

CHARLES ROBERT KELLY: 1912-1997

Ray Evans

In John Bunyan's great epic *Pilgrim's Progress* we read of the encounter between Mr Great-heart and Mr Valiant-for-Truth:

Then they went on; and just at the place where Little-faith formerly was robbed, there stood a man with his sword drawn and his face all bloody. Then said Mr Great-heart, Who art thou? The man made answer, saying, I am one whose name is Valiant-for-Truth. I am a pilgrim and am going to the Celestial City. Now, as I was on my way, there were three men did beset me, and propounded unto me these three things:

1. *Whether I would become one of them.*
2. *Or go back from whence I came.*
3. *Or die upon the place.*

To the first I answered, I had been a true man for a long season, and it could not be expected that I should now cast in my lot with thieves. Then they demanded what I should say to the second. So I told them that the place from whence I came, had I not found incommodity there, I had not forsaken it at all; but finding it unsuitable to me, and very unprofitable for me, I forsook it for this way. Then they asked me what I said to the third? And I told them. My life cost more dear, far, than that I should lightly give it away. Besides, you have nothing to do thus to put things to my choice; wherefore be at your peril if you meddle.

Then these three, to wit, Wild-head, Inconsiderate, and Pragmatick, drew upon me, and I also drew upon them. So we fell to it, one against three, for the space of above three hours. They have left upon me, as you see, some of the marks of their valour, and have also carried away with them some of mine.

Great-heart: But here was great odds, three against one.

Valiant: 'Tis true; but little and more are nothing to him that has the truth on his side: Though an host should encamp against me, said one, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.

Dear Friends, we have come to this service to give thanks to God for the life of Bert Kelly, and to share with Lorna, Tony, Kim and Roger and the grandchildren, and with Bill, Winifred and Marion, their loss in their bereavement.

I began these reflections with some lines from *Pilgrim's Progress*, because I know of no more apt description of Bert's life and work than the description 'Valiant-for-Truth'. Further, he had some close comrades in his pilgrimage and, in particular, it seems to me to be entirely correct to describe Alf Rattigan as Mr Great-heart. And finally, how appropriate it is to describe the foes which Bert encountered on his epic pilgrimage as Wild-head, Inconsiderate and, above all, Pragmatick.

Charles Robert Kelly was born on 22 June 1912. His father was W.S. Kelly, known as WS or Stan. His mother was Ada May nee Dawson and their infant son was named Charles after her father, and Robert after his father, in that order, because Ada was not going to have any R.C. Kellys in the family. The Kellys were Methodists from the Isle of Man who arrived in South Australia in 1838. The Dawsons were Anglicans from Kent, who arrived the same year.

Bert was the second of four children and they grew up on Merrindie, the family farm. Their lives at Merrindie are delightfully described in the book entitled *Merrindie*, jointly written by several members of the family and which Bert organised and published in 1988. One vignette, from Bert's pen, must suffice for this occasion.

Looking back on my youth at Merrindie, I suppose the aspect that I appreciate most now, with the benefit of hindsight, is the memory of the family

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sitting around the big table in what we used to call the dining room, with a big kerosene lamp in the table centre. Dad was not always there as he did a lot of reading and writing in his little study, warmed by a smelly kerosene heater in the winter.

A vital part of their lives was the Methodist Church at Giles Corner. Methodism was implanted by John Wesley in the Isle of Man in the 1780s, and the Kelly pioneers brought it with them to South Australia. The Methodist Church of Australia is no more, and other surviving churches seem distressed by heresies, but Methodism is important in understanding the life of Bert Kelly. The tag 'Methodist zeal' was applied to Bert as recently as 1991 by Sir Paul Hasluck when I was asking the former Governor-General about his close relationship to Sir John McEwen, and his perspective on the battle between the much-feared Country Party Chief and Deputy Prime Minister, and his antagonist, the modest member from Wakefield.

It will take a carefully written book to do justice to the closely interconnected fabric of family, farm, church and school which surrounded Bert during his childhood and young manhood. That book, I should add, has been in progress for some time and will I trust, when complete, describe fully in all its richness, this vigorous culture of early twentieth century rural Australia which produced so many great men and women.

