THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

From the moment Gough Whitlam was dismissed, the election campaign was under way. His famous appearances on the front steps of Parliament House on 11 November—once when David Smith prorogued Parliament; the other with his colleagues later that evening, to sing *Solidarity Forever*—were both early campaign activities. The election campaign lasted until the day of the general election on 13 December 1975 when, in the face of an unprecedented electoral disaster, Whitlam had finally to recognise that ‘*La commedia è finita*’.1 During this time, Malcolm Fraser was prime minister, heading a caretaker government that made no new policy and no appointments. There are grey areas in knowing what is ‘new’ and what is the continuation of ‘existing’ policy; my friend John Wheeldon fired off several telegrams to the Governor-General alleging that Don Chipp had taken action that transgressed the ‘caretaker’ convention.

In order to present the material with some logic while at the same time avoiding the mere setting out of a series of diary entries, I will discuss the election period under thematic headings. The diary entries made each day remain the primary material and are available; however, one writes an account with the reader in mind and a straight diary record is sometimes boring and sometimes repetitive.

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1 The last line of Pagliacci by Leoncavallo.
The Aftermath of the Dismissal

One of the less well appreciated characteristics of political life is the suddenness with which cataclysmic events occur and are concluded. These include most ‘institutional’ events with major impacts on the lives of individuals. On the morning of 11 November 1975, all members of the Twenty-Ninth Parliament were active participants in a life-and-death political struggle unequalled in the history of the Federation. By that evening the Parliament had been terminated, all members and senators were out, power had shifted to a new prime minister, the president and speaker had effectively been terminated as power brokers and an election campaign was under way. Many of those now out of Parliament would never return—some because they were retiring, some because they had been stripped of party endorsement, and many more because they would be defeated at the forthcoming election.

It was not unlike the situation facing players in a football grand final. All season they have worked towards this day. The press has followed each step of their journey and that press coverage has intensified as the event has come closer. In the days before the final game, it is the one subject discussed in all football circles and the players are feted and known and welcomed everywhere. After the game is over, instantly, all interest in it goes. Each player is nothing. The losers are not the only ones who feel let down; the winners do, too. The sense of let down is felt by many sportspeople after the finish of important events; it is the same for politicians in the situation in which we found ourselves on 12 November.

While Parliament itself continued to function after prorogation, it now did so on the much leaner basis of an ‘out of session’ structure than it had the day before, when it was fully staffed and the hub of a national conflict. All staff employed just for the duration of the sittings—cooks, waitresses, attendants—found themselves suddenly and unceremoniously out of work. Stunned and despondent Labor ministers were busy moving out of offices, archiving papers and telling ministerial staffers that they had to look for new employment.

Not only that, but the Parliament, which until then had been in the public spotlight continuously for a year, suddenly ceased to matter. The notices on the doors confirming that the Parliament was dissolved gave mute testimony to this. The public neither knew nor cared about the multiple human tragedies that had been precipitated within Parliament the day before and that would occur later when this campaign was concluded and the votes counted.
For us individually it was a sudden change, too. No longer were we the centre of press attention, of pressure, of importance, of interest. We were now junior campaigners in a great election—a contest, to be sure, but a different phase of the contest that had gripped the nation for almost four weeks and in which the Senate had been central to the outcome.

So it was that on 12 November I began to prepare myself for the next phase. First, I packed up and closed my flat as I would not be returning to it during the campaign. Then I came into Parliament—I had to get a taxi as the Commonwealth drivers had gone on strike, as had many others, in protest against the Dismissal. The taxi driver, however, made no secret about his delight at the Dismissal or the opportunity it gave him to vote. I had reason to talk to my solicitor and to a Canberra building society about my imminent home unit purchase; they were equally delighted.

The ABC was running a line very sympathetic to the Whitlam cause; on the other hand, the Sydney Morning Herald had a magnificent editorial setting out some of the issues well. Pickering had an unforgettable cartoon to finish the series he had run during the crisis.

We met as joint parties at 10 am and saw our senior colleagues leave for Government House to be sworn in as ministers in the caretaker government. We then did those things necessary to let us get out of Canberra and begin the campaign in earnest. I packed up my office, did my last Fraser dictation (which he now did as prime minister), said goodbye to Arnold Drury (Labor, South Australia), Ellis Lawrie (Country Party, Queensland), Dudley Irwin (Liberal, Victoria) and Nigel Drury (Liberal, Queensland), all of whom were retiring.

