The second main event of 1987 was our Easter at Ballara (the old Deakin house) south of Geelong. This is described in the following words. The holiday brought together members of the Liberal Forum and some of our wives in a congenial atmosphere.

Jenny and I spent the latter half of Easter 1987 at Point Lonsdale on the western side of Port Phillip Bay. The invitation had come from Tom Harley, our colleague and collaborator in the Liberal Forum. This body had been established in February 1985 to advance liberal thought, and had enjoyed greater success than we could ever have imagined.

Tom Harley is the great-grandson of Alfred Deakin. Tall, dark, slim, handsome, intelligent and very tough, he is indispensable to the forum and its operation. Educated at Oxford, he had already helped George Brandis and Don Markwell to edit one liberal book—*Liberals Face the Future*—before joining George and Yvonne Thompson in producing *Australian Liberalism: The Continuing Vision* at the end of 1986.

Someone told us that they once phoned a restaurant seeking Tom Harley. The waiter did not know him by name, but recognised him immediately when the caller described him as being tall and handsome, and right out of *Brideshead*. Tom is a good strategic thinker. He had worked with Snedden when Bill was Speaker of the House of Representatives during the Fraser years, and worked now as troubleshooter for BHP. He had played a big part in BHP’s successful defence against a series of takeover bids in 1986.
It was Tom who invited us to join his family at their beach home at Point Lonsdale. This house had been built by Alfred Deakin and named ‘Ballara’ after his then constituency of Ballarat. It is a splendid old wooden, rambling, basic, comfortable, relaxed place with a large garden containing ample ti-tree for the open fires we needed in the late autumn cold.

On Sunday, 19 April, Jenny and I flew to Melbourne using Jenny’s one annual free interstate trip. We had visited our oldest friends, the O’Malleys, in Wollongong and stayed with them the previous night. We were driven from Tullamarine to Geelong where we met Tom and George in the car park of the rather unpleasant looking (and sounding) Dinosaur Hotel on the Bellarine Highway. The arrangements worked perfectly. They arrived just a couple of minutes ahead of us and no-one had to wait for the other.

Harley had spent the previous two days showing Brandis some of western Victoria. George had hired a car, which had come to grief in a ditch some hours before we met them. But there they were, laughing hugely at it all, with various pieces of Mr Avis’s vehicle lying loose in the boot among the luggage, and speeding us from Geelong to Point Lonsdale.

That weekend at Ballara there was a full house. Geoff and Judith Harley, Tom [Harley], George Brandis, David Harley and three of his friends, Jenny and me, and Sid and Yvonne Thompson. There was room for us all, the whole being tremendously evocative of my own childhood when we had similar weekend gatherings at my Collaroy home.

Liberal Forum (‘Black Hand’ to its members) was thus, as to the majority of its membership, together for several days. Tom, George, Yvonne and I were in one spot. We had phone contact with Ian Macphee, Robert Hill and Chris Puplick at various times as the great events of the weekend developed.

Three weeks earlier I had resigned from the Shadow Cabinet and had spoken against party policy in relation to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in the Senate a few days later. John Howard had sacked Andrew Peacock from the Shadow Cabinet two days before I resigned. The National Party Conference on 28 March had given Ian Sinclair only qualified support for the continued Coalition of the Liberal and National parties in opposition, and the future of the Coalition would depend on the next meeting of the parties
when the Parliament resumed on 28 April. Two Queensland shadow ministers, Ray Braithwaite and Stan Collard, had already resigned in accordance with the orders of their state organisation.

Howard had negotiated the elements of a possible continuing coalition with Sinclair earlier in the week before Easter. It required the National Party to distinguish between the treatment of its ‘coalitionist’ and ‘separatist’ groups—something we doubted that party would accept.

History was to prove us correct and the National Party repudiated one key element of the package at its meeting on 28 April. But during the weekend at Ballara we could not foresee that with certainty. What we could foresee was that John Howard would reshuffle his shadow ministry that weekend to fill the four vacancies (Peacock, Baume, Braithwaite, Collard) that had emerged over the preceding month.

The press had been suggesting that Ian Macphee, ‘small-l’ liberal, shadow minister for communications, and member of the ‘Black Hand’, might be dropped completely in the reshuffle.

Ian and Howard detested each other heartily. This had begun probably in government, but had become marked when John Howard interfered with the policy areas within Macphee’s responsibility during the leadership of Andrew Peacock. Peacock’s leadership had been fatally destabilised by the actions of friends and agents of John Howard’s over a year or more. Many of us had been uncertain of Peacock’s leadership and of his commitment to any particular policy direction, but his superlative performance in the 1984 general election had convinced most of us that he deserved another go.

As leader, John Howard had moved Ian Macphee ‘sideways’ into the communications area, only to see some of the most delicate and politically sensitive issues involve that area in the year that followed. Howard and Macphee had clashed repeatedly over the desirable direction of communications policy, reaching a crisis in January when Howard returned from holidays to carpet Macphee for a particular public statement likely to offend powerful media owners.

On that occasion Macphee had chatted to me before he met Howard and I had advised him to hold his comments and to reply only to the charges as they were levelled against him. It was my judgment that, handled in this way, he could easily respond to any criticism. That advice proved correct, but many people harboured the belief that, given any excuse, John Howard would sack Ian Macphee altogether.
The papers that weekend were full of anticipation about the reshuffle, including the possibility of a Macphee sacking. There was also increasing recognition of the emerging power and influence of the ‘wets’ or small-l liberals, now finally in the open and in the field challenging some of the worst nonsense of the economic rationalists.

