These are reflections on a trip to the annual conference of the Queensland Division of the Liberal Party, in which a blunt and difficult discussion took place between liberal wets and the parliamentary party leadership.

John Howard had just started his address to the Queensland conference of the Liberal Party when I reached the ballroom area of the Hilton Hotel in central Brisbane. I slipped into the back of the room, ignoring the other federal parliamentarians sitting in the front row, and stood behind the last row of seats to listen to the speech. Standing with others in the same area, behind the last row of seats, were Tom Harley and George Brandis. Greeting them briefly, I then stood on my own and attended to the familiar messages of the leader. He spoke from a lectern to the right of the top table as I looked at it. The lighting was poor so that he was inadequately highlighted; never a tall man, he appeared as an insignificant talking head and shoulders above a standard hotel lectern.

Sitting closest to Howard was federal president John Valder, then successively were Queensland president John Moore, state director Gary Neat, federal deputy leader Neil Brown, and Senate Liberal leader Fred Chaney. Each of the politicians noticed me with surprise, and in Chaney’s case, with some alarm too. Uninvited and unexpected, I had come to Brisbane at the suggestion of Liberal Forum colleagues Brandis and Harley, and stood now, like Banquo’s ghost at the back of the room.

The speech was flat and uninspiring. It emphasised the themes of industrial relations and reduced government expenditure as the main elements of a Howard strategy for election. Not only does he sound like a boring accountant, not only does he now sound like a beaten man, but I doubt that the message will enthuse or attract the average Australian.
If that is what our election strategy is, we are going to get a bath—and perhaps the sooner the better. What is more, if this is his message and inspiration for Australia, he does not deserve to succeed. Not only that, but were he to become prime minister he would do the task without inspiration—a pedestrian, plodding, decent politician promoted beyond his capacity.

After the speech I joined Brandis, Harley and Hill for coffee. Trish Worth also joined us and we got from Hill and Worth an account of the unhappy federal executive meeting of the previous day. It appears that Hill and Chaney had a blunt talk on the plane on the way up and agreed that they should extend the talk at the Queensland state conference. Chaney joined the table briefly and suggested that arrangements be made for me to join the discussion with Howard and Robert Hill. Chaney then left the group. Howard supporter (Colonel) Peter White MC MP, the new shadow minister for defence, saw us at the table, approached, greeted us briefly, then left rapidly. He has been promoted to the front bench solely as a reward for loyalty, and wanted nothing to do with oddballs like us.

We determined what should be the elements of the conversation later in the morning, deciding to make the leaders explain to us their concerns, outline what they wanted from us, refusing to allow them to define all the party’s problems as arising from us, and confronting them with the failures of leadership that have made the problems inevitable. Then we went down to set up a table and sell a few copies of *Australian Liberalism: The Continuing Vision*, into the meeting to hear from successful and sleek middle-class lawyers some ugly debate on limiting the unemployment benefit for those unable to find work within six months. To the credit of the party, the motion which they were supporting was lost resoundingly. Neil Brown came and chatted, clearly trying to make conversation and win friends. He does not allude to his awful gaffe after the coup in Fiji a week earlier. That coup by the Royal Fiji Military Forces had overthrown the government elected three weeks earlier, mainly because it was supported by and contained a large number of Indian Fijians. Brown had met the press, had been extensively reported and quoted, but had failed to mount any unequivocal condemnation of the coup. There is no doubt that he is a third-rate deputy leader.

John Moore came and said a friendly hullo. Don Cameron was there along with Kathy and Bob Sullivan, and also Jane and Ian (and George) Prentice—she very pregnant. Then Fred Chaney delivered a strong and vibrant speech to the convention, showing Howard up in the process. During the speech, he rejected attacks on middle-class welfare, angrily, identifying the difficulties faced by intact families with dependent children. Chaney extrapolated from this to declare that a Liberal government should direct extra cash assistance to intact families. This is simply bad logic—a simple non sequitur. In times of
financial hardship resources must be directed to the neediest, not necessarily to those in the ‘tightest’ period of their life cycle. Chaney was angry as he made these arguments, looking at me, and speaking to me particularly, though he is addressing a large audience. John Moore recognised me from the chair as I left the hall—there was a note of surprised interest in his voice that I was there at all.

The Queensland Liberals are flat, disheartened, discouraged and uncertain of how to proceed. No wonder. The leadership is discredited publicly, the Government is leading in the polls, and the course on which they have determined to take us is not only being contested by we liberals, it is a course that will repel rather than attract voters.

At midday, with Chaney and Hill, I went to Howard’s suite on the twenty-fifth floor. It was ‘palatial impersonal’ but quiet and adequate for our purpose. Howard joined us a little after we had begun and we continued the discussion until just after 1 pm when I had to depart for the plane—never having explained to anyone how I have come to be in Brisbane at all. The conversation is direct and brutal, albeit still unsatisfactory. Chaney had the audacity to assert that our difficulties with the EEO Bill were due in part to the attempts of my colleagues to accommodate my difficulties; really it is hard to deal with people so blinkered in their comprehension of events that have involved them. My difficulties with the EEO Bill were created by the Shadow Cabinet of which I was a member, and by the party room to which I belonged. My contribution to the crisis was limited to a stubborn and determined refusal on my part to support any dishonourable decision, and in fact to force the matter to public attention by resigning. That is what they really have against me.

But, apart from that matter, it was the *Four Corners* program that has them most exercised. They are astounded at the direct challenge to their own authority in taking arguments and issues directly to the public, rather than containing them within a system that they control. The *Four Corners* appearance in mid-April had been an interview between Andrew Olle and four of us, Macphee, Hill, Puplick and me. In that television interview we had asserted and discussed an alternative and liberal agenda to balance the arguments of the ‘dries’ and ‘economic rationalists’. We had taken part in the program in the belief that alternative, and more compassionate, views needed to be presented as part of the wider spectrum of liberal belief and tradition. It arose as a natural extension of the work and priorities of the Liberal Forum agenda, and was resented by the leadership of the party precisely because of this.

Hill explained, directly and very quietly, that the situation now existing is largely of their own making. He outlined the new ideological directions, the corruption of the party room, which is now an unpleasant and confrontational place,
the inadequacies of the recent frontbench reshuffle, and the responsibilities that the leadership must bear for many of these failures. Chaney wants to argue and reject the criticisms; Howard is more ready to take the criticisms on board—he is an essentially decent, even if dull and dreary, man. As time runs out, I suggest that we reconvene the meeting in Canberra at a convenient time.