Bert attended Prince Alfred College and returned to the farm in December 1929 to serve an apprenticeship under a manager. Three months later he was appointed to teach in the Sunday School. WS had left Merrindie to take up his Tariff Board duties in Melbourne. Lorna Hill came that year to Merrindie School to housekeep for her brother Victor, who was taking charge at his first school. Very soon Bert was courting Lorna with the aid of a primitive Fordson tractor, which he used to work over the school corner paddock far more than any economic calculation could possibly

justify. In 1935 they married and no politician or public figure could have been more fortunate than Bert, in having Lorna as wife and sheet-anchor. How often has the story been told of Bert droning on to a virtually empty House, late at night, on the implications of the latest Tariff Board report, sustained only by the loyal presence of Lorna in the Visitor's Gallery. But those speeches became part of a public record which kept lobbyists and departmental advisers, at least from some departments, awake at night.

We can summarise Bert Kelly's claim to our admiration,

and to his important place in the history of Australia, very simply. He arrived in Parliament, aged 46, in 1959, with no more formal education than he obtained at Prince Alfred College and then, with no parliamentary allies, sustained a long and often bitter campaign, lasting two decades, first against a very powerful Deputy Prime Minister, but always against the deeply held and strongly defended conventional wisdom of the day concerning protectionism. In the thirties, Sir Keith Hancock had written,

Critics of protection, during the second decade of the twentieth century, dwindled into a despised and detested sect suspected of nursing an anti-national heresy,

and in the fifties the climate of hostility towards such critics, under McEwen's influence, had become worse.

The influence of two men sustained him during this long and lonely battle. The first was his father, WS, whom Bert regarded with 'awe and veneration'. WS was still very much alive when Bert entered politics, and he maintained pressure on Bert to take up the battle. WS was appointed by the Bruce-Page Government to the Tariff Board in 1929, and from that vantage point saw the tragic consequences of the 'tariff-on-request' policy of the Scullin Government, a policy espoused by that Government in its woefully misguided response to the massive unemployment caused by the



Bert Kelly in the CIS Library, 1994

Great Depression.

The second man, Charles Hawker, was killed in a plane crash at 2 a.m. on October 26, 1938, when his plane, en route from Adelaide, overshot Essendon airport in fog, and crashed into the summit of Mt Dandenong. Charles Hawker was crippled very badly by war wounds but won the seat of Wakefield in the 1931 election. Had he lived he would have most likely succeeded Joe Lyons as Prime Minister. Charles Hawker and WS were close friends and Hawker was a frequent visitor to Merrindie. An important exchange took place during one of these visits, not long before Hawker was killed, and in retrospect Bert recalled it in these words

But then he gradually became more pressing and one day said, 'Look Bert, I want to prepare yourself to take over from me when I can't go on, when I resign from Wakefield'. By that time, Bert reflected, I was a member of the Advisory Board of Agriculture, I

Hawker and the urgent and compelling voice of his father, propelled and sustained Bert in his early years in the Parliament.

The key events in this long battle were the Vernon Report, the resignation of Sir Leslie Melville from the chairmanship of the Tariff Board, and the appointment of Alf Rattigan to succeed him. During this intense power struggle Bert became a master of the parliamentary question which, seemingly quite innocuous, contained within it a potentially lethal trap for the Deputy Prime Minister.

Having appointed Bert as Party Whip, Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies retired in January 1966. Not long after, his successor, Harold Holt, having appointed Bert to the most junior ministry of Works, drowned in 1967. John Gorton then gave him the Navy but later dropped him, and in this way, with Lorna's strong support, launched Bert on his extraordinary career as the Modest Member. He had, prior to entering politics, developed a

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loved my farming, and I had kids at foot, and I said, 'Look I'd rather be dead than in politics'. And then he said, with that understanding look, 'I'm not asking you what you want Bert, I'm just telling you where your duty lies.' And that shut me up. Oh it shut me up. And I never went to a political meeting from then on, never. I said, 'I'm not going to do it! I'm not going to be tricked into bloody politics'.

