

ON THE DRY SIDE

Peacock's Shadows

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Those whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad. The election gave Andrew Peacock more talent with which to form a shadow ministry. He used it by making Peter Shack Shadow Employment and Industrial Relations Minister and Neil Brown Shadow Attorney but at the same time he exiled Jim Carlton, his best theoretician, and John Spender, another who thinks ahead, to the back bench; and he lined up Fred Chaney, his most articulate spokesman, against John Button, the Labor Minister who above all others is doing everything right. My impression is that he is giving too much attention to the cut and thrust of politics (and hence to capturing the Prime Ministership for himself) and insufficient to placing his party in a position to use power wisely when Hawke stumbles. Mr. Peacock might with advantage remember his own objection to Fraser's short sighted pursuit of power.

The attitude that, when in opposition, there is little purpose in being true to an ideal, because only in government is it possible to give effect to ideals and therefore the foremost task is to regain government, is wrong on three counts. First: an opposition which in truth cares about the way a Nation is governed can influence the way that a government governs. There is a clear precedent; the Calwell and Whitlam Labor Parties for several years practically wrote Liberal Party policy under Menzies, Holt, Gorton and McMahon. Conversely, if the Liberal Party were to now seek office by chasing the middle ground it would drive the middle ground toward Labor's left as the Hawkes the Keatings and the Buttons find themselves in the untenable position within the Labor Party of being more liberal than the Liberals.

Second: an oppositon's performance and policy are seldom on an electorate's mind - governments are sacked rather than oppositions elected. The obvious precedent here is the re-election of the Hawke Government. Hawke broke most of his 1983 policy undertakings but the electorate was unconcerned - those few who thought at all about the policies were probably rather relieved.

Third and most important: the prime purpose of positions thought out in opposition is to enable a party to govern well in office. To hold the treasury benches, but wantonly to squander the opportunity to improve the lot of the subject people is to admit that the sole purpose of the political struggle is power itself - the joy of being fawned upon and of pushing other people around. The task of governing well is very difficult yet too many politicians in opposition seem to think that all they must do to govern well is to get themselves returned to office. Once in office, many of the more able of them become ministers and so become too busy putting out political brush fires to think ahead or about anything beyond their own portfolios. The most important task of an opposition is to fit itself for government. That requires a rather different front bench from the one that can best embarrass today's Government by astute gamesmanship.

I would like to think that Carlton and Spender from the quiet of the back bench will prepare well reasoned arguments which will support a clear philosophical direction which every one else will then take seriously; and that Chaney will stroll across the Senate to work out with Button how to convince the slow learners in both their parties to accept policies which encourage the sort of manufacturing industry which will contribute most to Australian welfare. I am less than confident that that is how it will work.

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The supply side of the Australian economy is inhibited by the most dreadful log jam of restrictions, regulations, trade barriers and statutory monopolies. The Labor Cabinet under the persuasive guidance of Senator Button and Mr. Keating have taken some halting steps, which the Liberals talked of, toward rehabilitating capital and product markets. In the opinion of this, possibly not unbiased commentator, the Labor Party has made several serious mistakes since March 1983 but on the whole, and with exceptions like health care, they should, if they continue in similar manner, be able to look back on their record here and say, "At least in this we did not govern in vain". Politicians are birds of passage and the knowledge that something was done right is, in the last analysis, whether viewed from old age, private life, or the Opposition benches their only realistic solace.

Although ideas are the stuff of politics, politicians seldom generate ideas themselves; they adopt those which are to hand. On the day of the announcement of the shadow ministry the Sydney based CIS released a study of Foreign Investment and the Perth based AIPP released a study of employment. In Europe and North America it is from sources such as these that politicians in exile from the civil service have developed policy.

Politicians in opposition can and should influence which ideas the government accepts. Ministers, like Button with industry policy, or Keating with foreign bank entry, find it easier to do what access to expertise tells them is best, if opposition spokesmen do not lend moral and verbal support to vested interests defending their privileges against more general interests. Howard, to his credit, made the dollar float easy for Keating. Chaney should make structural adjustment easy for Button.

Writing of freedom of trade Adam Smith observed: "Not only the prejudices of the public, but what is much more unconquerable, the private interests of many individuals oppose it...The Member of Parliament who supports every proposal for strengthening this monopoly is sure to acquire not only the reputation of understanding trade, but great popularity and influence with an order of men whose numbers and wealth render them of great importance. If he opposes them, on the contrary, and still more if he has the authority to thwart them, neither the most acknowledged probity, nor the highest rank, nor the greatest public services can protect them from the most infamous abuse and detraction, from personal insults, nor sometimes from real danger from the insolent outrage of furious and disappointed monopolists."

By resisting the temptation to be populist Chaney, Carlton and Spender are still in positions where they can influence this government and the next Liberal government. Chaney's greatest influence may come from avoiding criticism and by offering judicious praise or even, if he is game, courting some of Button's flack; Carlton's and Spender's from spelling out a clear philosophical direction even when the front bench would prefer muddier waters, and from the slaying of cows which are sacred to both parties. Unfortunately the better they serve Australia by these means the more they will annoy some of their colleagues and they could, depending on circumstance, prejudice their careers. Although I was never much good with temptation, I am told that the ability to resist it is a measure of men, and I am always willing to urge virtue upon others.