

THE BIRTH AND EMERGENCE OF THE LIBERAL FORUM, 1985–1987 (1987)

The Liberal Forum was established in 1985 by a group of ‘small-l’ liberals to try to offset the conservative tide that was building. That the forum was unsuccessful in halting the conservative tide is a matter of history. The following account sets out some of what we did and how we proceeded.

Reflecting on the progress of the Liberal Forum in May 1987, it seems incredible that we have achieved so much in so short a time. So much! It was just over two years ago, in February 1985, that we met first and established our small, self-selected group at a time of great crisis for philosophical liberals.

Max Burr claims that he was a prime mover in the formation of the group. He acted after a conversation with Yvonne Thompson, who, after years of involvement in Liberal Party councils, was thinking of throwing it all in, and getting out of organisational politics. Alan Missen was alive then, and Peter Rae was still a senator—not yet translated to his ministerial role in Tasmanian state politics and to a closer relationship with Robin Gray, the conservative ‘Liberal’ premier of that state.

Things were grim then and becoming grimmer. The ‘economic rationalists’, ‘conservative radicals’, ‘dries’, call them what you will, were well advanced in redefining non-Labor politics in laissez-faire economic terms—and in purely economic terms. Our leaders no longer talked publicly at all, nor privately for that matter, of the liberties and primacy of individuals, and there was certainly less talk of the obligations of each of us towards all others, especially those

in need. There was little talk of empowering the weak or helpless, little or no rhetoric about the role of liberalism in securing and extending our liberties, or of developing new opportunities for the less privileged in society.

On the contrary, there was a concerted campaign from within my own party, and my own side of politics, to attack and belittle the recipients of welfare as being cheats, or layabouts, anxious to prosper on the welfare handed out by their industrious brethren. The fact that few people live in luxury on welfare alone never features in their thinking or their public rhetoric. Of course those who use welfare to cheat the system are another matter.

Moves to extend power to women and to racial minorities were bitterly opposed in our party and party room, the racist regime in South Africa had committed minority party room support, and opposition to communist expansion was regarded as almost adequate defence of rotten dictatorships. Not only was it a wrong analysis, but it was a laissez-faire libertarian credo based too much on greed and self-interest.

Our political leaders were disposed to turn a blind eye to racist calls in the area of immigration, and to make calls for cuts in personal tax the cornerstone of policy. Tax cuts are admirable, provided one can identify clearly what are the consequential costs to others. The costs to others have not yet been clearly set out.

In May 1987, at the time this is written, greed and self-interest drive the tax-reduction campaign. Nothing is heard about the needy, and there has been no analysis of the social costs of proposed cuts in personal income tax. For me, the question of social costs is a prior question, to be answered in detail before cuts in revenue as a consequence of lower taxes are even contemplated.

In 1985 this dismal scenario was already well advanced, and the forces of greed and self-interest were about to organise themselves into several groupings which together became known as the 'New Right'. Not only this, but our then leader Andrew Peacock was more a prisoner of the tide of events than its helmsman. He subscribed cheerfully to the goal of a cut in the level of personal income tax, and campaigned on it. He proposed, as did his successor, John Howard, to cut the expenditures of government to fund the tax cuts. But, simultaneously, he opposed the initiatives of the Labor Government to gain alternative revenue by taxing certain lump sum taxation payments, to tax certain capital gains on investments, and to add a means test to the income test that was applied to pensions. Not only this, but there were other proposals for substantial new government expenditures in child care, family allowances, and a tendency to offer new bribes to middle Australia as part of the election manifesto of the Liberal Party.

The Labor Party had a field day pointing up the internal contradictions in our policy statement. No wonder Yvonne Thompson felt like getting out. This was not the party for which she had worked for 20 years. This was no longer a party seeking sacrifice from the rich to assist those in need; rather it seemed (and seems still) to be the reverse.

The invitation to me to join the Liberal Forum, then nameless, came from my old close friend Chris Puplick. I accepted it immediately, insisting only that it should be an 'ideas' group, not a leadership destabilisation group. Named the 'Liberal Forum', the group met quietly, clandestinely in fact, for the first year or so. Partly because of this, Tom Harley nicknamed it 'the Black Hand'. The name stuck. I had joined a significant group of compatible people, people to whom I had always felt close, and to whom I was to become closer month by month. Senator Robert Hill was, and in May 1987 remains, President of the South Australian Division of the Liberal Party. Something of an expert in the area of foreign policy, he, like Chris Puplick, is a talented numbers man. He has a cool head, a liberal vision, and plenty of courage. Robert is a lawyer with an LL.M degree, son of the Honourable Murray Hill MLC of South Australia, and fortunate to come from the most liberal state in Australia. His interests and parliamentary expertise lie in foreign affairs. His wife, Diana, is deputy principal of a private school in Adelaide and a liberated feminist. She and Robert have a large, rambling house with large, lolloping dogs and children, including an adopted girl from Vietnam. Robert has the problem of dealing with Bruce MacDonald, who still hopes to do to the Liberal Party in South Australia what he has already done to it in New South Wales.