I caught the early afternoon plane to Sydney and received a splendid reception at the Ansett Lounge. At my office building in Chifley Square, Gough’s photograph had already been taken down from its place of honour.

The suddenness and completeness of the change caught our selected candidates and our conferences on the hop as well. Although they had been on alert, although they knew we had been pressing for just this election, many of them were still ill prepared. I made some campaigning plans at work and was home early. Our neighbours were delighted by the outcome. I had a call from Joan Sookee, our candidate in Chifley, who was terrified by what had happened and by what it might lead to.

A week later I returned to Canberra to do some more of the settlement on the purchase of the new home unit. On this visit, I went to sign the visitors’ book at Government House and was pleased to note that activities in Canberra were very much back to normal with no apparent ‘maintenance of the rage’, as Gough had asked for.
Personal and Family Pressure

Pressure on senators who had been part of the refusal of supply continued. Many old friends let me know throughout the campaign that they disapproved of what we had done, and that they disapproved of me for being part of it. Some of our friends and relatives made their concerns known to Jenny and not to me, which made her life more difficult. They were a damn nuisance.

Labor people who were bitter about the events did not try to hide that bitterness. It was not always easy to cope with. One example occurred when, before a dinner to honour Judge Adrian Curlewis given by the Surf Life Saving Association on 29 November, I reminded the organisers that, although I had accepted to represent the Leader of the Opposition, I was now representing the prime minister. The organisers rearranged things so that I had precedence over Bill Morrison, who represented Gough Whitlam—no longer the prime minister. The Morrisons had in previous encounters been proper and pleasant to Jenny and me, but on this occasion they cut us completely. It did not really matter as we were engaged in a war, but it is sad whenever people carry matters to those lengths.

I found, too, that I was manifesting physical signs of some of the unremitting stress. I reacted badly to this early phase of non-activity, getting a nasty and persistent bellyache, which responded to anti-ulcer medication although I did not ever have it properly investigated. The treatment worked and was simple—and I am an expert in that area of medicine anyway.

During the campaign period we still had to maintain a normal home, see the kids off to school and riding, attend to homework, and so on. Our car decided to give up the ghost during the month, so we had to rent a vehicle to keep up the work and domestic schedules. It was not always easy to keep things running. For example, there was a good Liberal literally going mad with grief over the death of his wife in a car smash and the failure of police subsequently to charge the young driver with any serious offence. In his grief, he was harassing Jenny, which made life just a bit more difficult than it was already.

At one stage we had a row. I was rushing from point to point and Jenny was bearing the brunt of a million aggressive phone calls. When I finally got home from one of the rallies, I found a nice note: she took the blame for my being angry (‘I am sorry that I was so grumpy’) when it was scarcely her fault at all. Added to our lack of a car, she was a saint to cope as she did.

Even the children felt the strain. We went to Wollongong for campaigning in the last week. There was heavy fog on the tollway and we were held up. I have recorded in my diary that Ian was fascinated by the fog lights. But then at the
Wollongong end the car that was supposed to pick us up (easily identifiable because of the candidate’s decorations on it) just drove past without seeing us, and Ian began to weep. He has always been a time-conscious person and this event was too much for him. But it was quickly corrected and the tears were quickly forgotten.

The pressure got to all of us. I showed scant interpersonal tolerance when James Darby complained to me, one day while we were driving round on his fire engine, about his removal from the Werriwa Conference of the Liberal Party. My diary records that I asked him in return whether the Werriwa campaign books (from 1974) had ever been audited. This was a very aggressive response made with inside knowledge. My diary then records: ‘Strained my back on the bloody fire engine.’

Then on 4 December, we had Bob Scott ring us from Newcastle, where he was working miracles, to say that he had just had a bad day. He had run into the car in front of him and now had decided to give it all up—just nine days before polling! I did my best to get him to delay a decision, which I recorded as ‘immature—will cost him dearly’.

The weather was difficult, too, as one would expect in November in Australia. We had heavy rain some days and extreme heat on others. I just had to keep driving on, trying to stay fresh and looking fresh—although it was not easy. At one evening rally in a packed hall in Liverpool, we estimated that the temperature was about 40 degrees; it must have been difficult for the audience, too.

The ‘Phoney War’

The first few months of World War II were quiet for the British. Germany was active elsewhere and the full fury of its assault was yet to be turned westward. This brief period of respite became known as the ‘phoney war’ and the phrase is appropriate for the first few days after the Dismissal.

