

Stan Collard Newsletter to Queensland National Party branches, 21 July 1987

(Chapter 11, p. 153)

Unfortunately, because of circumstances mainly outside my control, this will be the last newsletter for some time - perhaps forever? - and because of this I feel I should devote it to setting the record straight and giving my side of the story.

Let me say at the outset that I regard the aim of making the National Party the dominant conservative party in Australia to be both legitimate and desirable. All of my political life I have worked to this aim for the simple reason that without being the dominant force it will be impossible for us to bring about the type of society I believe Australians want and deserve.

Most National Party people would agree that a healthy society can only be founded on respect for the social and political institutions upon which our nation was founded and which served us well until 1972, when Whitlam allowed the social engineers to put us on the rocky road to ruin.

This ruin included not only economic decay but also the undermining of such great social institutions as the family, church, law, the Parliament and national pride. It is the task of a conservative party to redress the imbalance that was created then. I believe that, economically, this can only be achieved by private enterprise or reward for effort. This does not mean our system should be tilted in favour of the snake oil salesmen or get-rich-quick merchants, regardless of our society whether they wear white shoes or R.M. Williams elastic sides. On the other hand, our society must be a compassionate one and recognise the less fortunate in our midst. I would argue that it is of little use creating a wealthy generation if society disintegrates through what can only be called moral decay.

The reason I could not support the methods of the Joh for PM, Joh for Canberra or Joh's Nationals in control of the Senate pushes was simply that the tactics used violated many of the conservative principles I believe in and I understood so did the National Party. Also, at no stage was I, as Federal Senate Leader, consulted about the campaign. Neither were any of my Federal colleagues. Like you, I read about most of it in the press but I was expected to endorse what had occurred.

Regardless of your opinions of Ian Sinclair, he was the Federal Leader. I would see it as a gross betrayal of National Party principle not to have given Ian the loyalty his position accorded. The whole Queensland campaign was apparently based on a survey which supposedly proved that only Joh could defeat the Hawke Government. I will reserve judgement on this survey for the simple reason that I have not seen the raw data and cannot vouch for its veracity. I do know that the then Coalition had been ahead of the Hawke Government, according to all reliable polls, for eight consecutive months. We lost the lead after the start of the Joh push and never regained it.

Sir Joh's obvious high recognition factor could and should have been used for positive purposes and not the purely destructive ones which characterised the initial push.

It was obvious that the Joh for PM push could only succeed if the Liberal Party disintegrated at a Federal Parliamentary level. This would have allowed Sir Joh to be the only viable alternative. This was obviously NOT going to happen.

Contrary to media inspired opinion, the Liberal Party was not about to swing back to the Peacock, Macphee, Steele Hall wets. The Howard dries always had the numbers and were in control even if the wets did tend to hog the media limelight.

I do not know whether the original vicious attacks on John Howard were based on naivety - that is, believing the press beat ups of an imminent Peacock challenge - or were pure Machiavellian power politics. I leave you to be the judge.

I have always been led to believe that seduction is preferable to rape. If the Queenslanders had approached the rest of the National Party branches in a calm and rational manner they may well have found that, with a few necessary modifications, the Joh push could have contributed to a conservative victory.

I should also like to say that there has been less than accurate reporting of some events which were used to justify decisions. For example, it was said that it was Federal Policy, reaffirmed at a recent Federal Council meeting, to adopt the Queensland 25% Flat Tax Policy. All that occurred at Federal Council was that the principle of Flat Tax was reaffirmed as a concept. There is no way that Federal Council was going to endorse the Queensland policy for the simple reason they had never seen it. Therefore the claim that Sinclair was not following party policy because he did not endorse the Queensland policy is patently untrue.

The Federal Council meeting also passed two resolutions concerning withdrawal from coalition in Opposition. At Milton [Brisbane], Sir Robert said that the second motion calling for unconditional withdrawal was the one which should be regarded as binding. In fact the mover stressed that this particular motion was only to apply to future situations - not the present one. The official reason for withdrawing from the coalition was irreconcilable policy differences. The simple fact is, at that stage neither all the then coalition policies, nor the Queensland policies had been finalised. The reality is that with Howard in charge of the Liberals there is, and was, no major difference in policy thrust.

