

13. The Coalition Starts to Slide

With the retirement of Arthur Fadden in 1958, the Country Party leadership went to John McEwen (later Sir John), an Australian World War I soldier-settler. He entered Parliament in 1934 and was long recognised as one of the strongmen of the Menzies Government. As Deputy Prime Minister, McEwen was entitled to take over from Fadden as Treasurer, but McEwen had been advised Fadden had secured all the tax advantages for farmers that were possible. He decided to set up a powerful new Department of Trade. McEwen had been Minister for Commerce and Agriculture when he made the switch to Trade and therefore lost responsibility for agriculture. A new department was created—the Department of Primary Industry—and, to everyone’s astonishment and mirth, the first Minister for Primary Industry was none other than the Liberal William McMahon, who had held the Social Services portfolio. Labor wit Fred Daly remarked that McMahon was the ‘Kings Cross farmer’. ‘All he knew about farming was growing flowers in his window box’, Daly chuckled.

After the 1958 election, the Country Party won back the Department of Primary Industry, with the plodding Charles Adermann as minister. Following the 1963 election, McEwen’s department was expanded into the Department of Trade and Industry—a change giving McEwen ministerial control not only of trade negotiations abroad, but also of tariff protection at home for Australian manufacturing. McEwen was seen as an arch protectionist. But his critics could not deny that had it not been for McEwen, the Australian car industry would have disappeared and much of the infrastructure of manufacturing and engineering would have been lost. McEwen told the author he wanted the manufacturing industry to have the Australian market as its base, and this solid base would allow it to achieve export success.

This seemed a sensible view and had wide support on both sides of Parliament. Most MPs remembered the Depression years of the 1930s and full employment was the rock on which all political parties’ policies were based. The war had aroused a sense that Australia had to develop to enhance its economic and strategic independence and this continues as a basic policy of all political parties. As well as general approval for immigration and development of northern Australia, manufacturing was the largest employer, and politicians from both sides of the Parliament believed in protection, as did a majority of gallery journalists.

McEwen’s willingness to protect the manufacturing industry naturally brought a generous flow of funds into the coffers of the Country Party. This was important, but by no means McEwen’s motive. He genuinely believed, despite his party’s base among farmers, that for its own security, Australia needed to develop a powerful manufacturing sector. The protectionists’ domination

started to slip under steady attack from the media, and farmers increasingly saw that protection for manufacturing was a burden they had to carry in the form of increased operating costs that they could not pass on in the export market.

Towards the end of the Menzies era, the first stirrings of opposition to McEwen's protectionist policies were beginning to surface. Charles Robert (Bert) Kelly, a farmer, came into Parliament in 1958 as the Liberal Member for Wakefield, and remained on the back bench until he entered the Holt ministry in 1966 as a junior minister. Because of his tireless advocacy of lower protection and criticism of the Menzies Government's protectionist policies, Bert played a far more important role on the back bench than he ever did as a minister. I remember innumerable speeches by Kelly on the tariff issue and, although he was anything but an orator, his case was well put and slowly he began to influence the Parliament and the gallery.

Another important player in the protection debate was Alf Rattigan. A former deputy secretary of the Trade Department, later Comptroller-General of Customs, he was appointed Chairman of the Tariff Board by McEwen in 1963 and remained in that position until 1979, although the organisation's title was changed to the Industries Assistance Commission (and is now the Productivity Commission). Rattigan surprised many by immediately resisting the protectionist policies of his former political master, McEwen, and he had a considerable influence on the decision of Whitlam in 1973 to cut tariffs across the board by 25 per cent. Alan Wood, when only a junior economic writer in the *Australian Financial Review's* bureau in the gallery, was a supporter of Rattigan and was tireless in opposition to McEwen and the Trade Department.

The fundamental argument against protection was that less efficient companies or industries should not be shielded from import competition and the resources (meaning capital) being used behind a tariff barrier should be deployed to more efficient industries. This argument was convincing when movements of capital in and out of Australia were strictly controlled by the Reserve Bank. With the arrival of globalisation—permitting capital to be seamlessly shifted around the world—many formerly flourishing and protected industries have disappeared or have been substantially reduced. Sacked workers found that the capital freed up did not go to other Australian industries, but rather to China or other emerging economies. Products made in Australia thus became imports. This is leading to a resurgence in support for protection, particularly as the world slips into a global recession. The protection debate is not yet over.

