

**Sir Robert Sparkes presidential Report to the annual conference of the
National Party of Australia – Queensland, Townsville, 6 November 1987**
(Chapter 21, p. 243)

I am sorry to have to begin my report on a very somber note, but we must face the harsh reality that the stocks of our Party have fallen from an all time high on the occasion of the last State election to a disastrously low level at the present time, as revealed by the latest research. However, all is not doom and gloom! I am confident that, if we take the appropriate corrective measures we can overcome our present difficulties, retrieve lost support, and go from strength to strength. But more of that later.

1986 State election result the best ever.

The one really bright spot since the last Conference on the Gold Coast was, of course, the 1986 State election result which was the best in our history. We contested 88 of the 89 seats. We achieved almost 40% of the primary vote and won 49 seats – both records!

This splendid result, of course, permitted us to resume Government in our own right with a very comfortable majority.

There were a number of very interesting aspects of the last State campaign, you would be aware of most of them. However, it certainly highlighted two things, firstly the very great impact that media advertising can have on voter intentions, and secondly the volatility of a large percentage of voters right up to election day.

There is no doubt the serious trouble that polls showed us to be in a couple of weeks before the election was very real indeed. A number of factors combined to reverse the situation, but undoubtedly the main one was the change in the thrust of our media campaign and the great increase in its intensity over the last seven or eight days.

Research that we had executed immediately after the election revealed that up to 20% of the people changed their voting intention in our favour in those last seven or eight days; and they were mainly influenced by our very brilliantly conceived and implemented advertising campaign.

In passing I pay tribute to the Premier, Lady Bjelke-Petersen, our State Campaign Director, Fred Maybury, our excellent candidates, our loyal staff, and especially to the thousands of “grass roots” Party people who every election work so hard to get their candidates elected.

Last Federal election result not a catastrophic reverse

I am disappointed to have to report that some Party members appear to have suffered some loss of morale and confidence in the Party due to the Federal election result we achieved in Queensland last July.

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”.

Unfortunately, I suspect most of us (and I include myself) had grown accustomed to electoral success after success, especially the last State election. The result was we had lost our traditional National Party resilience, our capacity to take a bit of a knock without wingeing (*sic*), without rushing around looking for scapegoats!

Probably what conveyed the impression that we had suffered a much greater set back than was actually the case was the loss of 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.

With the wisdom of hind sight I would say, if there was one flaw in our Federal campaign strategy, it was that it exposed us too much to the adverse effects of certain State Government actions, e.g. the announcement of increased rail freight rates and fire insurance levies during the campaign.

On the positive side it should be noted:-

- (a) That on a two party preferred basis the A.L.P. 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%.

Federal election result has triggered an unfortunate and potentially destructive Party malaise

Unfortunately the Federal election result seems to have triggered a sort of malaise within the Party marked by destructive self-criticism, needless knocking, and senseless scapegoat seeking.

Self-criticism is necessary and beneficial, provided it is constructive, but if it is purely negative, it becomes morale destroying and quite counter-productive.

Now there is no real reason for the current Party negativism and pessimism. It is largely psychologically generated, aided by some persons with ulterior motivation. All the ingredients

for our continued viability and growth are still there. If we regain our confidence and have the courage to make some necessary modifications, the future is ours!

A brief survey of recent Party history will not only refute the knockers, but also restore our perspective and thereby our confidence – the main prerequisite for our future strength and growth.

The following statistics constitute a record of progress of which we can all be justly proud:

Party Growth Statistics – A Decade of Progress

<u>(A) State Election Results</u>					
% of primary vote	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1986</u>	
	26.9	27.8	38.8	39.6	
Members elected	35	35	43	49	
Ministers	10	10	18	18	
<u>(B) Party Membership</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1986</u>	<u>Current</u>
	33,955	35,845	34,123	44,660	50,132
<u>(C) Accredited Electorate Councils</u>		<u>1980</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1986</u>	
		44	53	84	
<u>(D) Central Council Attendance</u>		<u>1977</u>	<u>1987</u>		
		114	195		
<u>(E) State Conference Attendance</u>		<u>1977</u>	<u>1986</u>		
		282	912		

I put it to you, ladies and gentlemen, that the figures I have just quoted portray a pattern of solid growth and progress in significant areas of activity. They completely rebut our knockers who delight in alleging that the Party Organisation is ill-managed and stagnating.