As a conservative, I found most unpalatable the binding of parliamentarians to decisions under threat of disendorsement. This is a clear violation of the Westminster Parliamentary Conventions we supposedly follow. How often have you heard National Party people castigate the ALP for exactly this behaviour. Even the ALP give their parliamentarians the out of only implementing policy where practicable.

I should also like to ask how often have delegates at Conference heard Sir Robert correctly remind them that they are there to listen to the arguments and then make up their minds. They are to exercise their judgement and not vote under direction from branches, zones or divisions. Similarly, Parliaments are deliberative assemblies where representatives, elected by the voters, are expected to exercise their judgement. It also seems there is one rule for Federal

Parliamentarians and another for State. I ask how long has sex education in schools been State policy and how long has a register of foreign land owners been State policy?

The excuse that the forming of coalitions is “fundamental policy” and that therefore direction with menaces by a single State organisation is legitimate is too absurd to be taken seriously. Who decides what is fundamental policy - Sir Robert or Sir Joh?....NO....Either we are a party of principle or we are at best a bunch of cowboys. If we are the former then such behaviour can never be condoned and should not be contemplated.

The reasons for my dumping have been officially and unofficially put down to lack of effort, treachery and failure to honour undertakings given at Hervey Bay. No-one who has known me over my twelve years of Parliamentary service could say I did not put in the required effort - and more!

The charge that I failed to honour agreements given at Hervey Bay is false. I undertook to resign my Shadow Ministry and not to attend joint party meetings with the Liberals if the Party required I should do so. I at no stage said I agreed with these decisions or that they were in any way wise. The events of 11 July proved that my premonitions about the outcome were correct. The fact remains, I did resign my Shadow Ministry and did not attend joint meetings.

The charge of treachery is equally untrue. If I had acted out of pure self interest the charge might have had some justification. Anyone who cares to think about it will soon realise that what I did could not have been in self interest. In fact, the opposite is true.

In my position as Senate Leader, I came into contact with a great variety of people - some party members, some party supporters and some just influential business people. Without exception, people I spoke to outside the party were appalled at what was going on. So, too, were many party members.

What I feared was that if the campaign fared badly for us, and on any objective assessment it did, then it would set back the goal of dominance in conservative politics a good many years. I also believed that a perceived loss could jeopardize our State Government at the next election.

All I ever wanted was for the rank and file party members to call time out and think more clearly about where the campaign was heading and its likely consequences. It was clear that those orchestrating the Joh push could not, or would not do so.

It was Sir Robert who said at Hervey Bay that we were undertaking a high risk strategy and that if Hawke was re-elected the campaign would have been a failure. All we had to do was to look at the history of the ALP to realise that politics is littered with the corpses of houses divided.

In conclusion, may I offer a few comments about our future.

The biggest problem for the National Party has been to translate some of our electoral successes into general acceptance, respect and credibility. In other words, we have to convince the opinion leaders and makers of the community that we are a party worthy of their respect, if not support.

Credibility and respect cannot be bought - it has to be earned over a long period of time. It is of little long term benefit to buy respectability by chasing a few high profile glamour candidates during election periods. This tends to lessen our credibility, even if those people can and do contribute greatly at the time.

To really gain respect, we must firstly act consistently and according to the principles we occasionally espouse. If and when we do this we will find our stability and conservative bent will attract the right sort of people to our banner - people for whom self interest is not the sole motivation.

If we can achieve this our success in Queensland will not be a transitory thing and federal power can be achieved. Currently, our success in Queensland is based on the popularity of Sir Joh and the weakness of our opponents. It is a fact of life that Sir Joh will not be about forever and weak opponents have a habit of gaining strength. Therefore, eventually the National Party will have to rise or fall on its intrinsic merits. I would hate to think that my thirty years of National Party service amounted to nothing because of a lack of vision at the critical moment.

The National Party is not the property or the play thing of Sir Joh, Sir Robert, Ian Sinclair or even Stan Collard. If we are serious about being a conservative party of principle, it should not be even considered as belonging to the present generation. It belongs to past, present and future generations. We of this generation will quite rightly stand condemned if, by the pursuit of short term goals and ego trips, we jeopardize the political future of the following generations.