In the 1960s, the Basic Industry Group (BIG) came under notice. Financed by a number of wealthy graziers, it set out to force the Menzies Government to reverse its protection policies. The financing of BIG was largely provided by Charles Russell, a wealthy Queensland grazier, who had been the Country Party

MP for the seat of Maranoa from 1949 until he was defeated in 1951. The major operative for BIG was Max Newton, who had returned to Canberra and started a newsletter called *Incentive*. Don Whittington and I regarded this apprehensively as direct competition. Fortunately, it turned out not to be. Its purpose was to argue the case against protection and McEwen's administration of the Trade Department and its readership was therefore limited. Newton had hoped farmers would subscribe to *Incentive*, but as publishers before and since Newton have discovered, farmers are tightwads when it comes to buying anything in the media. Most of them read the local paper and one of the major farm papers such as *The Land* and that is enough information for them.

BIG addressed the tariff issue from the narrow focus of its impact on the wool industry, dominated by the landed aristocracy, and McEwen used this to his advantage. Much of rural industry and those who worked in it were the beneficiaries of one form or another of government subsidy or protection. There were the statutory marketing bodies established by legislation, operating what clearly were anticompetitive systems of selling on the domestic market. Margarine production quotas were imposed to limit competition with dairy farmers; rail freight rates for hauling grain in one direction and fertiliser in the other were subsidised by State governments; and, most important of all, farmers enjoyed a variety of tax concessions, tailored for them by the Country Party. McEwen also argued that protection was needed to attract migrants who would not come to Australia if their jobs were threatened by imports. In turn, this would see population growth slowed and the domestic market for rural products would diminish.

All this was sound enough for industries such as dairying, horticulture, feed grains and, to a degree, beef and lamb. But it was not so with wool. The free-trade argument was undeniable if confined to the wool industry, with its overwhelming reliance on export markets. Protection of the Australian manufacturing industry raised wool producers' costs—not necessarily recoverable by auction selling of wool. The threat from BIG to McEwen and protection finally disappeared in the early 1970s when the wool industry agreed to the establishment of a reserve price system for wool (which eventually proved a disaster and was scrapped by the Hawke Government).

This was not the end of Max Newton. He had supporters such as Bill McMahon (thereby ensuring McEwen was an enemy) and Secretary of Treasury, John Stone. Newton was contracted to the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) in Sydney and was engaged in providing submissions to the Tariff Board and a general information service on tariff issues of interest to Japan. At least one senior journalist, Ian Fitchett, complained about Newton carrying out this work whilst a member of the gallery. A gallery constitution had finally been hammered out after much argument in 1966 and this provided that

membership was confined to members of the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA—the journalists' union) whose duties were restricted to the 'collection and dissemination of parliamentary, government or political news'.

A number of journalists (under the lap) carried out limited non-journalistic work such as sending reports to companies of developments in Canberra of direct interest to them and advising them on public relations matters (although not directly lobbying themselves). Fitchett directly challenged Newton's right to be a member of the gallery and we all knew that this was inspired by McEwen. Fitchett was close to McEwen, who fed him with a regular flow of stories—most of them favourable to McEwen and hostile to McMahan. After a number of stormy special general meetings of the gallery, Newton agreed to resign on the condition the gallery would accept a journalist he nominated to represent him in his news service and *Incentive* newsletter.

Like all successful politicians, McEwen was a pragmatist. When it came to looking after his party, he would do the best deals possible and if he had to cross the traditional party lines, so be it. McEwen made a preference-swap deal with the Labor Party strongman and left-wing faction leader Joe Chamberlain. According to the deal, during a Senate election in Western Australia, Labor would preference the Country Party rather than the Liberals and the Country Party would preference Labor rather than the Liberals. He did the same deal with Labor Premier Vince Gair in Queensland. McEwen's press secretary, Bill Carew, told the author he was instructed to carry what Carew described as 'a bagful of brass' to Brisbane airport, where, in the bookshop of the terminal of Australian National Airways (ANA: later to become Ansett Airlines), he handed over this considerable amount of money to Gair and the preference swap was done in Queensland. This was before Gair moved over to the DLP after the Labor split.

