

ON THE DRY SIDE - XIV (ALTERNATIVE VERSION)

A Christmas Carol Strikes Back

We dry-siders have a reputation for being tight-fisted and unsentimental. Just to show how wrong you all are, today's column is offered as a Christmas present to our Australian film industry (and its attendant train of tax beneficiaries). There are still a few rough edges on the following scenario, but as a rough treatment I think it already shows promise. I have Peter Weir in mind as director; he has the right touch with the supernatural and could probably rise to the Brechtian overtones. Graham Kennedy should, I think, play Prime Minister (he has the charisma), and Bert Newton, Treasurer. To attract foreign equity, Dustin Hoffman plays Minister for Social Security and Glenda Jackson, Minister for Finance.

In scene one, the Ghost of Elections Past carries Cabinet (suitably equipped with nightgowns, candles, nightcaps, etc.) back to 1972, to an executive meeting of the Liberal Party; the agenda item, abolition of the means test. Whitlam has committed the Labor Party to grant age pensions to all irrespective of need. With the outcome of the election in the balance, executive decides that the claims of the needy can be sacrificed to the purchase of a few more middle-class votes. All to no avail, Labor wins. As the election results come in, a ghostly McMahon sings "Got dem ol' pragmatic blues again" (music by Weill, adapted Rice and Webber).

Some of Cabinet are looking a little green, but the Ghost relentlessly shows them even more ghastly horrors: 1982 and the Lowe by-election. Minister Lynch (a cameo role played by George Melly) delivers a speech bravely re-affirming what has in the intervening years become both Labor and Liberal Party policy:

welfare must go to those who need it. After a bright young man from the Secretariat shows them how many middle-class pensioners there are in Lowe, Cabinet hastily explains that of course no-one meant to say anything of the kind, and if they did, they only said it because they didn't really mean it. Fade-out on chorus (Cabinet and shadow Cabinet), "Who needs principles when you're popular?"

The Burley Griffin Carillon strikes one: our hapless Cabinet is wakened by the Ghost of Early Election. The penitents watch with mounting shame as the pre-non-election Budget - which seems to have been written by the Opposition - adds to the nation's problems. In the fade, Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet join in a slow shuffle, "We're not quite sure if we want to be popular/If it means we have to clean this mess up".

Next scene, our haggard Cabinet is shown a montage: an economy with inflation of Latin American proportions, which cannot grow for the dead weight of unproductive activity and monstrous tax rates. They see their people grown accustomed to turning to government to satisfy their every want: the old, the young, the unemployed, the sick, single parents, married parents, the under-educated, the over-educated, those in uncompetitive industries, farmers, miners, manufacturers. The wealthy - who now number only politicians, tax avoiders and welfare providers - defend their privileges, while citizens riot and foreign invasion threatens. The government is frightened and irresolute. From the Odessa steps of the New Parliament House, the Prime Minister and Treasurer with their Opposition counterparts (here played by Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave) sing, "O why, O why Argentina/Did we not learn from you?"

Final scene: at dawn, a chastened Cabinet, led by Tiny Tim and the Minister for Social Security, files out into the cold light of reality, chanting their credo in solemn measure. "Welfare is for people, not industries. Welfare is for people who need it. It is more important for governments to be principled than popular." The sun rises, the economy begins to grow, the poor are succoured, bitterness and violence vanish. "God bless us, every one," says Tiny Tim.

Any takers?

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