

WEE

ON THE DRY SIDE 259

SENATOR JOHN STONE

John Hyde

Senator John Stone's differences with his colleagues have been papered over but he is still at a low point on the political rebel's learning curve. A political rebel's only substantial asset is his influence and that asset is fragile. Basic rules for rebels include: be fair; pick your company carefully (because as many rebels are destroyed by their allies as their enemies---ie Joh won't do); and don't flout any of the political conventions, a restriction which makes rebellion particularly difficult from the front bench.

In his Earl Page Memorial lecture, Senator John Stone gave his new colleagues more of a serve than was fair or made tactical sense. Like any politician worth his salt, Stone has a vision of a better Australia. His is more comprehensive and more realistic than most. Nevertheless, he should ask himself whether he is more likely to achieve more of it by denigrating people he must work with and pre-empting shadow cabinet deliberations, than he would if he used his exceptional position within the shadow cabinet.

If all shadow ministers were to adopt public positions on difficult and debatable issues, such as a broad-based consumption tax, the shadow ministry would be unworkable and the Opposition would be indistinguishable from a rabble. Mr McPhee's reluctance to accept the majority line on industrial relations meant that he had to be dropped. Stone will not be so easily dropped but it makes no sense to court rejection.

Public debate is essential, but if Senator Stone alienates his colleagues they can make him irrelevant and then the public won't listen to him either.

His attack was unfair. In his lecture he admits that the public image of disunity which the 'Joh for Canberra' campaign undoubtedly helped to generate was electorally damaging. He should admit two other points: the Joh campaign would have died a speedy death if he had not lent it credibility; and those who credit it with the Coalition's defeat are not merely the self-serving, but include many Labor Party people who called the election because of it.

Further, I question his claim that the Joh campaign was needed to fill a policy vacuum. Far from there being a vacuum,

the least-fudged policies since 1975 were already causing divisions in the Liberal Party. The Liberals had done a lot of work on policies, including expenditure cutting. They were patchy but from John Stone's position---and my own---they were a great improvement. The Joh push exacerbated the divisions and drove the policies from the agenda. Deregulation, privatisation, the labour market and the ID card for instance, were ignored for a single issue, taxation, and a single personality, Joh.

The tax policy the coalition eventually ran on was not believed by many people with a healthy scepticism for politics. They felt it would, in fact, result in an explosion of the deficit for the same political reasons that a similar policy caused a deficit explosion in the United States.

Believe me, I am familiar with the Senator's dilemma. As a rebel 'dry', in the days when dryness was seen as an aberration, I lived with it, worried about it, and was both criticised and praised for the trouble I caused and for the issues I ducked. But I was on the back bench and likely to stay there whatever I did. Senator Stone is not. I had no privileged position of influence to sacrifice. What is more, in 1982, I believed it was time my party lost office. I think Senator Stone wants office.

His dilemma is made worse because the rules governing dissent in the party system are vague. However, they are not unknowable and most politicians soon learn the point at which they begin to do their cause more harm than good.

I find myself cheering Senator Stone only when I agree with him---government spending and deregulation---and deploring lack of shadow cabinet solidarity only when I disagree---immigration and consumption taxation. Obviously this reflects nothing more reliable than my own judgment. The political rebel, too, is left with no alternative but to back his judgment. His first problem is to know whether his policy, among so many, is the right one, and his next is know how far to buck the system while trying to get it implemented. In both he must draw a line between courage and hubris. In 1982 my life was made miserable by self-doubt. If Senator Stone does not suffer any, he is indeed fortunate.

He has an exceptional mind and an intimate knowledge of the Australian economy and government machinery. He cares passionately about his country. His talents and disposition could be of great service to us all, but he runs the risk of becoming personally irrelevant in spite the relevance of his issues. He runs the risk of being seen as a mere spoiler and because of that his ideas run the risk of being marginalised. He is losing the support of colleagues who believe in the team and want office. His scatter-gun approach to issues is wounding too many allies. His interpretation of events leading up to the election appears as self-serving as the interpretations he deplores. He could end up with neither power nor much of his ability to teach Australians the truth about economic management. That would be a tragedy.

Both sides of politics are bound to public opinion but a strong personality can change what people think. If, like

another conservative intellectual parliamentarian, Enoch Powell, he were willing to be a maverick teacher without preferment, and if he were to concentrate on areas where his believability is greatest, then the force of his intellect might radically change Australian government for the better. However, he cannot do that from the front benches. It would best be done from the cross benches where he could not be sure of success, and he would have sacrificed his privileged position to influence Coalition policy from within. He would be acting in the finest traditions of parliament, he might even be effective, but these days he would be most unusual.

If he does not want to be an Enoch Powell, he must accept that no-one can be a shadow minister or minister without making concessions to cabinet solidarity. In politics influence is everything. To be judged a spoiler, or not to accept the majority's authority is to squander it, and that is to risk crying in the wilderness.