It was Menzies who dubbed McEwen 'Black Jack', and the dour Victorian did not appear to mind when it became common in the media to so refer to him. McEwen was cursed with a terrible burden: neurodermatitis—an itchy skin condition. Bill Carew, when he travelled with McEwen, carried four pairs of extra socks because McEwen's feet would be bleeding from dermatitis. It was exacerbated by stress, caused insomnia, and insomnia added to stress, worsening the dermatitis—a self-perpetuating, awful array of maladies. It was no surprise McEwen came into office fairly late.

As Prime Minister, McEwen welcomed US President Johnson to Australia for the memorial service for Harold Holt and they hit it off immediately. Both were farmers and both were in the cattle business. Johnson invited McEwen to his Texas ranch—an invitation McEwen later took up. At the ranch, McEwen had a particularly bad time with bleeding feet and the President insisted on doing

something about it. The presidential plane, Air Force One, was whistled up and McEwen was dispatched to the Mayo Clinic for treatment, where he was given cortisone. It appeared to assist him although his widow, Lady Mary, later claimed it contributed to his death.¹

It could hardly be said that McEwen, born in 1900 and living until he was eighty, died prematurely. McEwen was a dour public figure and carried himself with great dignity in the house, although privately, in the office, he had a lively wit and his staff adored him. He assembled an impressive team to match the high-powered intellects of Treasury. The first Secretary of the Trade Department, John Crawford (later Sir John), an outstanding public servant, recruited gifted officers into the department. Unlike ministers of the Howard Government, McEwen did not object to journalists being briefed by departmental officials in both the Trade and Primary Industry Departments.

Stringing as part-time correspondent for *The Land*, I had a keen interest in what was going on in both those departments and enjoyed easy access to senior officials. One of these was Jack Campbell, who was McEwen's major adviser on developments in the European Economic Community (EEC, now the European Union). To emphasise its trading implications, the EEC was often called the European Common Market by politicians. Britain under the Macmillan Conservatives seemed intent on joining. The implications of British membership caused consternation within the Menzies Government.

Britain and Australia enjoyed preferential tariff rates for trade between the two nations under the Imperial Preference Scheme formulated at the Ottawa Conference in 1932. This was under threat. McEwen dispatched Jack Campbell to Brussels for a year and he returned with a comprehensive understanding of the politics and the bureaucratic intricacies of the developing common market. It was thought that Jack Campbell might have become the new departmental head after Crawford left the department for a new career at the Australian National University. Bill Carew told me that both McEwen and Menzies regarded Campbell as too young for such a responsibility and Alan Westerman became permanent head instead.

McEwen had dispatched Campbell to Brussels convinced the EEC had the potential to disrupt Commonwealth trade and his judgment proved accurate when Britain under Prime Minister Harold Macmillan began negotiations for the United Kingdom to join the European trade bloc. In a speech to business leaders in Brisbane in October 1961, McEwen explained his position:

If the United Kingdom joined the Common Market on terms that now exist between the six present members, it could have devastating

¹ Conversation with Carew.

consequences for our export opportunities to the United Kingdom. We have made this very clear from the outset. We have said, 'It is not our business to tell you how to run your own affairs. We wouldn't relish you telling us how to run our affairs. But we are partners, Australia and the United Kingdom; we are not only blood brothers, but we are also trading partners and we put it to you strongly that you ought not to go in unless you can contrive such modifications of the present arrangements as will protect our trade.'²

The issue was to come to a head in London in September 1962 at a meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers. This was a hugely important story, not only for *Inside Canberra*, but also for *The Land*, and I wanted to get to London for the meeting. But how? *Inside Canberra* could not afford to cover the airfares and hotel and other costs. I did a deal with *The Land* that it would pay my hotel and living expenses in London if I got there. With no introduction, I talked Air India into providing me with a free return economy ticket in return for some puff pars in *The Land*.