For it was not as if everything moved suddenly into top gear as far as campaigning went. It was not as if there were suddenly rallies, meetings, campaigns and candidates needing advice and help. On the contrary, things moved up from low to high gear at what seemed to me a snail’s pace. The first few days were particularly slow.
For me, there was a period of about five days when I had almost nothing to do. I cleared up a backlog of correspondence and did all the routine work that Naomi had ready for me. But I work quickly and we both had this done in no time. On Friday, 14 November, I recorded in my diary: ‘I have nothing to do. No campaign. No meetings. No real work. Attending to trivia and details only.’

I even attended my normal Rotary meeting and managed to get home early, entertained my sister to lunch, attended the theatre with my wife, and attended some receptions and conferences arranged long before. One of these was a conference arranged by the Council of Social Service at which a speaker tried to link the achievement of social goals with the re-election of the Whitlam Government. I had to intervene hard to stop that line.

I found I was reading signals into everything. At a nursing home in Blakehurst where I represented the minister there was a warm reception and I felt good. On the other hand, the newspapers in that first week treated us quite roughly and I recorded for Sunday, 16 November: ‘The press is not friendly. I feel depressed and unsure. We are being done in both the press and the public is uneasy and unhappy.’

It was not like this everywhere. A day earlier I had attended a meeting of Liberal workers in Chifley, a safe Labor seat in Sydney’s west based around Mount Druitt and Blacktown. With just 24 hours’ notice, there were 60 people who attended the meeting, planned a campaign, allocated tasks and showed some enthusiasm. This was due to the fact that we had Max and Dulcie Harrison running the show in Chifley; if we had more people like them we would be unstoppable.

I realised that we still had an election to win and that we had only a finite time in which to do it. I was worried that we were not gearing up or proceeding with an appropriate sense of urgency or with appropriate speed. Because of the slowness with which things hotted up, it was possible for me to keep seeing patients for two hours early on Mondays. I continued to see patients each week, although the number decreased as the campaigning intensified. John Lyons, our campaign manager in Chifley, had his phone cut off. The relevant department then claimed that he had never had a line on! It took some sorting out and probably involved some funny play by someone. Don Dobie reported that a bugging device had been found in his campaign rooms. Incidents like this were most common during the early ‘phoney war’ period but continued to occur sporadically and did not make our job easier.
Active Campaigning

By the morning of 17 November, the Monday after Gough Whitlam was sacked, we had some semblance of a program of activities. I was to concentrate my time particularly in Labor-held ‘hard-luck’ electorates, and in some marginal seats we hoped to win. Within days, I was to record that there was enormous and well-organised activity in hard-luck electorates, which was very encouraging. From that day on our phones ran hot all the time. By Monday, 24 November, my program was very crowded and required adjustments as urgent calls poured in. While I was concerned with motivating candidates and helping campaigns on the ground, I was also monitoring our national presentation continuously. Philip Lynch continued to come across unclearly and our press was mixed at best as the second week began.

What did I really do over the next four weeks? Almost everything—some of it at a measured pace, some of it frantic. There were rallies, meetings, dinners, street meetings, home meetings, lunches, school visits, flag presentations, press conferences, citizenship ceremonies, cocktail parties, instructional meetings for scrutineers, regular radio segments, private meetings with trusted advisers, looking after visiting colleagues, and so on.

There were a number of large rallies. Some of them, especially later in the campaign, were of doubtful value. Some others actually frightened me with the passion and vehemence of the audience. It was clear to me that electors were polarised more than I had ever seen, and that they were showing support for the side they had adopted just like supporters at a grand final support their football team. I recorded in my diary on 28 November about the large rally at Ashfield:

Drove Jenny et al. to ballet. Then to Ashfield. Enormous crowd—hysterical—JMF [Fraser] et al. got a very emotional reception. It worried me by its fervour.
Home by 11pm. Very tired. Lost all my notes for Saturday dinner speech.