Senator Christopher Puplick is probably the most formidable mind on our side of politics. He has a Sydney MA in history, and cut his political teeth working on the staff of the brilliant W.C. (Bill) Wentworth when Bill was a minister. Chris was NSW state, and later federal, president of the Young Liberal Movement of Australia. He worked on my staff in the mid 1970s until he entered the Senate as its second-youngest senator ever. Out in a bad election year, he came back a few years later, beating the awful Bronwyn Bishop decisively in a preselection. Michael Baume was selected between Chris and Bronwyn in that particular preselection. Chris is feared in the party room by stupid or ill-prepared shadow ministers. Not only does he generally know more than they do about most subjects, he is also more articulate, more persuasive, more influential, and more credible. He is not popular with those in power. I was warned on many occasions that my close friendship with Puplick was attracting adverse political comment. I was even warned that I should distance myself from him to ensure that my preselection was not put at risk. Since Chris is my friend, and has shared my apartment, and since he and I are allies in most battles, I have not acted on the advice that has flowed in. I have ignored that advice quite deliberately,

and more and more openly as the Liberal Forum developed. My preselection was secured, first with a decisive win over Bronwyn Bishop for first place on a half-Senate ticket, and then for my place in the double-dissolution election of July 1987. There have even been allegations that Chris is gay. If true, this is irrelevant to questions about his capacity, and worse, if false, it is simply part of the viciousness and mutual unhappiness that characterises our current situation.

Max Burr is the least intellectual of the Liberal Forum members, but he is also one of the tough and smart survivors. He has held a difficult constituency for a long time, and has resisted both his Labor and his Liberal opponents. He is a good counter of numbers. His constituency is Lyons, which covers most of Tasmania except for the urban areas of Hobart and Launceston and the north-west of the state. Max has coped with very conservative and hostile electorate presidents and party officials. A former shearer, he gained his advanced education as an adult. He is a person with good instincts and dislikes the ideas of the 'dries' with an admirable intensity.

Ian Macphee is the best known of the philosophical liberals. He is also the most overtly ambitious. He has offered himself to the party room as deputy leader without success and will probably continue to offer himself in future party leadership elections. Originally from Sydney, Ian lived in the Mosman area and attended North Sydney Technical High School. He was a godson of Eileen Furley, who was a Liberal member of the old non-elected Legislative Council of New South Wales. Working in Melbourne as an industrial advocate and as director of the Chamber of Manufacturers, Ian came to Parliament in 1974, representing first the seat of Balaclava and, after redistribution, the renamed seat of Goldstein. He is very strongly supported locally, but has had vicious opposition from right-wing elements. These even went to the lengths of running a National Party candidate against him recently—that person lost his deposit. Ian entered the ministry early in the Fraser years and I served with him (sitting beside him) in the last Fraser Cabinet.

It is not without significance that those who complained most about leaks from the Shadow Cabinet while we three (Macphee and Peacock and me) were there had precious little to say about the same leaks when they continued after we were gone. One thing was certain: someone else was briefing the press after we had gone, and the same source or sources might well have been the source of leaks all along.

Ian alienated many in the party when he asserted in 1984 words to the effect that anyone who did not support the (then) Sex Discrimination Bill had no place in the party. He acknowledges freely that the words were inopportune and clumsy, and has not done the same since. He is impetuous, too. When sacked

by Howard, his first instinct had been to go out publicly and take Howard on. Three weeks earlier, he had wanted to follow me into resignation over the issue of equal opportunity; he certainly intended to resign had the party rejected him on the issue of media ownership. Earlier, in January 1987, he was summoned to Sydney to meet Howard and Neil Brown following a statement Ian had made to the press about media ownership. Arriving in my Sydney office an hour or so before the meeting, Ian told me he had come probably 'to be sacked'. Together, we worked out a simple strategy: he would offer no opening statement but would defend himself against each accusation on the merits. He would take a 'passive defence' position and see what happened. It was an unexpected approach and worked perfectly—on that occasion.