We at Ballara, and the other Liberal Forum colleagues in phone contact, had provided the focus for that small-l revival by providing a visible and strong point about which friends could gather. As events were to unfold, our influence and power were to increase dramatically and to become even more unwelcome than they were that weekend. But it was to be the power and influence of a large minority excluded from decision making—a certain recipe for destabilisation and disaster.

Ian Macphee had taken his wife, Julie, and son, Scobie, to Canberra for Easter, and they were combining the role of family tourist with that of waiting for news. We were in frequent contact from Ballara, as the hours and days ticked by.

On the Monday morning the group considered my immediate future and my needs. It determined what should be the content of the speech I would make on the Equal Opportunity Bill that had caused my resignation, and advised me on a medium term course within the party, which could be useful and constructive.

Later that day we walked in a cold autumn breeze to the ocean beach with headlands stretching away to the south and west as far as Barwon Heads, while a few happy, hardy souls walked happily through the sand towards the lighthouse that dominates the point. Later still we went across to a local restaurant for a superb meal, which took us through to midnight. There was still no news of the details of the reshuffle although inspired leaks from the Parliament House gave us no comfort.

On the morning of Tuesday, 21 April George Brandis returned to his practice at the Brisbane Bar, taking Mr Avis’s injured vehicle back with him to drop it off at the airport to a startled company. Sid Thompson went up to Melbourne with Geoff Harley, who had to start work again and we were left to wait.

Quite early, soon after 9.30 or so, Ian Macphee phoned from Canberra to tell us that Howard had called him in and sacked him completely from the Shadow Ministry. He had indicated that the reasons did not relate to Ian’s technical competence, a thinly veiled reference to Howard’s belief that Ian had been a main source of Shadow Cabinet leaks. It appeared that some astounding appointments had been made to fill what were now five vacancies, although these remained unconfirmed for the present.
Ian was proposing to hold a press conference to attack John Howard frontally. We advised strongly against this, recommending instead the ‘more in sorrow than anger’ approach. Ian Macphee eventually adopted this suggestion—for the first few hours anyway—and one crisis was averted.

Tom advised Creighton Burns and Peter Cole-Adams of The Age of what had happened and the phone then ran hot as Michelle Grattan and others phoned in for confirmation.

Gradually the other new frontbenchers were identified. Alexander Downer, my cousin Michael Baume, Jim Short, Peter Reith and Wal Fife resurrected from the dead and moved into the Shadow Cabinet. John Moore and John Spender moved to the front table as well. The new five were a pretty motley lot. But one thing they all had in common was that they were Howard loyalists. It became crystal clear that this was the most ideological reshuffle we had ever seen with one wing of the party picking up all the positions, with the other wing gaining nothing and losing Macphee by sacking.

We were able to brief the press accordingly, and this was the line taken by everyone. The reshuffle got a panning from the moment its details became known. Our line that ‘the party now had more talent on the back than on the front bench’ was run widely. And Ian Macphee, having taken the high ground in his initial response to the news of his sacking, was able to go on to the attack with spectacular success later in the day.

After lunch we drove up to Melbourne with Yvonne and Tom, listening to news bulletins and comment as we drove. We left our gear at the Walsh Street house of the Harleys and then left with Tom to eat dinner in East Melbourne. On this occasion Bill Snedden came in with his friend Rowena and we all sat together and ate a long and alcoholic dinner. During this meal, Bill explained solemnly that it was all nonsense to worry about liberal and conservative philosophies. The difference was between a belief in socialism on the one hand, and capitalism on the other! He assured us that this simple difference would explain all—sadly it does not seem to fit the phenomena I met daily in Canberra and in the Parliament.

After dinner we returned briefly to Vale Street, to the house Tom shares with Rupert Myer. Rupert had made a video of a sensational Carleton–Walsh Report in which Ian had confronted and got the better of John Howard. So we returned to Walsh Street and to bed.

The reshuffle was known. Ian Macphee had been sacked in an act of hairy-chested machismo and five undistinguished people had been paid off for loyalty. It meant that Howard had decided on a path of confrontation, a kind of ‘crash
or crash through’ in the Whitlam tradition. It meant that he was now doomed to function as a factional rather than as a party leader, and doomed to destruction in the longer term.\footnote{I was quite wrong.}

It meant that he had rejected any kind of rapprochement with the more liberal elements in his party at the very time he should have been talking and presenting himself as the healer and unifying force. In short it signalled the end of John Howard, at least in the medium term, sooner if the Coalition fails.

Everyone, including John Howard, realised in time that the Easter reshuffle had been a disaster. After he had led us to our third successive election loss, he discarded several of the Easter appointees, and added Chris Puplick from the Liberal Forum to his Shadow Cabinet.

But as Easter 1987 ended these events lay in the future. The press reaction to the reshuffle was uniformly hostile, as it should have been. It was a devastating demonstration of the judgment of John Howard and of the ineptitude of those advising him. It put the final nail in any hopes we might have had of an election victory in the mid-year.

The drama of the weekend made it unique; the decisions made it sad. But withal, the beauty and atmosphere of Ballara and Point Lonsdale made it pleasurable—and quite unforgettable.

The next morning we analysed the uniformly hostile press, spent an hour or two in the Municipal Art Library where Jenny did some research on her great Aunt Ada Whiting, then back to Sydney, to a meeting of our ‘Black Ankle’ group to discuss the state preselections. And so to bed.
This text is taken from *A Dissident Liberal: The Political Writings of Peter Baume*, by Peter Baume, edited by John Wanna and Marija Taflaga, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.