Hawker bitterly attacked the endemic corruption which attended the Scullin tariffs, and the settlement which was reached during the thirties on this issue was due to Douglas Copland who argued successfully for 'economic and efficient protection'. Protection would be accepted as a normal part of economic life, but the Tariff Board would be given the right to exercise proper scrutiny and control over procedures, free from immediate political pressure. WS served on the Tariff Board for many years and all of his work was directed towards implementing this truce. However Sir John McEwen, seeking for even greater power to implement his vision for Australia, and desirous of using the tariff and the import quota to achieve his ends, found his ambitions blocked by the Tariff Board. Within this power struggle, then, the ghost of Charles

unique style and a technique as a columnist with his 'Dave's Diary', written for rural papers. His characters then were Dave, his wife Mary, their politically ambitious neighbours the Clarksons, and Squatter the sheep-dog.

With 'Dave's Diary' Bert had become a very skilled writer, and in the tradition of Steele Rudd and C.J. Dennis he created, from his experience of farming and political life, a series of characters for his 'Modest Member' column such as Eccles the ivory tower economist, Fred the farmer next door, and Mavis, the long suffering politician's wife. These characters, and the rural imagery Bert employed, captivated many thousands of readers in all walks of professional and business life. Those Friday columns came to exert great influence throughout Australia, and each successive Friday came to be dreaded by the Canberra lobbyists whose job was defending and expanding the tariffs which their industries enjoyed.

I was one of the Friday-only readers of the *Financial Review* of those days, a phenomenon which made Friday's circulation greater than on any other day. And I well recall the sense of anticipation with which I immediately turned to the editorial pages to catch up on the latest adventures of Fred, Mavis, Eccles and the modest member. Self-deprecation became, in Bert's hands, an extraordinarily

effective weapon. But we should not assume, because it became such, that Bert was not what he claimed to be – a modest member. Bert believed that modesty was an important quality which, if not innate, should be diligently cultivated, and he did so because it was a part of the fabric of values and strongly held beliefs which became part of him as he grew up at Merrindie, and married, and with Lorna, brought up their family there.

Similarly we should not think that Bert was opposed to protectionism because it was inefficient, or led to distortions in investment and trade – to use the language of economics. Bert was opposed to protectionism because it was wrong, and it was wrong because it created a situation in which governments, in the person of ministers or officials, granted arbitrary and capricious favours to some, who were thus greatly enriched, at the expense of

Prime Minister referred in his recent tribute to Bert of 19 January 1997.

Bert was much loved by his companions in these battles. At the various conferences where the issues were debated, Bert's appearance, dressed as he usually was in shorts, open necked shirt, long socks with ruler and pencil tucked inside a sock, together with the battered case with the letters CRK emblazoned in unruly fashion in white paint on one side, was always cause for an immediate uplift of spirits. Bert was always good fun, but we all knew that underneath the wit and engaging charm there was a well-tempered core of steel; that he would always be true; and if we were to desert the cause, particularly for temporary advantage, his judgment would be stern.

After this it was noised abroad that Mr Valiant-for-Truth was taken with a summons by the same post as

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others, who were at best impoverished and at worst, ruined. Bert was not really an economic rationalist as that term is now employed. Bert was the great embodiment of Edmund Burke's dictum that 'politics is morality writ large' and if the application of the moral principles which had been inculcated into him from childhood led to economically sensible conclusions, that was an additional benefit.

For the same reasons Bert never placed the prospect of political preferment above his mission, and he thus became an exemplar to a rising group of politicians who saw in Bert someone who achieved, in reality, extraordinary success but whose political career, in conventional terms, could only have been described as modestly successful. These political heirs of Bert's formed the Society of Modest Members, and have sought in their various ways to emulate him in their conduct and influence.

Bert instinctively understood the truth of Edmund Burke's observation that 'all government is based on opinion'. Bert set out to change opinion on protectionism, and first of all in the parliament, and then, in his column and in his speaking engagements all around Australia, he played an indispensable role in bringing about the nation-wide change in opinion, to which the

the other, and had this for a token that the summons was true, that his pitcher was broken at the fountain. When he understood it he called his friends, and told them of it. Then said he, I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who now will be my rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river side, into which as he went he said, Death where is thy sting? And as he went down deeper, he said, Grave where is the victory? So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

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