Ian's wife, Julie, is a moderately radical feminist and they both dote on their son, Scobie. Ian is a lawyer by training and some of his language is rather convoluted and lawyer-like. But his courage is undoubted and his commitment to liberalism is strong. He differed from the rest only in his more definite personal agenda and ambition. This thumbnail sketch seems a little critical. So it should be made quite clear that Ian Macphee is a splendid, liberal, brave, and talented man, an adornment to politics, and an asset to the Liberal Party and to liberalism.

Peter Rae was a senator for Tasmania when we first met as the Liberal Forum. He was then a liberal thinker and a most interesting man. A barrister before he entered the Senate (and afterwards too to a limited extent), he maintained extraordinary hours—often working late into the night and emerging late in the morning. He liked his scotch, was very convivial and a good host, and ran an office that was a nightmare to view. Papers stood in high piles on his desk; the amazing thing was that he could find documents within the piles immediately with his excellent memory. Peter was a partisan as regards the divisions within the party. He fought with conservatives on his own state executive, within the parliamentary party, within the front bench, and in regard to leadership candidates for whom he declared his support. He was, like so many lawyers, only a moderate communicator. Like many of his profession, he found it difficult to ignore detail in the interests of greater clarity. But he was a real resource in the Liberal Forum and worked well with the group.

Alan Missen was alive in February 1985, but died at Easter 1986. He was the other parliamentarian in the Liberal Forum. I have spoken in the Senate about Alan in my contribution to the eulogies spoken after his death and will not repeat them here. It is sufficient to say that the Liberal Forum was probably more important as a symbol of support for Alan than for anyone else in the group. Always a maverick, Alan did not find it easy to be part of a consensual group, even this group. He confided to me a short time before he died that he was considering withdrawing from the Liberal Forum because the other parliamentarians had not gone to the barricades with him on some matter before

the party room. Alan was always going to the barricades. He was an ‘issues’ man, whose underlying liberalism was expressed in relation to this or that matter currently at centre stage. He was not a gentle debater and he too presented in his speeches the extra detail that makes lawyers hard to listen to. He told me in return that he did not like my ‘shrill Sydney’ style of debate—so there you are, it is very much in the eye of the beholder. Alan and his wife, Mollie, lived in Melbourne. They were childless, but were a close and loving couple. After his death, Mollie confided to me that she had lost not only the man she loved, but also her best friend.

George Brandis is about 30 and lives in Brisbane, where he is a barrister. He was at Oxford when he met Tom Harley and Don Markwell and published, with them, the *Liberals Face the Future*. I recall that Kathy Sullivan (then Senator Kathy Martin) offered me the opportunity to take over her commitment to write one of the chapters for this book—but did so only 10 days before the deadline for copy. I refused her—reluctantly. Tall, balding, cadaverous, with a loud laugh, George is intellectually formidable, has good judgment, is an uncompromising liberal, and has been an initial member of the Liberal Forum. Until recently, George was a resident tutor in St John’s College in the University of Queensland. He was instrumental in my receiving the invitation to deliver the oration of the college recently. He also introduced me to John Morgan, the warden of St John’s College, a theologian and a liberal.

Tom Harley is about the same age as Brandis. He worked for Bill Snedden when Snedden was speaker, and spent time at Oxford with Brandis and Markwell. He is a troubleshooter for BHP. A great-grandson of Alfred Deakin, he is an elegant, very tough, very intelligent man and is probably the most important single member of the Liberal Forum. I have said more about George and Tom elsewhere.

Peter Coatman, another lawyer, was included in the group as the current president of the Young Liberal Movement of Australia. This has traditionally been the source of many of the most liberal of Liberals, but alas is so no longer. Peter contributed little to the forum and dropped out within a year.

So there we were, in the house Tom Harley shares with Rupert Myer, a scion of the Melbourne retailing family, in Vale Street, East Melbourne. This charming house with its excellent artworks is conveniently located in the same block as Andrew and Margaret Peacock; this was interesting, as Andrew knew nothing of this new grouping being established within the party he was leading.

It was obvious from the start that there were several agendas being run simultaneously, and an early task was to separate and give priority to different goals. First, there were the continuing leadership ambitions of Ian Macphee,