I began to get the hang of life in the developing world on boarding my flight for London via Bombay (now Mumbai) in Sydney: all the cabin stewards were male. These jobs were far too good for women it seemed. When we got to Bombay, I was offloaded with a number of other freeloaders (mainly crews from Australian airlines). Our protests were in vain: there were fare-paying passengers who could take our seats and that was the end of the argument. About midnight, we travelled from the airport to our hotel, the magnificent old Taj Mahal Hotel on the waterfront, a reminder of the days of the British Raj. As we drove along, I was astonished to see tens of thousands of Indians asleep on the footpaths. Some had a simple canvas or plastic awning above their heads, some slept in the open on a blanket and many slept on the bare pavement.

I was thirty-three years of age, and this was my first trip abroad (leaving aside New Zealand). It drove home to me what politicians from the developing world meant when they talked about the need to lift their people out of crushing poverty. Although India was dry at the time, when we got to the hotel we all demanded a drink, only to be told by the night clerk we could not have alcohol unless we filled in a statutory declaration declaring ourselves to be alcoholics. As one, we shouted: 'Give us the forms; give us the forms.' The rooms were magnificent, with marble floors, towering ceilings and a floor space three times the size of the best hotel rooms in Australia. We spent two unforgettable days in Bombay before managing to pick up an Air India flight for the rest of the trip. The memory of India remains with me to this day.

² Golding, Peter 1996, *Black Jack McEwen: Political gladiator*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, Vic., p. 206.

I was knocked out by London and remember my father telling me of how he walked up and down the Strand during World War I filling in time. I was walking up and down the Strand but I had plenty to fill in my time covering the conference. I was struck how at 6ft 3in, I stood out in the crowded street—a reminder of how Britain had lost so many of its finest young men in two world wars and how short food had been during World War II. The prime ministers' conference ended with no agreement and it did not matter as de Gaulle soon put a veto on British entry to the EEC. But there was no doubt in the minds of Commonwealth statesmen that Mother England had dumped her Commonwealth family and would eventually join Europe. The de Gaulle veto was a blessing, giving Australia time to turn its attention to other markets with a sense of urgency.

Alan Westerman was recruited by the Trade Department from Columbia University in the United States, where he was more or less discovered by the then Trade Commissioner for New York, Eric McClintock, who later became the Chairman of Woolworths in Australia. Westerman was highly regarded by McEwen, in part because he was an expert on shipping costs and at that time the shipping cost of wool was creating concern in the Government. It was as a result of Westerman's knowledge of the various shipping conferences that McEwen forced the government-owned Australian National Line—then basically serving only the Australian coast—into the European shipping conference. McEwen explained to the Parliament that this gave the Government a 'window' into the financial operations and the costing methods of freight price setting by the conference lines.

Westerman also encouraged McEwen to apply pressure to the shipping companies to use the new method of shipping products in containers. Malcolm Summers in the Trade Department played a major role in the development of the containerisation trade and later became head of the Department of Shipping. In the published diaries of Peter Howson, a minister in the Menzies, Holt, McEwen, Gorton and McMahan Governments, Howson tells³ of having a drink with Sir Roland Wilson, who was about to retire as Secretary of the Treasury: 'His [Wilson's] epithets on Westerman were almost unprintable.' McEwen would have been most gratified had he heard this. Westerman's job was to confront Treasury, not to please it.

McEwen was Australia's eighteenth prime minister and his tenure was short: 19 December 1967 to 10 January 1968. Michael Page in *Prime Ministers of Australia* sums him up well: 'John McEwen was what used to be known as a "black Scot".'⁴ He was a tall, strong man with hair and eyebrows as black as crows' wings; upright in every sense of the word, aggressive, ruthlessly determined to get his own way and inflexible in defence of Country Party policies.

³ Howson, *The Howson Diaries*, p. 230.

⁴ Page, Michael 1988, *The Prime Ministers of Australia*, Robertsbridge, London and Sydney.

Everyone knew him as 'Black Jack'. Born in 1900 at Chiltern in Victoria, he was orphaned at seven and, like many great figures before him and since, he was brought up by his grandmother. He volunteered for the Army when he was eighteen and would have gone to the Western Front had the war lasted, but in the event he did not leave Australia. He was, nevertheless, entitled to a soldier-settler's block provided by the Government for returned soldiers.

