . apart from the Greens”. So I thought, no, this is my first day on the job, I am not sneaking in via the basement. So I said, “No, take me to the main entrance, Peter. This is my first day on the job, I am walking in through the front door!” Suit on, briefcase in hand . . .

When I arrived, sure enough there was the media pack congregated around Christine Milne (Greens, Tas). When I got out of the car a whole pack of cameras and microphones pounced on me, asking all sorts of questions. When they had finished, one of the media crew said, “Thanks for stopping, that was great. Will you come again tomorrow, all we ever get is Greens!” He then said, “When you come tomorrow, stand about a metre further that way so we can get a better shot and if you get one of your staff to stand between those two cameras, we’ll be able to give you much better coverage!”

So I did the same the next day, and the next, and then I started getting telephone calls from the various political commentators on Sky News like Graham Richardson and *Lateline* and *Capital Hill*, etc. So there went the low profile!

The Comcar driver’s comment about the Greens was very telling. The Greens really do dominate the place. There is an old saying: “The world is run by those who show up”. And the Greens show up to everything. They speak on every motion, always moving amendments, calling divisions, constantly working the chamber, sidling up to other cross-benchers, calling press conferences, getting their message out every day. The Greens are serious. They show up. There are only 10 of them out of 76, but their influence is out of all proportion to their numbers.

Another observation concerned the seating arrangements. As we know, the Senate is the States’ house. There are 12 Senators from each Original State plus two each from the Territories. But Senators do not sit with their State colleagues. They sit with their party colleagues. This came up recently in South Australia where our Premier said he was going to call in South Australia’s Senators and get them to block the proposed funding cuts to South Australia that had been flagged in the Budget. The Premier was on local ABC radio with his plan and they got me on the line, asking if I would go along with this. The Premier said:

I want their support in calling for changes to this budget, in particular those cuts to health and education which are going to so dramatically affect ordinary, everyday South Australians. So I’ll be writing to all of the Senators setting it out. I want to make sure that

they fully understand the effect on South Australians so that they can represent South Australia in the Senate. I'm asking our Senators to represent South Australia and to make their voice heard.

They then crossed to me and I responded by saying this new found federalism of the Premier's was music to my ears. I said that is what the Senate is for . . . to represent the States, and I am looking forward to hopefully the Premier saying that, in future, Labor Senators will vote in the interests of South Australia because I cannot think of an example in the last 50 years where Labor Senators have voted for South Australia against their interstate colleagues. The River Murray is probably a good example.

Suffice to say, I did not hear from the Premier.

I do meet representatives from other States – MPs, Senators, academics, public policy commentators and others and hear how seriously fed up the other States are with South Australia's performance because they are the ones picking up the tab.

In his recent budget, the Treasurer of South Australia forecast a \$1bn deficit this coming year but the real budget deficit is actually **\$2bn** as South Australia receives \$1bn in GST donations from the other States (mostly from Western Australia) above and beyond what South Australia raises itself. That \$1bn in GST is what is under the microscope because, for example, Western Australian taxpayers are quite rightly asking:

Why are we paying for a new football oval in Adelaide? And why are we paying for a new footbridge so football fans can take a shortcut to the Casino? And why are we buying new trams and paying for SA to host arts and musical festivals? And why are we supporting a public sector workforce out of all proportion to the size of their State?

You cannot blame them. And how do I, as a Senator for South Australia, and a proud South Australian, respond to that?

Commenting on the recent South Australian Budget, Professor Richard Blandy of Flinders University suggested the South Australian economy will get worse, not better.

It is an iron-clad principle that you cannot “grow” a company or country – or a State, out of trouble. The only way is to “shrink to viability” and grow from there.

Another iron-clad principle is, “anything not based on economic reality is doomed to failure”. At present, the South Australian economy is not based on economic reality.

South Australia raises \$14bn per annum in taxes and other revenue but spends \$16bn. It first needs to reduce its spending to below \$14bn, that is, shrink to viability, and then use the money to grow from there. If it does that I will be in a much better position in Canberra to start lobbying for South Australia to become a “special economic zone” or a “Right to Work” State.

When I was President of the Housing Industry Association, I had to meet with various politicians. This is when I discovered that many of them had never had a proper job. They had gone to university, got jobs working for politicians and then became politicians themselves. The results were there for all to see. I was shocked to discover how lacking in understanding they were about how the real world works, how markets work, how and why investment decisions are made, and how real jobs were created. So I thought the only answer might be to run for office myself.

It was at that point that a business colleague of mine – no names, just initials, Roger Drake, said to me, “Bob, you won’t get in. Politics is designed to keep people like you out!”

This leads me to the current situation.

I know the House of Representatives is seen by many as the “First Team” or the “A Team”, and the Senate as the “Reserves” or “B Team” but, for the next few years, the focus is going to be very much on the Senate.

The Abbott Government has a huge majority in the House of Representatives but needs six votes to get its legislative agenda passed by the Senate. In the Senate there are six new cross-benchers. David Leyonhjelm and I are two of them. The others are Palmer United Party Senators Glenn Lazarus, Jacqui Lambie and Dio Wang and the Motoring Enthusiasts Party representative, Ricky Muir.

And there is Clive Palmer, who is a frequent visitor to the Senate. John Nethercote reminded me recently of a comment by Winston Churchill about the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, who Churchill described as “the only bull who carries around his own china shop with him!” No-one can predict what Clive is going to do next or what is going to happen over the next couple of years but, bear in mind, at the 2013 election, 25 per cent of the electorate voted for a party other than the Coalition, Labor or the Greens.

In South Australia, and at the recent Western Australia Senate re-run election, the non Coalition/Labor/Greens vote was over 40 per cent. If the same happened at the next election there would be 15 cross-benchers. In a recent survey, 40 per cent of respondents said they did not believe it mattered which party was in power. Voters are looking for alternatives – which is good for people like David and me.

I do not think a Double Dissolution election to get a joint sitting is at all on the cards. There have been only six Double Dissolution elections in Australia’s history and only one Joint Sitting. I read Jim Allan’s article (in *The Australian*) on Thursday but I just cannot see the Government having the numbers for a Joint Sitting – especially if David and I pick up extra senators due to the lower quota!

To conclude, and to return to where I started, as most of you know, the Australian settlement was based on five key principles – two economic, two social and one of imperial benevolence of the mother country.

The two social principles were the White Australia Policy and State Paternalism. The two economic principles were tariff protection and regulated labour markets. The two went hand in hand. Bert Kelly, the modest farmer from South Australia, removed one, tariff protection – this is the text book – *The Modest Member: The Life & Times of Bert Kelly*, of how he did it. We now need to remove the other – regulated labour markets.

If, at the end of my time in Parliament, everyone who wants a job has one, my journey, in which I am pleased to say The Samuel Griffith Society has played a key role, will end well.