One busy two-day period I remember very well. As recorded in my diary, it began on Friday, 21 November with Jenny and me getting a car at 5.30 am and a plane to Merimbula at 7 am. We were met there by Murray and Janet Sainsbury and by David Barton, Secretary of the Eden branch of the Liberal Party. We went down to the wharves and got a very good reception from fishermen at the co-op and the cannery. It was a very good trip down the coast, with visits to the newspapers in Eden, Bega and Bombala. I was also able to record a segment for Bega radio. We ate a hurried and public lunch at the Bega RSL Club. We were driven from Bega to Bombala at about 130 km/h by the field officer, Peter Mazengarb, who told us casually as he drove at high speed and turned to look at us while still careering along that he had suffered a coronary just six months earlier. It scared the hell out of us!
We reached Bombala late in the afternoon and were met by Peter Smith, president of the Bombala branch of the party. We did a ‘soft sell’ in the RSL club there to conform with the ‘non-political’ policy of the club—talking to foresters and truck drivers, and so on. In the evening there was a rather wasted and pointless function at the home of a local Liberal, Mrs Chirnside, a widow who made us welcome and in whose home we stayed overnight. I use the word ‘wasted’ only in the sense that it was a function for committed Liberals and so did little to win hearts and minds, although it might have made some money for the campaign.

The next morning, Saturday, 22 November, we made an early start from Bombala for Cooma. There was clearly much more support here for us than there had been in the previous election. Murray and Janet Sainsbury performed well: she did a street walk with Jenny. I saw an Italian supporter quietly hand a $70 donation to Patrick Litchfield, a local Liberal official.

Our charter plane had been unable to get out from Sydney so I charted a local plane from Cooma to Nowra. When we arrived, there was no one to meet us (as had been arranged) so I conned a man into driving us into town by truck. We arrived at the rally there for the electorate of Macarthur and I made a rousing speech in support of my cousin Michael Baume. Then I went off to lunch with the group, including Bid (Brigid) Baume and the boys. Then I caught a light plane with David Connolly back to Sydney and then home. I had a rest and later set out again to two barbecues, one in Woollahra, and one at Woolaware! That evening the car was not at all good and it broke down the next day. Not surprisingly, Jenny was pooped. There were some memorable confrontations during the campaign. One occurred on 27 November, when a group of us held a street meeting outside the Billabong Hotel in Merrylands in Sydney’s west. My diary records:

Immediately trouble started. One man revved his motor bike beside our microphone to drown us out. Then 15–20 men with Labor badges began to shout and swear and harass us. Several punches were thrown, there was jostling, some drink cans were thrown, and water was poured over us. Then the microphone was torn out of the car. Ten police arrived. We carried on and gained a lot of sympathy from the (by now) large crowd. I was angry and defiant.

Another marvellous day occurred on Tuesday, 2 December, in Newcastle with Ivor Greenwood. Among the many things we did was go to BHP, where we were turned away from the main gates and then abused by busloads of workers. Television cameras were there and the story appeared across the country that evening. In the afternoon, we joined Phil Lucock for a meeting at Raymond Terrace and saw a young heckler carrying a sign ‘Graziers for Gough’ with subtext objecting to the ‘diary [sic] subsidy’. It transpired that he was not a grazier at all. That evening we had a meeting in Newcastle in support of Liberal Party candidates, with 750 people present. It was magnificent, and the
marvellous organisation was the work of Bob Scott. We finished with a party after the rally, which is recorded in my diary because a policeman tried to run off with one of our attractive workers!

On 4 December, I visited the Yeshiva College at Bondi and its charismatic leader, Rabbi Pinchas Feldman, with Jack Birney and Chris Puplick. Jack won the seat of Phillip in the election and served with us until 1983. Feldman was an amazing person. I remember well that Jenny and I were struggling to make ends meet on a senator’s pay, yet this man talked me into buying for myself a Hebrew reading course for $150 that I could ill afford. Needless to say, the Yeshiva has prospered under his leadership.

The Tide Turns

By the beginning of the second week of the campaign it was clear that we were ahead in the public opinion polls. My worry was that we had been ahead at that stage in 1974 and had seen Labor storm home. This time, however, the press was concentrating increasingly on the economy rather than on the events leading to the calling of the election; this was very encouraging as we would win any sustained economic argument or any argument based on capacity to manage things well.

It had not always been so during the campaign. A poll in the last week of October showed that Labor would have won 49.2 per cent of the Senate vote Australia-wide. On 12 November, Maximilian Walsh wrote in the Australian Financial Review of the likely outcome in the Senate that ‘it is probable that the actual balance of power will be held by senators elected on tickets other than that of the Liberal and Country Parties’. He was only five years early! A Gallup poll in early November indicated that Labor’s electoral stocks had been rising rapidly; the National Times reported that Labor had been making a rapid recovery before the sacking but it was still behind the Coalition. Morgan Gallup polls taken serially showed Labor support was at 47 per cent in a poll taken on 8 November, but fell to 41 per cent in the week before the election. A series of McNair Anderson polls showed Labor support at 44 per cent on the weekends of 1 and 8 November, but then progressively falling to just more

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2 The Age, 5 November 1975.
4 The Advertiser, 11 November 1975.
5 National Times, 17–22 November 1975.
than 40 per cent by the end of the campaign. At lunch on 24 November, the American consul-general Norman Hannah told me that he saw the election as ‘balanced’—but that is not what the polls were saying, even then.