Modern equipment and techniques

One of the principal reasons for the continuing improvement in our operational efficiency has been the installation of the latest technology and the adoption of the most progressive administrative practices.

As you would expect, membership records and fund raising data are all computerised, and the latest in laser printing equipment is utilised.

A few years ago we had a top business management consultant review all aspects of our Head Office operation. As a result of his recommendations a number of beneficial staffing and administrative modifications were made.

An equipment and systems consultant from a leading firm of accountants is constantly monitoring our Head Office operation to maintain maximum efficiency.

Most of our critics have one thing in common in addition to an exasperating vagueness about the nature of the alleged problem – they have never bothered to inspect the Secretariat and consequently would not have a clue as to what happens there.

I invite any interested Member visiting Brisbane with a little time to spare to call in at the Secretariat and see first hand how that important Party component functions and to meet our dedicated staff.

Questionnaire

However, whilst I believe most criticisms of the Organisational administration are unfounded, I do recognise that the administration is not perfect. Therefore, I have welcomed, as I am sure you will also, an initiative by the Administration Director, Mrs. Helen Maybury, that a comprehensive questionnaire be sent to all Branches, Electorate and Divisional Councils to ascertain and overcome any flaws that may exist – in fact to elicit ideas and information that will enhance the efficiency, not only of the Secretariat but all Party components.

Staff

I am pleased to be able to advise delegates of the following staff appointments, which, I believe, will enhance the effectiveness of our organisation.

Mr. Dennis Quick has been appointed our North Queensland Regional Director and Robyn Hugon has been engaged as Office Administrator. They are naturally based in Townsville.

Mr. Jim Gillan, whom many of you would know as a former State Secretary of the Party, has been appointed as a Research Liaison Officer at Head Office. We are on the verge of appointing another Research Officer so that the Research Section will be fully staffed.

You will also be interested to know that we are well advanced in the selection of a Political Director. The criteria for this office are most stringent and hence it is very difficult to fill. However, the Finance Committee has already interviewed a number of applicants, and it is hoped to make an appointment within the next three or four weeks.

I would sound a note of caution – there is an unrealistic expectation on the part of some Members that a Political Director will somehow be an (*sic*) panacea for all our ills, real or imaginary. While a Director will perform a valuable role in promoting the Party in various ways, including spokesman in the absence of the President, there is a limit to what he can achieve.

Let us never forget that in the final analysis the image of the Party depends far more on the performance of the Party in Government than on the public projection of the Organisation. If the public perception of the State Government's performance is generally favourable, our stocks will be high and of course vice versa.

Incidentally, I would remind you that the Party obtained its best election result ever in the State election last year without a Political Director!

In passing I would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to Fred Maybury for the significant contribution he made to that outstanding victory as our State Campaign Director. The fact that Fred's contribution was honorary makes it all the more laudable!

Debt due to "grass roots" members and loyal staff

I should like to stress a point that is all too often overlooked, especially in the current leadership debate. We must never fail to appreciate the outstanding contribution to our successes by the thousands of loyal dedicated "grass roots" members.

Without detracting one iota from the great contribution of Joh and Flo – something we all readily acknowledge – there is no doubt without the tremendous support of the "grass roots" little would have been achieved. In short no matter how brilliant the captain is he can accomplish little without a good team.

In addition we are indeed fortunate that we have a very loyal dedicated staff from the Administration Director, Mrs. Helen Maybury, down. These people frequently work long hours, especially at election time, without over-time payment, and most of them end up on election day handing out "how to vote" cards without monetary remuneration but from sheer dedication to the Party cause. To all our staff members wherever they work and in whatever capacity, personally and on behalf of all Party Members I say "thank you".

