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Time the Nats Delivered

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"The National Party yesterday took steps to railroad its Liberal Coalition partner into abandoning support for a deregulated domestic wheat market....Mr Bruce Lloyd said he would propose a plan to strengthen the Australian Wheat Board's control over domestic sales....The move...could confront the Liberals with a choice between maintaining unity or sticking to principles": Julian Cribb, *The Australian*, July 22. What's new? The National Party, nee Country Party, railroaded Bruce, Menzies, McMahon and every other conservative leader. Why not Howard?

The price of forming a coalition with the Country Party and its heirs has always been a measure of economic irresponsibility. Australians would be wealthier today if the Country Party had not railroaded previous governments into the two airline agreement, the maintainance of bank regulation, the dairy plan, the car plan, the undervalued dollar (when Anthony and Sinclair stood McMahon up, causing the inflation of the early seventies), tariffs and subsidies. The style may not be new, but recent history lends a certain poignancy to the most recent Nat hypocrisy.

The `Joh-for-Canberra push' gave Labor a victory it could not otherwise have anticipated---those who say otherwise must explain why Hawke chose to run early. The Queensland Nats tried to justify their wrecking spree by contending that the Coalition's policies, or lack of them, demonstrated that it was not ready for government. I do not agree with that contention. It seemed to me that, as Opposition policies go, the 1987 Coalition policies were less dominated by waffle and inconsistency than is usually the case.

Be that as it may, Joh and his camp followers climbed aboard the dry bandwagon singing that the Coalition was wet. At a time when Keating and Co were actually taking short journeys with the dries, Joh and Co told us the Coalition was dominated by the Melbourne wets and was therefore too socialist to govern well. All but John Stone looked decidedly out of place among the dries and history now records that the electorate, particularly in Queensland, was not impressed. Nevertheless, those who committed themseves to Joh should not be allowed to forget that they committed themselves to

economic rationalism and that economic rationalism was their only excuse for setting out to destroy the Coalition and indeed seriously damaging it.

Despite Joh, some Queensland Nationals were elected. They quickly joined the Federal National Party and the Coalition in opposition. The Queensland Nats are now obliged to deliver a dry National Party, if necessary even by using their considerable skills as wreckers to do so. The economic policies which will make Australia competitive and service the foreign debt are worth paying even a very high price for. If they cannot deliver a rural policy that is less socialist than Labor's, then they are the flimsiest of paper tigers: a joke with which future historians will lighten their accounts of Australian politics.

Issues which were related to preserving the consistency of dry policy have caused every card-carrying wet, bar Chris Puplick, to be dropped from, or not included in, the Liberal front bench. Sex discrimination legislation is not a mainstream dry issue but the Nats saw it as such. It was the Nats who railroaded the Libs into opposing legislation to end (or was it to increase?) sex discrimination in the workplace which predictably saw Senator Peter Baume resign. That issue may not have been trivial, but it was not one that was critical, whereas deregulation of Australia's large rural industries is. Senator Baume has not been reinstated.

When Ian MacPhee tried to railroad the Coalition into collectivist industrial relations and media policies he had to go. McPhee was dropped because he opened too big a gap between his publicly expressed views on key policies and his party's broad philosophical principles. The Nats applauded. But, unlike Bruce Lloyd, he was not to be found on the collectivist side of the Labor Party. For the same reason that MacPhee was dropped, Bruce Lloyd should now be dropped from the Coalition front bench, even though he is deputy leader of his party.

The survivors of the Joh-for-Canberra campaign cannot honourably occupy positions on the wet side---the economically irrational side---of the Liberal Party, let alone Labor. They, who applauded the dropping of Liberal wets so loudly, if often for the wrong reasons, are now honour bound to deliver the head of one of their own on a plate.

I don't think they will do it. Deep down they are wets. In many areas they are far wetter than the present Labor Government, and their attitude to rural regulation is like a tropical thunderstorm. When others, even avowed socialists in the Labor Party, rediscovered conventional micro-economics, the Nats remained true to their roots. Those roots lie deep in collectivism but even deeper in populism. Over many decades the Country Party has in the same breath demanded both subsidies and tax cuts, and espoused such patent nonsense as "protection all around". While claiming to represent a rural constituency, it became the principle proponent of trade barriers which can only be paid for by exporters.

In spite of the appalling history of their party there are new-guard Nationals who are economic rationalists---Stone (QLd), Cobb (NSW), Blunt (NSW), Braithwaite (QLD) to name four. These Nat dries must stand up to their wets and wimps in the way the Liberal dries did. If they do, they run the risk of splitting their party. If they don't, the more serious consequence is a divided coalition, unfit to govern. As for the Joh-for-Canberra group---they are honour bound to champion the dry cause.

If the National dries do not disown Lloyd's collectivism, what is a voter, concerned about our uncompetitive industry and our balance of payments, to do? Dare he gamble on the Liberals defying and beating the National Party wets in government, when they could not do so in opposition? Or does he vote Labor?

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