Given the humble circumstances of his childhood, his achievements in politics were prodigious. He entered the Federal Parliament in 1934 representing the Victorian seat of Echuca and, during his long career, which ended in 1971 when he resigned, he represented Indi and then Murray. After only three years in Parliament, he was Interior Minister in the Lyons Government and was in the Cabinet of every non-Labor government from then until his retirement.

In his short tenure as Prime Minister, he was responsible for a political earthquake: blocking William McMahon's bid to become Prime Minister after the death of Holt. McEwen, like Menzies, wanted Hasluck to replace Holt. Two days after Holt disappeared, Governor-General, Richard Casey, swore in McEwen as Prime Minister. McEwen had told Casey he intended to keep the Holt ministry unchanged until the Liberal Party had elected a new leader, when he would stand aside as Prime Minister. At a press conference in Parliament House after his swearing in, McEwen made it clear his appointment was not conditional on these undertakings. The gallery was hot on the heels of the sensational development that McEwen had told senior figures in the Liberal Party that the Country Party would not join a coalition with McMahon as prime minister. Alan Reid⁵ recorded the following exchange at a press conference:

Question—Mr. McEwen, are you prepared to say publicly, as you have apparently said privately, that you will not accept Mr. McMahon as a Prime Minister, as Leader of the Liberal Party.

McEwen—Yes, I say to you I have told Mr. McMahon that neither I nor my Country Party colleagues would be prepared to serve under him as Prime Minister. Mr. McMahon knows the reasons. My senior Liberal Party colleagues not only know the reasons, but knew the reasons before Mr. Holt's death.

Question—Do you disclose the reasons?

McEwen—No, I will not.

McEwen explained he had had to decide whether to disclose his opposition to McMahon before the Liberal Party room met to elect its new leader and expose

5 Reid, Alan 1969, *The Power Struggle*, Shakespeare Head Press, Sydney.

himself to the charge of seeking to influence the outcome. On the other hand, McEwen went on, if he remained silent and McMahon was elected, this would produce 'a very serious national crisis', with the Country Party refusing to form a coalition under McMahon. Like many of his ministerial colleagues, McEwen detested Billy McMahon, whom he regarded as deceitful, a liar and the main leak in Cabinet to the anti-Country Party Packer press. In the gallery, McMahon was known as 'Billy the Leak'. The NSW Liberal Party was affronted that their (and Packer's) man was being denied the political leadership of Australia, but was powerless to do anything about it. When Gorton was elected as Holt's successor as Liberal leader, McEwen, as was inevitable, ended his 21 days in the highest office in the land.

Going right back to Federation, until the arrival of television, the major daily papers in the various States exerted most media influence on politicians from both sides of the Parliament. The Menzies era was a time of comparative social, economic and political stability. Apart from the odd upheaval and close election outcome, the country seemed happy to let Menzies go on and on, but when Menzies went, change was in the wind. The influence of the daily newspapers on voters diminished with the development of television and radio news and current affairs and, after the death of Holt, the impact of the electronic media on politics accelerated.

In the early 1950s, the papers from the two biggest States obviously had the greatest political clout. Although the Herald and Weekly Times' morning Melbourne paper, *The Sun News Pictorial*, had the largest circulation in the nation, the group's Melbourne *Herald*, the only afternoon paper in Melbourne, was the first paper Victorian MPs, including Menzies, looked to. *The Age* in Melbourne (controlled by the Syme family) was important. In Sydney, the venerable broadsheet the *Sydney Morning Herald*, flagship of the Fairfax group, and Frank Packer's tabloid, *The Daily Telegraph*, although having a greater circulation, shared political influence. Anti-Labor and anti-union, *The Tele* was the most overtly politically biased major paper in Australia. My father would never read *The Tele* and was appalled that unionists made up the bulk of its readers. In the gallery, the bureaus serving these Sydney and Melbourne papers were similarly regarded as having more clout with the Government and Opposition than other bureaus.

The ABC bureau was of little significance in the early 1950s, and, for some time after the dawn of television, Jack Comans ('Como' to everyone) was bureau head of the national broadcaster. Although a very good tennis player in his youth, Como was, around the gallery, slow moving and slow talking. He would join other journalists for the morning vigil at the top of the stairs in King's Hall to catch moments with people such as Artie Fadden. No story ever emerged as a result.