Leadership challenge welcomed

Let me say here and now, quite categorically, I welcome a challenge for the Presidency. Our National Party philosophy stresses the need for healthy competition in commerce. I think it is equally desirable in politics.

Competition for the Presidency and other Party offices affords you, the Party Members, the opportunity to pass judgement. Let me respectfully remind you in exercising that judgement you have a serious responsibility to put personal likes and dislikes and any other extraneous considerations aside, and vote for the candidate best qualified to do the job.

Condemnation of "gutter" tactics

Whilst I heartily welcome a leadership challenge, I vehemently condemn the use of what can only be described as "gutter" tactics. These tactics are not only an affront to traditional National Party practice, but I am sure are totally abhorrent to all decent National Party Members – in fact to all decent people regardless of their political persuasion.

Of course I have long ago come to accept that politics is a tough game, but cold blooded premeditated character assassination of the kind evident in recent times goes way beyond what is tolerable, even in a tough game.

By now you would all be aware of the blatant attempt to seriously smear my character and that of the Senior Vice-President, Sir Charles Holm, by means of the infamous “House on the Hill” photograph.

It makes me very sad – in fact it is sickening – to think that anyone associated with the National Party would indulge in such a deplorable “gutter” tactic.

For obvious reasons, I do not propose to seek to publicly identify the perpetrator or perpetrators, but I am sure that those who are familiar with all the circumstances will know, as I do, who was responsible.

Another deplorable tactic being employed by some of my political opponents is phone calls by an anonymous caller to Branch officials, urging them to vote against “Sparkes because he condones and encourages homosexuality”. This is just another vicious lie being peddled in the current campaign against me.

Another falsehood being perpetrated to my detriment is the allegation that I am an immoral person who is preoccupied with ushering in an era of condoms, prostitution and abortion – a person who is leading the Party away from traditional values and principles.

This is utter malicious garbage! I am proud to say my morality and my conduct will stand any scrutiny, and that is more than many of my detractors can say!

However, I am a realist. We have to face life as it is – not as we would wish it to be!

“Politics is the art of the possible”. If a Government persistently and arrogantly presumes that it is infallible and thumbs its nose at the wishes and views of the majority of the people, electoral disaster will overtake it, as surely as night follows day.

Moreover, to suggest that I am leading the National Party astray is an insult to the many intelligent Party Members who make up the State Management Committee and Central Council. After all, the views I expound are their views – not mine alone. I cannot and do not act unilaterally.

No abandonment of traditional standards

Let me re-assure all delegates the National Party Organisation is not abandoning traditional values and standards. We are pursuing a course that is in accord with our philosophy and policies, but which at the same time realistically recognises and accommodates changing community standards. To do otherwise would be politically suicidal!

We are at the crossroads

I began this report by stating that our stocks were at an all time low. No doubt you will have seen the survey results that confirm that unpalatable reality.

However, we must not despair! The situation is retrievable provided we have the statesmanlike vision to recognise what must be done and the courage to do those things.

Now is not the time to attempt to spell out the formula for our recovery, but there are at least two pre-requisites:

- (1) There must be an immediate end to all feuds and factionalism, and a complete restoration of traditional National Party solidarity, discipline and loyalty; and
- (2) No abandonment of basic Party philosophy and policies, but a careful fine tuning of policies and leadership style to accord with the current mood of the people.

If we are not prepared to recognise and implement the remedial measures that this most critical time in our history necessitates, then, make no mistake about it, we will perish!

I am confident we have the vision and the courage to do what must be done, and we will achieve the best result in our history in the 1989 State election.

Expression of thanks

Before concluding I would be remiss if I did not thank our Senior Vice-President, Sir Charles Holm, Charlie, for his constant loyal support and service to the Party – one could not ask for a better Vice-President or friend!

I also thank all the other Vice-Presidents and Management Committee members for their loyal support and co-operation during the past 15 difficult and at times traumatic months.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us put the past behind us, let us rekindle the traditional National Party spirit of loyalty and unity, let us together go from strength to strength so that history will record that this was but a brief aberration in the progress of a great Party.

Thank you.