

**Sir Robert Sparkes letter to Queensland National Party members,
28 September 1987
(Chapter 19, p. 219)**

Dear Fellow Party Member,

I am concerned at the fairly widespread unhappiness amongst Party members regarding a number of matters, but especially the recent Federal election and the Stan Collard case. Whilst some of this unhappiness may be warranted, I believe much of it stems from misinformation and misunderstanding of the true facts of these matters.

So that you know the truth I will furnish you with the salient facts as far as practicable in a letter of this kind. Firstly, I will give the reasons underlying the Joh for Canberra exercise and a brief history of it. Secondly, I will present a correct assessment and perspective of our Queensland Federal election results. Thirdly, I will briefly outline the facts of Stan Collard's removal from our Senate team.

Many would be aware that long before the Federal election there was increasing evidence of widespread disenchantment with the leadership and policies of the two conservative parties in the Federal arena. Research revealed that many people believed that the Fraser Government failed in industrial relations and economic management and they feared that the Howard/Sinclair Coalition possessed neither the correct policies to save this Nation nor the leadership qualities required to implement such policies.

In short there was growing demand for new leadership and policies, without which it was increasingly obvious the conservative parties would not win the next Federal election. Increasingly, research indicated that many conservative voters felt that what was needed in the Federal arena was strong leadership and policies of the kind displayed by the Premier. Accordingly, more and more people were seriously suggesting that the Premier ought to transfer into the Federal arena, and act as a catalyst to bring together a team of outstanding Australians who would provide the statesmanlike Government and policies so necessary for the Nation's salvation.

By the time of the meetings of the State Management Committee and Central Council in Hervey Bay on the 27th February last, it was quite clear that the Premier was convinced that he had an obligation to perform this role and to help save our Nation – in fact he was committed to that course.

Accordingly, it is now history that the Central Council meeting at Hervey Bay carried virtually unanimously a composite motion committing the Party to support the Premier. The motion also provided for the ultimate withdrawal of our Queensland National Party Parliamentarians from the Federal Coalition. The reasons for this much misrepresented and misunderstood move were basically:

- (a) To enable the Federal National Party to cease being an ineffectual appendage of the Liberal Party and resume its own separate identity; and
- (b) To enable it to propound its own separate distinctive policies for the welfare of the Nation, especially on industrial relations and taxation, e.g.: the Stone economic package.

To put it another way, it would have been absurd – in fact politically schizophrenic – to have had a situation, where on the one hand we were expounding Coalition policies and at the same time on the other hand we were expounding Joh National policies differing significantly, especially in regard to taxation.

It should be stressed that at the time of the Hervey Bay decision we had a firm commitment of sufficient financial support to successfully conduct the Joh for Canberra campaign (and not from the “white shoe” brigade). Because of the hostility of much of the media we obviously required millions of dollars to fund massive advertising to get our message across to the Nation!

At the outset, in briefly recapitulating the history of the Joh for Canberra campaign, I must emphasise that the decision to initiate the campaign was not taken by the President alone or for that matter by the State Management Committee, but by the whole of Central Council comprising about 250 delegates, all of whom had an unfettered opportunity to present their views and vote according to their judgement. Moreover, it was appropriate that Central Council should have taken this decision, as it is the body charged with the responsibility for the conduct of elections under our Constitution.

Furthermore, the Hervey Bay decision was widely supported by the grass roots of the Party! This was evidenced by the fact that 121 Party units [branches] conveyed their support for the campaign to the State Secretariat.

Pursuant upon the Hervey Bay decision, the Party started setting up the necessary organisational structure to effectively conduct the Joh for Canberra campaign. A National Campaign Committee was established, Mr Fred Maybury, who so successfully directed our 1986 State Campaign, was appointed National Campaign Coordinator, and the mobilising of the vast human and financial resources needed was commenced.

Whilst some initial difficulties were experienced in establishing a satisfactory modus operandi with the National Party organisations in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, these difficulties were eventually overcome and the Joh for Canberra campaign was supported in those States as complementary to their own campaigns.

An appropriate mechanism for policy formulation was put in motion, e.g: former Federal Treasury head and Australia’s foremost authority on tax and economic matters, Mr. (now Senator) John Stone, was engaged to refine our single rate tax policy and associated matters of economic policy.

Very prominent Australians such as Ian McLachlan, President of the National Farmers’ Federation, were displaying considerable sympathetic interest in the Joh for Canberra campaign.

In fact there was every prospect that an outstanding group of Australians would come together as a result of the Joh for Canberra campaign and constitute the nucleus of a sound conservative Government.

Tragically, the great potential of the Joh for Canberra campaign not only to enhance the influence of the National Party in the Federal arena, but also to ensure a conservative election victory was not to be realised. The great stumbling block was the failure of the Federal Parliamentary Party Leader, Ian Sinclair and the New South Wales National Party organisation to join this historic move. Sadly, Ian Sinclair, and the New South Wales organisation lacked the statesmanlike vision to appreciate the great potential of this move.

Undoubtedly, the verdict of history will be that the National Party lost its greatest opportunity to become the major conservative party in this Nation because of the lack of vision of these people and their unwillingness to subordinate their personal ambitions to the good of the Party and the country. (Sadly, most of the hierarchy of the National Party organisation in New South Wales have always been short sighted and resistant to innovation and progress.

Consequently, while the National Party in Queensland has gone from strength to strength, in New South Wales it has stagnated, e.g.: we have four Senators, they have only one!) It is now history that Bob Hawke called an early election, wisely from the ALP point of view, but in complete repudiation of his earlier promises to the contrary. The severe time constraint thus imposed made it impossible for the Joh for Canberra campaign to set up adequate organisational structure and select suitable candidates across the Nation before the election.