Comans eschewed speculation on, or interpretation of, news. Unless a news item came from a press release or an official announcement, there would be no report at all on the ABC. Colin Parks remembers coming from the ABC in Adelaide to join the ABC's gallery team and introducing himself to Comans in the ABC office. Comans told Parks he had a piece of advice to offer and the junior from Adelaide leaned forward, expecting some invaluable tips about covering politics. Comans' words, as Parks remembers them, were: 'There are a lot of pisspots around here. Stick to beer and you'll be all right.'

During the 1960s, the first bastardisation case at the Duntroon Military College was a major news story. Senior cadets, it emerged, were bullying junior cadets. Reporters rushed to Duntroon to report the story. Not Como. Tony Ferguson was producer or director (I am not sure which) of the ABC's highly successful *This Day Tonight (TDT)*, an evening TV current affairs program. We both started our journalistic career as cadets on the *Daily Mirror*. Tony told me how he was on the phone to Comans asking him to get a crew and reporter over to Duntroon for a piece on the bastardisation scandal. Comans refused, saying this was not the type of story the ABC covered. Ferguson was furious. He even appealed directly to the then General Manager of the ABC, Talbot Duckmanton. To Ferguson's astonishment, Duckmanton refused to give Comans any direction, telling Ferguson he completely agreed with Comans' decision not to cover the story.

Parks and a number of other old hands, including myself, took part in an oral history conference with historian Michael Richards at Old Parliament House on 8 December 2004. Parks' comments gave a feel of the atmosphere in the old building and what it was like to work there and how difficult Comans could be:

The nature of this building was such that the whole building and everyone in it was a source. You could walk into this building at nine in the morning and you could sniff something. You could feel an atmosphere that something was going on. It was a quickened pace or: what are those two talking about? Those people are enemies so what are they talking about? Doormen were always a very good source in this place. I remember walking in one Monday morning and saying to the bloke on the Reps door—George I think—'Did you have a good weekend?' 'No, I've spent the whole bloody weekend working', he said. I asked, 'What do you mean, the place isn't open?' and he said 'No, I had to work here all weekend because they're cleaning out [Defence Minister, Malcolm] Fraser's office. The bloody sheilas' boxes—all weekend I had to carry them out to the car'... Very funny, I thought. So I reported it dutifully to the head man, Jack Comans, who said 'No, that's bullshit, just bullshit.' Anyway, two hours later, Fraser announced his resignation. I mean, we were so far ahead of the story it didn't matter, yet we didn't report it.

Jack as head of the bureau had the last call on whether stories, which were un-sourced, should be reported. It was all ‘bullshit’—because he didn’t get it officially.

Parks later became press secretary to Prime Minister Bob Hawke and moved on to success as a political lobbyist in Canberra for some of Australia’s largest companies.

It was against this background that in 1972 Ken Begg from the ABC’s Sydney office was dispatched to Canberra as political correspondent. Begg, in an interview with the author, said there had long been concern among the senior editorial managers that the Canberra bureau was not getting on top of some of the Canberra stories. One instance was when John Gorton voted himself out of office on the day of Bill McMahon’s challenge. The ABC did not report it for several hours.

Begg told the author: ‘There was great frustration because commercial radio was starting to operate in the Canberra gallery and they were reporting these issues, they were reporting the gossip and the speculation and putting great pressure on the ABC, which was getting left behind.’

The ABC also recognised it had to start putting some people into the Canberra office who had experience in both radio and television news and current affairs. The catalyst was change—change in the nature of politics, the changing nature of reporting and the fact that technology was starting to impact on the reporting of politics at both the State and the federal level. Begg found that Como was of little help to him in learning the ropes. He took Begg aside and said: ‘I can’t give you any of my contacts; it would be a betrayal of their confidence.’ Begg said: ‘I later found out that Comans’ contact was a bloke who used to work for some National Party senator. Como used to drink with him down in the non-members’—a hopeless bloke.’