which intruded into many of the other matters. These ambitions were valid and proper, but had to be assessed as they affected this or that decision. Second, there was the need for mutual support and a safe forum for discussion of issues. As a self-selected group, we were able to assume that our meetings were secure, or at least as secure as they needed to be. This mutual group support was a much-needed improvement on the isolation that most of us were feeling in the Federal Liberal Party Room. Third, there was the need to develop and present, as part of the intellectual debate in Australia, a formidable liberal position to counter the arguments and intellectual dominance achieved by the conservative and libertarian elements within the party. For many of us, this was almost the first opportunity to be part of a sympathetic, collegial group pursuing compatible ideological goals. It was an exciting prospect of renewal and fresh hope. Fourth, arising from the last goal, there was the need to project that intellectual argument into documentary form. We determined that one urgent priority would be the preparation and presentation of books, to complement books like the *Liberals Face the Future*, the making of liberal speeches in critical places to critical audiences, the publication of occasional papers, and so on. Fifth, the forum would give us the opportunity to create new ways to present liberal views within the party and the community. This was quickly reflected in the luncheon meetings organised by Yvonne Thompson in Melbourne, and provided a focus around which many compatible liberals rallied. Finally, the forum provided a grouping that could offer and receive mutual support in an increasingly shrill, unpleasant, illiberal party room, dominated by dries and later by a leader whose boast was that he was 'the most conservative leader the party had ever had'.

But in February 1985, Andrew Peacock was still the leader, and two members of the forum sat in his Shadow Cabinet. John Howard's agents were busy chatting to any journalist who would listen, and were setting up the conditions that allowed the events of September 1985 to result in Peacock's replacement with Howard. As with any group, we took some time to settle in, to learn to listen to each other, to respond to each person's input, to agree on collegial priorities, and to share the tasks required for completion of these priorities. We began with a degree of mutual trust and confidence, which grew rapidly as we learned that we could depend on group colleagues for loyalty and support.

The Liberal Forum met each six or eight weeks from then on. Peter Coatman quickly became irrelevant, partly due to his other professional commitments, partly due to an inability to contribute in any significant way to what we were doing. Chris Puplick and Tom Harley were the informal leaders and adjutants of the group. We met usually in Melbourne, sometimes at Vale Street, occasionally at Macphee's home at Brighton. We put in a little money each to help George Brandis to come to Melbourne; the rest of us had other ways to pay for our travel.

Melbourne was the best place to meet because it involved the least amount of travelling by the group members (with the exception of Brandis). Our first decision was to produce a book. Having considered all the options, we decided to start with a publication bringing together the published writings about what we understood to be liberalism from the time of Deakin to the present. This approach had many advantages. It would draw upon writings already in existence, and indeed, would revive some of these writings currently out of print and unavailable. It could be presented to show a continuing philosophical emphasis, associated over a hundred years, with the name 'liberal'. Further, it might be possible to find some published work by each Liberal leader that could be consistent with our theme and emphasis.

Tom, George and Yvonne were appointed as the editors. They were given complete authority to select and organise the material for the book. Each of us submitted to the editors some speeches we wished to have considered. We saw it as important to keep the politicians away from the evaluation of material, which could be their own, for publication. Not only that, but Yvonne's husband, Sid, is a printer and was to play a critical role in the publication of our book. Although it took us about 18 months to get from conception to launch of the book, events seemed to move quite smoothly during that time. Yvonne did not then have a word processor available and enlisted a team of volunteers to help with the enormous job of typing, editing and proofreading the material for the book, now titled *Australian Liberalism: The Continuing Vision*. Yvonne works for Mark Birrell, who is in the Victorian Upper House and who has been a philosophical liberal in his days as a Young Liberal leader. His wife, Jenny, worked for Alan Missen. She managed to do some of the work for us at work, while friends like Joel Martin did some of the dreary and tedious typing out of work hours.

The enormous commitment of this group to the production of our book has been too little praised or recognised. It is a splendid book. Designed to fit into a coat pocket, it is attractive and has achieved its purpose admirably. It contains some of the Menzies speeches not otherwise available any more. It moves from the early Liberals, to and through the Menzies years, to the period in and out of power, and to a final section looking to the future. This section contained contributions by some of the younger 'small-l' liberals. The book ended with a eulogy to Alan Missen—the one I had delivered in the Senate in 1985.

Continuing Vision was launched on 2 December 1986 at the National Press Club in Canberra. John Gorton attended, Chris Puplick, George Brandis and Yvonne Thompson made splendid if provocative speeches, and we all had a splendid luncheon in the private dining rooms of the Parliament.

This is written as we start the 1987 double-dissolution campaign; we have two lots of occasional papers ready for reproduction and distribution, with the third group of occasional papers almost complete. We have letters ready to go to prospective contributors to our second book, to be called *Affording a Liberal Society*.

Continuing Vision received a good press and was seen for what it is: the first evidence of the 'wets' (or 'small-l' liberals, or as we call them, the philosophical liberals) fighting back. It had been financed by some generous anonymous donors and sales have been directed to replenishing our funds ready for the second book. There were later launches at state level in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales by Liberal Forum members. Sales have been steady and, at May 1987, are continuing well. We have offered the book to schools and have offered bulk prices for colleagues in Parliament.

