

Stuart McDonald letter to Sir Robert Sparkes, 27 November 1987
(Chapter 21, p. 247)

Dear Bob,

I wanted to write and thank you for your invitation and hospitality at the recent State Conference in Townsville. I found my stay there both enjoyable and useful. It was good to have the opportunity of meeting people from the Queensland Party and renewing old acquaintances.

At the same time, I feel I must raise with you my very deep concern about the continuing undermining of the Federal Parliamentary Leadership of the Party.

From my observations, the fundamental thrust of the debate at the Queensland Conference accepted the need for a return to unity, stability and loyalty in the National Party. I appreciate that these sentiments were primarily directed towards the Queensland National Party. However, I think we all appreciate that the National Party is more than just Queensland. I completely endorse the view that there must be a return to unity and loyalty in the Party at all levels and covering all States and the Federal arena.

Against this background, I was appalled to learn of your comments to the closed session of the Conference about the Federal Parliamentary Leadership. According to my information, you told delegates that in your view we would have little hope of future success in the Federal arena with the present Leadership, but that you had great hope for John Stone. That is a direct attack on the present Leadership of Ian Sinclair. It completely ignores the fact that the Federal Parliamentary Party, only three months earlier, had re-elected Sinclair as its Leader. Indeed, as you would know, Sinclair was even contested for the Leadership by Ray Braithwaite.

The point is not the personalities involved, but the principle. This Party has always accepted that the Federal Parliamentary Party has the sole right to elect its Leaders and that, having done so, those Leaders are entitled to the support of the Party throughout Australia – and in particular, the support of senior Party officials.

Unfortunately, your attitude and comments run completely contrary to that principle and – as you very well know – can only serve to continue the destabilisation of the Federal National Party. You are the one who is now perpetrating the belief within the grassroots membership of the Party that Sinclair is no good. If I may be so bold as to suggest, Bob, you have fallen hook, line and sinker for the bait set by the ALP. The Labor Party has for years denigrated Sinclair and has for years failed to get his head. You are on the verge of giving it to them on a plate. As President of the Party in Queensland, you should be helping Ian Sinclair, as the elected Federal Leader, not helping the Australian Labor Party.

I have found in recent weeks since the July [federal] election a very strong desire within all levels of the Party right around Australia to get back together again. There is a recognition of a need to change some of the structures and relationships between the Federal and State Parties and in this context, people are looking at the Review Committee under Peter Nixon with

considerable optimism and objectivity. But it will all be for nought if you continue on your course.

You have yourself admitted that the early months of 1987 were highly traumatic for the Party and that the Joh campaign was a damaging failure. You have also, on many occasions in past years, been – rightly in my view – highly critical of anyone in the Party who has made statements that could be regarded as being in any way disloyal – even to the point of suggesting expulsion from the Party. I think you should take a cold, hard, look at some of the public comments you have made about Ian Sinclair during the course of 1987 and apply your own standards to them. Having done that, I would then urge you to uphold your own closing comments in your Presidential Report to the Townsville Conference:

‘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.’