Begg remembers the election night of 10 December 1977, long before the ABC had the services of electoral experts such as Antony Green, and Comans was the inhouse expert, but hard to pin down. Begg recalls:

Jack, at 9 o’clock on election night, said, ‘Labor will shit it in’, and departed for the Canberra Club at Canberra’s Civic Centre. That was his analysis—‘Labor will shit it in’—so we had 47 radio bulletins and television bulletins to do and he just disappeared. The chief sub at the time was screaming, saying, ‘Where the fuck is Labor shitting it in? What am I supposed to write, “Labor will shit it in” for the 10 o’clock bulletin?’ That was Jack; he just disappeared. Of course, far from shitting in, Whitlam was trounced by Fraser.

Despite Begg's difficulties with Comans, the ABC was well on its way to being the dominant bureau in the gallery. In 1967 the current affairs radio program *AM* began and relied heavily on Canberra content. Even today, listening to *AM* is a must for politicians, political journalists and many more Australians. Radio current affairs was further beefed up with *PM* and *The World Today*. This gives the ABC the ability to comprehensively cover a big story right through the day. Nothing in commercial TV/radio, then or now, goes anywhere near touching this service. The ABC is now easily the most important bureau in the gallery, reaching more Australians via radio, television and its online service than any other media organisation.

To the credit of ABC management, it has for decades provided the Canberra bureau with adequate, well-trained and experienced journalists for TV and radio. One was Michael Willesee, son of the Foreign Minister in the Whitlam Government. He came to Canberra in the 1960s as the first representative in the gallery of the (now long gone) WA paper the *Perth Daily News*. Young, handsome and witty, he was recognised for his talents by the ABC and became the Canberra representative of *This Day Tonight*. With just the right amount of aggression, without appearing overbearing or unfair, Willesee was one of the best interviewers on Australian TV. I was much older than Mike, yet I learned a lot from him about TV journalism—something of great value in my role as the sole and part-time representative of the Ten Network in the gallery.

In his oral history, Begg touched on the pressures on ABC journalists, particularly those reporting politics, either in Canberra or in the State capitals. He contrasted this with his experience later in commercial TV when he left the ABC to head the Seven Network's gallery staff. Politicians from all parties, but particularly the party in government, pressure ABC journalists, or senior management, or sometimes both. Speaking of his years with the ABC in the gallery, Begg complained 'everything in those days was about balance'. He told of how McMahon in the 1972 campaign 'assassinated' his Cabinet by saying, in effect, he had to do half the work because his ministers were too lazy. (I remember this story well and it was one of the sensations of the campaign.) Begg reported the story yet it did not go to air until 11 pm because the TV news editor at the time, Keith Fraser, without consulting Begg, was convinced he had got the story 'terribly wrong'. Begg went on:

Back in the Seventies we were living in a time of balance, where you had to have the same amount of words [for each side]. If you had 45 words for the Labor Party, you had to have 45 words for the Liberal Party, 15 for the DLP and 15 for the National Party. If you had a wide shot of the Prime Minister and a close up of the Opposition Leader, then the next night you had to reverse. So we lived in that silly time of everything having to be balance and lines had to be counted and the ABC was, and

is today, under great pressure. So I was more aware of pressure in the ABC as a public broadcaster than I ever was in the commercial world. I was very aware Talbot Duckmanton [then ABC General Manager], was under heavy political pressure, particularly at election time.

Since Begg's time, the pressure on the ABC has become greater. Much of TV and radio news/current affairs is about the doings of government, particularly its failings, hence the government of the day is the leading critic of the ABC. The fact that a government gets something right is not nearly as newsworthy as something it gets wrong. This is an iron law of journalism, whatever the media.

Neil Andrew (Wakefield, SA), a good fellow, if somewhat naive, was Speaker of the House for some of the Howard Government era. He once said to me: 'Rob, I used to subscribe to *Inside Canberra*, but it could never find anything good to say about the [Howard] Government.' I explained to him the job of the gallery was to attack the Government, of whatever political colour. Nearly all (not all) politicians seek power and these are the ones holding powerful jobs in a government—from the Prime Minister down. Wishing to continue in power, they do not want the media to know details of how they will achieve this. Our job is to discover the bastardry they are up to. The wielders of power are the ones we cannot trust, not the Opposition.