The Coalition II

John Hyde

Last week I wrote that the Coalition had neither core beliefs nor a sufficiently frightening external enemy to hold it together. Therefore it would be better to split. Let me explain.

On the whole, the Hawke governments have performed better than the Fraser governments which preceded them but, nevertheless, "it's time". Hawke and Keating are not as good as the commodities boom makes them look. Some current policies, health care for instance, are disasters of Whitlamesque proportions. The better government of the past five years is as attributable to a public which has woken up to the fact that the party is over, as it is to Mr Keating's genius. The Hawke government is running down, its people are getting tired and, like all political parties that have been in office too long, it is committed to policies it would not choose with hindsight.

Thus, it is also time that the alternative government got its act together. However, it seems it lost the script at the time of the last general election.

The public knows that divided parties cannot follow consistent strategies and it is almost a political axiom that they do not get elected. So why divide the coalition?

One reason is that dividing the coalition seems a better option than allowing the current Liberal Party divisions to become a rift that cannot be healed. The Liberals are themselves a coalition of differing interests and opinions which in other times tolerated each other with more good nature than is now evident. If something is not done now to relieve the tension, the Liberals run the risk of splitting, or of dissipating their energies in internal quarrelling.

Another reason is that coalitions of people who do not agree on fundamentals are coalitions in name only. Within the Opposition, economic rationalists sit with economic regulators and manipulators. Elitist utopians, who would mould public tastes and personal behaviour by using taxes to subsidise 'merit goods', sit with classical liberals. In the past few weeks alone, want of common beliefs has seen the coalition

divided on immigration policy, aboriginal policy and wheat marketing.

The National Party exudes an aura of racial nationalism and economic socialism. Most Liberals are uncomfortable with at least one of these images; many with both. Both images are perceived by Liberals to have infected Coalition policy. Whether that perception is true or not, it has the making of an unholy row. On top of it all, few Liberals can forget that the Joh-for-Canberra campaign cost them the treasury benches.

In politics every politician wants office, but for most, office is not an end in itself. Politicians have ambitions for themselves and their nation. They will trade their ambitions to form the parties and coalitions which allow them to hold and use office. None the less, each holds to some principles and ambitions without which he feels office would be pointless. Thus it is not possible to cobble together coalitions of people who share too few common goals and attitudes.

What is more, the art of compromise requires a little sweetness and light. It is not helped by old, disappointed, bitter and vengeful rogue bulls who have lost the respect of the herd and who feel slighted because they are neglected. At present, the joint party room must admit rather too many of these rogue bulls.

Until the Opposition politicians can really agree on more than they do now, they have no option but to reduce the extent to which personal belief intrudes on team loyalty. To reduce this intrusion the Coalition will eventually divide along one of its many fault lines. It seems to me that the question is quickly becoming, which line?

To break the Coalition would be traumatic, but the resulting wounds will be healed, as they have been healed in the past. Whereas, if the Liberal Party were to divide, I don't think the wounds would heal for a very long time.

John Howard should take up the Nats' threat to split the coalition over wheat marketing, promptly and politely. The Coalition should be divided while its members are still talking to each other. At the same time, he should conspicuously set in train the processes that will eventually lead to amalgamation of the two parties into one.

Howard's first step might be to circulate every Liberal MP with a copy of the report on the National Party's future prepared by a committee chaired by Peter Nixon. This document does not deal with the vexed policy questions but, if it convinces Liberals that there are some Nats thinking honestly and generously about the coalition's problems, it will have served one important purpose. It will do Liberals no harm to realise that, in some matters, the Nats are ahead of them.

People in both parties must articulate core beliefs and establish them within their parties———they must decide what is

really important and convince others of it. The parties'
manifestos must be compatible, otherwise coalition is not
possible. Concessions to the Liberal wets and to Nat
traditionalists must be chosen carefully.

The task is not impossible. These are a few of my
preferred compromises: The economic rationalists must insist
on micro-economic reform, including the markets for labour and
rural produce, because the country needs it and because there
is no room for much of a coalition to the left of Labor. But,
the Human Rights Commission and equal opportunities
legislation, which are so dear to the wets, are not worth
going to the barricades for. The middle class rip-off must
cease, but we can afford to be more generous to aborigines and
the really poor. By weeding out all the tax and other
legislation that discriminates against the conventional family
the traditionalists might be appeased in a way that should
appeal to true liberals as well. The traditionalists might
also be conceded a promise to take a tough stand against
crime. And so on.

Only when current tensions are reduced can a highway
broad enough to accommodate both wets and dries, Nats and
Libs, be built. If the effort fails, then nothing worth saving
will have been lost.

ENDS