

Merrindie

*John Hyde*

A few weeks ago a book, "*Merrindie: A Family's Farm*", by CR (Bert) Kelly, arrived with the invitation to send \$25 if I liked it, or to keep it for present if I did not. For anyone interested in the land and its people, as I am, it is a good read---well worth the \$25. (Copies may be obtained from the author.)

Moreover, I read it looking for signs of the parliamentarian who was to take on the formidable Black Jack McEwen over industry protection. I looked between the lines for the making of the man who, for most of two decades, withstood calculated abuse and derision from the textile lobby, dairy farmers and others who had their snouts in the government trough. I wanted to understand the source of the guts needed to persist with arguments which, at the time, almost nobody wanted to hear.

It is not an easy thing to be the odd man out in any company, and it is particularly difficult in the Party Room. Oh, we can all take on the mob occasionally---we will prove it if ever an issue arises to put us to the test---but we cannot do it year after year. It takes a special sort of courage to withstand the ridicule of colleagues. Mind you, he also knew how to use ridicule with devastating effect.

Now the wheel has turned a full turn: Bert is popular. A month ago I attended a dinner hosted by the general managers of BHP, Western Mining, CRA and Mount Isa to honour him. Despite \$50 per head (and the impossibility of fitting the old dinner suit) the Great Hall of the Victorian Art Centre was filled. It was a very grand show and many of Kelly's old allies came to do him honour. Even more significant was the attendance of several of his old opponents.

So far as I can recall, there is nothing that Bert Kelly fought for in the 1960s that has not become received wisdom---if not yet government practice---in 1988. In short, perestroika has come, even to Australia. The debate has moved so far that some of Bert's policies now seem unduly cautious. Even those politicians who are not well known for their courage are promising freer trade, deregulation, privatisation and balanced budgets.

There can be no doubt that Australians have adopted the ideas which, not long ago, vested interests successfully portrayed as Kelly's peculiarities, even though the peculiarities were shared with academic economists, Treasury and Reserve Bank officers and the staff of the IAC. How much of this intellectual turn-around is due to advocacy within Australia and how much to external pressures?

Ken Baker of the IPA wrote, "It is no good talking about economic recovery unless you also talk about the institutions and values that sustain free enterprise." We should understand that Bert did not invent institutions and values---he was not an intellectual but a political activist. As I see it, by defending unpopular ideas he ensured that they were around when their time came; and, by ridiculing economic mismanagement, he ensured that the hole Australia was digging for itself was shallower than, say, New Zealand's hole. He did these things within the honoured institutions of parliament and a free press.

Could it be that, when all is said and done, the prime ministers, party leaders, and departmental heads were really followers, while big changes were being wrought, often in spite of them, by men like Bert Kelly, his allies and opponents?

When Bert spoke of "economic rectitude" hackles always rose. Faced with arguments they could not refute, ministers sometimes responded that nobody could be sure. I thought such nihilism was pathetic in the mouths of people who were compelling other Australians to accept discriminatory tariffs and regulations, as though they knew what they were doing. To establish the nature of "economic rectitude", Kelly often quoted ministers' own words. Although I once heard Malcolm Fraser refer to this practice as a cheap trick, so far as I am aware, nobody actually claimed that ministers were not obliged to say what they meant. The truth of the matter is that people in authority do hold views about right and wrong and, when they depart from their own perceptions of rectitude inconsistency betrays them.

It is remarkable that, in spite of the many thousands of his own words recorded in readily accessible form in newspapers and in hansard, and in spite of his practice of hoisting others with their own petard, no one really hoist him with his. He was too consistent. He was always against government by grace and favour---against the conferring of legal privileges on protected industries, farmers, licensed occupations, or trade unions.

Opposition to privilege has overtaken Australian thinking. The fact of the change is strong circumstantial evidence that ideas do sometimes prevail over interests. (It is just as well for the weak that they do.) There is also evidence that, in Australia, Bert Kelly influenced those ideas. But what influenced him? *Merrindie* provides some clues but that is all.

The Kelly's and their spouses were a tough bunch. They coped successfully with droughts, not floods because Merrindee is on a hill, rabbits, soil erosion and poor prices; but that alone does not make them exceptional.

The book's cover page shows a conventional family tree. I was struck by the stability of the Kelly marriages. If marital success requires both rectitude and good-humoured tolerance, there is evidence of traits required for public office. They are a close knit family with strong but never narrow views of right and wrong, and I have not met any Kellys who took themselves too seriously. Lorna, Bert's wife, a lady with an impish humour and well developed sense of the ridiculous, was Bert's best critic and encouragement, while keeping a weather eye on the size of his boots. They are a team.

Other Kelly traits are an unusually strong sense of civic duty---they were always on committees---and a feeling for that thread that links past and future. I suspect that, when Bert was ridiculed by contemporaries, he was more content than most of us would have been to let history be his judge. However, I think *Merrindie* the farm, and *Merrindie* the book, are more consequences than causes of his long view.

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