Malcolm Fraser gave his policy speech on Thursday, 27 November, and was very well received by early commentators. At this stage, the polls showed us well ahead and drawing away with 51 per cent of the popular vote. Then we drew well (number two position) for the Senate ballot in New South Wales. The editorial writers started to go our way and I was able to record on 28 November that ‘it is all starting to hang together’, and on 30 November ‘we are now gaining strength and momentum’.

On 2 December, Don Edgar, then reader in sociology at La Trobe University, reported that 18 per cent of voters in a Victorian electorate were still undecided in their voting intentions.

On 5 December, I was eating a hurried lunch at a Chinese restaurant when the owner recognised me and showed me the afternoon papers. They predicted an enormous swing away from Labor and a majority of 51 seats. I just did not believe it; but results were to confirm it all.

On the Tuesday before the election, we had a meeting for those who would scrutinise the counting of votes. There were 700 people at the meeting; I have never seen anything like it. By 6 December, a Gallup poll showed that Malcolm Fraser’s approval rating in the electorate was rising in line with rising support for the Liberal and Country parties.

We were now on a roll and were looking and feeling like winners. The run into election day was almost anticlimactic. Activity lessened during the last week. There can be no doubt that Whitlam’s pollsters were giving him accurate and depressing news, just as ours were telling us the opposite. We had a so-so rally at Kogarah on 7 December, at which I recorded ‘it is now almost too late to hold effective meetings’. But messages were getting through. My diary records that the next day in the Hunter Valley coalfields, at Kurri Kurri, a policeman produced one of our campaign pieces that had been given to him and which he had read and kept.

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6 The Australian, 13 December 1975.
7 Edgar (1975).
8 Most polls at the end of the campaign were predicting a massive Coalition win. See, for example: National Times (8–13 December 1975); The Age (13 December 1975); The Australian (12 December 1975); The Sun (Sydney) (10 December 1975); Northern Territory News (3 December 1975).
9 The Advertiser, 6 December 1975.
My last campaign activity was on the Friday afternoon, just 18 hours before polling began. I went into Marrickville to help Johnathan Fowler, who was our candidate there. I have recorded ‘no activity of any worth’. This is not a criticism of Johnathan; people were exhausted and were heartily sick of politics. I remember, too, that it was humid, hot and heavy—a thoroughly unpleasant afternoon. I was able to finish by going to synagogue that Friday night; it was a tiny congregation I joined as part of my own ‘winding down’ process.

Election Day

Election Day 1975 was 13 December. By that time I was almost exhausted but, on the day, still managed to visit polling booths in 14 different electorates, visit party headquarters and vote in Caringbah in southern Sydney. It was good news everywhere. We had booths manned well and received a good reception from voters everywhere. Luckily it was less hot than it had been during the final days of the campaign. I got home in time to take Jenny, Sarah and Ian out for an early dinner. We got home by 8.30 pm and watched some of the second cricket Test in which Australia was taking a pasting. Then on to the results.

The election results were staggering. The newspapers and polls had been right. We gained votes everywhere. John Gorton lost in the Australian Capital Territory as voters polarised to the two main parties. Whitlam, pale and tense, tired and still angry, was forced to concede, which he did as gracefully as possible. Max Harrison phoned me from Chifley three or four times and I spoke to Bob Scott in Raymond Terrace about their excellent vote. I did two segments on Wollongong radio. I finally got to bed at 1 am.

Dimensions of the Victory

The election result was shattering for Labor. It represented a complete rejection of the Labor position by the people. We gained votes everywhere, won 91 of the 127 seats in the House of Representatives and 35 Senate places. The Liberal Party could have governed alone but chose not to break the Coalition. Whether or not Australians had wanted an election, once it was forced on them they had no hesitation about how they would vote. The next day it was more or less back to normal. I did swimming pool duty like other parents at the local swimming pool and later took Sarah with me to the Lajovics’ home. I noted that ‘Tatjana Lajovic is so excited she is dangerous’.

If the Dismissal was a sudden end and loss of interest and public attention, the election was more so. I began the long clean-up and wondered what would be the road ahead.
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