The Liberal Forum had to regroup after the destruction of Peacock's leadership in September 1985. It was a depressing time and Howard, though clean himself, was deeply involved via friends and agents in the destabilisation of Peacock over some months. For example, John Valder, the federal president of the party, failed to give unqualified support to Peacock at the Federal Council Meeting in Canberra in mid-1985, fuelling media rumours that a leadership challenge was imminent. In the end, Peacock could see his leadership being eroded by unseen enemies working to undermine him without ever challenging him directly. Finally, he confronted Howard and called on a challenge to Howard as Deputy Leader, a challenge Peacock lost. With it, he lost his authority and wisely resigned his leadership immediately.

The Liberal Forum was then confronted by a party leader who boasted that he was the most conservative Liberal leader ever, and who brought back into critical positions the dries and conservatives who had supported him. Jim Carlton returned from the back bench to be Shadow Treasurer, Tony Messner moved into finance, and people like Peter White and Alan Cadman were given positions as a reward for loyalty rather than ability.

Ian Macphree and I were retained in the Shadow Cabinet, though I was demoted a couple of places and given the relatively 'harmless' jobs of shadow minister for community services and status of women. Eighteen months later, sensitive to the policy imperatives of the status of women, I was forced to resign my position when the party decided to vote against an equal employment opportunity Bill. Our problems, however, were becoming more acute each month. Howard was encouraging Carlton and they were moving the policies and the rhetoric of the party to the right. What were we to do? And what could we do most effectively?

One test of our will came when there was an attempted takeover of BHP and the parliamentary party decided on a laissez-faire, hands-off approach. The call 'to leave it to the market and the shareholders' displayed scant sensitivity to the market manipulations being undertaken by powerful individuals to the detriment of shareholders. The approach reminded me of the old admonition in regard to Christians in the Coliseum: 'let's leave it to the lions.' In the event, Tom Harley and his mates at BHP beat off the challenge. BHP had precious little to thank us for as a party, but was grateful to forum members who argued against the official party position.

We realised that we had to speak more publicly of the alternative position we were offering, but the problem was how to do this so as to enrich the debate in a way that would not be seen as just destructive and divisive. First, we began to be more active in the party room, especially through Chris Puplick, who is a formidable person. He is devastating when he intrudes into a debate about which he is more knowledgeable than the hapless shadow minister. The party room has learned that it can trust his mastery of detail even if it is suspicious of his ideology. Second, we began to give more philosophical and substantial contributions in public debate and in public forums. I have made a number of substantial speeches strongly liberal in nature. They have had an excellent reception, and the liberal content has attracted strong and specific support. Third, especially after Macphee was sacked from the Shadow Cabinet (I had already resigned), we began to appear together publicly to identify a different and more liberal stream of thought and emphasis. The most celebrated of these was the appearance four of us made on the ABC *Four Corners* program with Andrew Olle in mid-May 1987. It caused a furore in the party. It incensed Howard, especially the suggestion that the party under him somehow lacked compassion and humanity. The fact that this is so, and that he and his clique talk like accountants and bankers at a convention, seemed to escape his world view. The *Four Corners* appearance was widely noticed and helped extend the feeling that a liberal group was active and defiant.

One consequence of these activities has been to stiffen the opposition to each of us. Preselection has become more difficult, and more unpleasant. I had to agree to accept the second position on the senate team for the 1987 double-dissolution election in order to protect Chris Puplick in fourth position and keep Bronwyn Bishop in number five. We have received numbers of angry and critical letters denouncing some of our more public activities, but we have received much more positive comment and commendation. My mail has run 20:1 in favour of what I have done.

Fourth, we have commenced the publication of 'Liberal Forum Occasional Papers' to feature current speeches by members of the forum and by friends. We plan to develop other structures too. There will be a 'society' with which

other liberals can identify, to hold dinners, encourage discussion, produce ties and scarves, etc. Such a structure will vary from state to state; in New South Wales, we already have a group that works to control the executive election and to give support to particular candidates for preselection. It was this group that protected me at preselection two days after I had resigned publicly from the Shadow Cabinet. Finally, we are moving to enlarge the Liberal Forum. David Jull from Queensland has become a member and Bob Ellicott is considering whether he will join us.

The Liberal Forum today, after 29 months, has created a powerful alternative political force within the Liberal Party and within non-Labor politics. It is still developing. Today, in May 1987, we still do not know what its future might be. We can only dream and work. Our goal remains one related to the liberal vision of Australia. The Liberal Forum today serves that vision.

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.