Moreover, unfortunately the massive funding which was so essential to get our message across to the people of Australia was not materialising rapidly enough. However, we were still hopeful that a reasonably good result could be achieved given that at that stage Ian McLachlan's support seemed almost certain. Whilst Ian never unequivocally committed himself to the Joh for Canberra campaign, I was convinced that he would ultimately do so.

Unfortunately, he finally declined for various reasons and thus we were denied a very significant element of support which would have acted as a catalyst to bring other prominent Australians and resources behind us.

Beset with these insurmountable difficulties, there was no alternative but to abridge the Joh for Canberra campaign. Obviously with this severe abridgement it would have been almost impossible for the campaign to achieve sufficient National Party members in the next Parliament supportive of the Premier to enable him to assume an effective role. Therefore, naturally not wishing to be relegated to an ineffectual back bench role, the Premier rightly decided, with the full concurrence of the Joh for Canberra Committee, that he would no longer seek a seat in the Federal Parliament.

The Committee fully supported the Premier in this decision because it would obviously have been a senseless waste of his ability and experience to have condemned him to a back bench role in the Federal Parliament.

In retrospect I am convinced that had Ian Sinclair and the New South Wales organisation got on the Joh for Canberra bandwagon thus giving it complete National Party support, it would have gathered tremendous support across the Nation and would have ensured defeat of the Hawke Government.

Nevertheless, the Joh for Canberra campaign was as partial success because:

- a. it certainly “starved up” the conservative leadership;
- b. it shifted the whole Australian political spectrum including both the Liberal and Labor Parties to the right;
- c. it resulted in the drift in Liberal policies especially in taxation and industrial relations towards ours; and
- d. it resulted in the election of Senator Julian McGauran in Victoria under the auspices of the Joh Nationals.

The next matter of concern is the Federal election result we achieved in Queensland. I am disappointed that some of our members seem to be regarding it as a catastrophic reversal and consequently are displaying a sad loss of morale and confidence in the Party.

The fact is we only suffered a minor reversal of the sort every political party must be prepared to weather from time to time without tearing itself apart in search of convenient scapegoats. Obviously we cannot go on forever improving our result with no setbacks whatsoever!

Our House of Representatives vote was only down approximately 2.85% and significantly our Senate vote was almost unchanged on the previous election. It is interesting to note that in the 1980 Federal election we suffered a greater reversal but on that occasion there was no “weeping and wailing.”

Probably what conveyed the impression that we had suffered a much greater setback than was actually the case was the loss of the two seats Hinkler and Fisher. However, it should be remembered that they were extremely marginal and as such always liable to be lost, despite the best endeavours of the two sitting National Party Members and good campaigns.

On the positive side it should be noted:

- a. that on a two party preferred basis the ALP vote in Queensland was lower than in any other mainland State;
- b. that to a considerable extent the decline in our House of Representatives vote was due to the fact that the Liberals ran a candidate for the first time in Maranoa, Wide Bay and Dawson; and
- c. our Queensland vote of 28% was the second highest in our history and greatly surpassed New South Wales at 11.1% and Victoria at 6%.

In short, a realistic assessment of our Queensland result is that it was a minor setback of the sort every mature political party must expect from time to time and be capable of enduring without loss of morale.

However, I would be remiss if I did not enunciate the principal factors responsible for our failure to get rid of the Hawke Socialist Government. In my view they were:

- a. Bob Hawke and Paul Keating came across as more effective leaders;
- b. the ALP campaign nationally was better organised (the ALP campaign in Queensland on this occasion was directed from Canberra and was probably the ALP's best Queensland Federal election campaign);
- c. John Howard's stumbling over his tax policy posed a big question mark over his competence as an economic manager. This problem was compounded by Michael Baume's conflicting tax statement;
- d. the ALP has moved decidedly to the right of the political spectrum (in fact, they have done things Malcolm Fraser should have done);
- e. the ALP, aided by sections of the media skillfully avoided coming to grips with major issues such as the Stone economic package and the ID Card (ironically the latter was one of the principal reasons cited by Hawke for calling the early election).

I strongly refute the allegation that the Joh for Canberra campaign was a significant factor in our failure to defeat the Hawke Government. That allegation has been made mainly by misguided people seeking a scapegoat and refusing to accept the unpalatable realities. In fact, a recent Liberal Party survey confirmed that the Joh for Canberra campaign was not a factor in the failure to unseat the Hawke Government.

Another matter that appears to be upsetting some Party members is the quite untrue allegation that Stan Collard was dumped by the Party hierarchy manipulating a massive number of proxies at the Central Council Senate selection meeting.

The facts are:

- a. the Premier had 5 proxies, Bill Gunn had 4 and I had 4, making a total of 13, not the 90 wildly alleged by Vic Sullivan or the 47 alleged by others;
- b. the decision of Central Council to reject Stan Collard was a popular one in the sense that it was overwhelmingly supported by over 200 delegates present;
- c. no doubt the Council's decision to reject Stan Collard was based on a number of valid reasons but probably the principal one was that Stan had breached a fundamental Party rule in that he publicly criticised the Joh for Canberra campaign despite his undertaking to support it.

Together we have built up a great Party with the right philosophy and policies for the good of the State and Nation. Though the road ahead will not be an easy one, I am confident, given traditional National Party loyalty and solidarity, together we can go from strength to strength. Never let us forget the wisdom of the old adage – United we stand, divided we fall.