

SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

Chapter 5

Pick a Box

Sydney Morning Herald 26 June 1987

CAMPAIGN DIARY

Barry Jones tries to wake a few sleepers at lunch

by ROBERT HAUPT

But for Roger Woodward's popular classics introduction to the Labor Party campaign launch, we might have imagined that we had come by mistake to a Sportsman of the Year presentation, such was the wealth of sporting prowess among the chosen few.

But no, it was the Prime Minister outlining "the Australian vision...a new century of Australian achievement". Where, then, one wondered, were the Australian thinkers. So far as people of ideas – you know the word, intellectuals – were commended to our attention, they were safely old: Manning Clark and Lloyd Rees come to mind.

These thoughts arise after a day on the election trail with the Minister for Science, the Hon B.O. Jones, whose message is somewhat sceptical in contrast to his PM's.

Where the Prime Minister regards us as a great Australian family, free, proud, independent, intensely individualistic and uniquely diverse, Mr Jones sees an inward-looking people, self-satisfied, suspicious of change and resistant to anything that smacks of

intellectual rigour. Where Mr Hawke urges us to see it through together, Mr Jones...well, let me allow him to speak for himself.

We are in the electorate of Lowe, a typical slice of Sydney suburbia represented in Parliament by the assiduous, gentlemanly Mr Michael Maher, who faces defeat on all but the slightest swing against the Government.

Inviting the plain-spoken Mr Barry Jones to address your electors is, to say the least, a risk, and if I were the kind of reporter who goes in for gaffes – that is to say, treats candour as controversy – I could, I dare say, squeeze a front-page story out of his remarks yesterday. To me, however, he spoke eminent sense.

After the obligatory visit to a factory, we arrive at the Strathfield Golf Club for a lunch with local businessmen. Mr Jones is not one of those speakers who changes his pitch to please his audience, as the following shows.

Businessman: I read your book, *Sleepers Awake*.

Jones: No, no. *Sleepers comma Wake*.

Businessman: Yes, and I found it difficult to read.

Jones: Really? In Victoria it was a Year 12 text.

Businessman: I think if you did a second edition that was simpler, it would be a commercial success.

Jones: It has been through 14 editions and it is a considerable commercial success. It has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Swedish and Braille. The last is for Australian managers. I have considered a simpler version, *Sleepers Wake for Morons*.

Mr Jones is not a humble man.

Oh, he praised the Government – John Button's industry policy would go down as its greatest achievement – and condemned the Opposition. But he also spoke candidly, and I commend his forthright thoughts. If they are put into the propaganda machine and turned into gaffes, I hope you will remember that they began as thoughtful criticism from an honourable man.

‘Can you file this please, Warren.’ Alice handed the faxed newspaper clipping to her chief campaign worker and then coughed nervously. She was standing at the window of her office, waiting for the Commonwealth car containing the Minister for Science to arrive and pick her up.

‘I hope he doesn’t say anything controversial today,’ she said to Warren. ‘The good old *Adelaide News* is bound to turn it into a sensationalist headline.’

He shook his head. ‘Not at a school. He’ll be careful what he says. He used to be a teacher, after all.’

‘Warren, I was a teacher too, remember, and I was quite candid sometimes.’

The big white car pulled up in the driveway and a familiar, larger-than-life figure emerged and shook her hand. ‘Alice, my favourite candidate,’ he boomed, ‘I hope you have something interesting in store for me today. No tedious business people.’

‘Well, I hope it’s of interest, Barry. But come inside first – just briefly. My campaign workers want to meet you. You’ve no idea how excited they are.’

‘They must be easily excited,’ he said.

During the short trip to the school he turned and chatted to her from the front seat. ‘This is a co-ed Lutheran School, I seem to remember.’

‘Yes, Barry. It’s one of two Lutheran secondary schools in Adelaide. South Australia has a strong German tradition – as I’m sure you know.’

‘Yes, I’ve been reading about it recently – in particular about certain German community activities here in the years leading up to and during the Second World War.’

‘Yes, well...’ – she removed a sheet from the bundle of papers on her lap – ‘Barry, I have some stats on the school if you’re interested – the amount of Federal funding they’re getting, and so on.’ He didn’t respond. ‘Right, Barry, so you’ll do a brief tour of the school, including the science labs, where they’ll have some experiments set up, and then you’ll speak to the Year 11s and 12s in the hall.’

He nodded. ‘Let me know how much time I’ve got to speak. I want at least half the time to be interactive – questions, comments from the kids.’

‘Yes, I’ll keep an eye on the clock.’

‘Anything in particular they want me to talk about?’

‘Well, I spoke to the Principal and he’s happy to leave it to you. But we both thought that you could possibly say something about career opportunities in science. Perhaps talk about some of your themes in *Sleepers, Wake*...in an appropriate way...for their age, I mean. But I’m sure you’ve done this before.’

He turned back to her. ‘You know, I should be talking to the junior students as well. It’s too late in Year 12 when they’ve already dropped Maths and Physics because they’re too hard, or not sexy, or something.’

‘Well, you’re right, of course, but a hall full of several hundred students would be very impersonal – not conducive to productive discussion.’

He nodded slowly. ‘So, anything else I should talk about?’

‘Well, whatever takes your fancy’ – she paused – ‘but I’d steer clear of the German experience in South Australia. It’s not all wine and wurst, I’m afraid.’

They passed through the school gates towards the spot in front of the building where a gaggle of people waited to greet them.

‘What did you say the Principal’s name is?’ the Minister asked.

‘Mr Volk,’ she said.

‘Ah, Volk. A good German name. It means “people”.’

‘Yes.’

‘Like in the Nazi slogan – *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*. One people, one nation, one leader.’

‘*Ja*’ – she laughed nervously – ‘but I trust you won’t point that out to him.’

‘Of course, the English word “folk” is from the same Germanic root.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘But it has a more anodyne meaning in English.’

As they rolled to a stop, he turned to her and said, ‘I wonder if Mr Volk drives a Volkswagen. If so, it would be the *Volk*’s car in more ways than one.’ He smiled broadly, delighted at his witticism.

That afternoon she received a call from her campaign director. ‘So how did the Jones school visit go?’

'It was brilliant, John. He was at his best. The kids enjoyed it – and the teachers – and there were a few parents there. They loved him.'

'Any media there?'

'No. I was kidding myself that someone might turn up. Who's going to give *me* a free kick?'

'Okay. Well, I'm glad it went well. But of course you know that, vote-wise, it was a complete waste of time and effort.'

'Because children don't vote.'

'Right. And how many of those teachers and parents live in your electorate?'

'Probably a few.'

He huffed. 'You'd have been better off spending the time door-knocking. At least then you know you're talking to someone who can vote for you.'

She was silent for a few seconds. 'John, this may come as a surprise to you, but I am not a complete cynic. If just one of those kids decides on a career in science as a result of hearing Barry today, then it will have been worthwhile.'

He huffed again. 'Okay. So remind me – who's the next Min coming?'

'Another of the brainy Bs. I'm taking Button to Mitsubishi on Friday. And don't ask me how many of the workers there live in Holder.'

'Mmm, a few, probably. But most would live further south in Bilney's electorate.'

'Thanks a lot, John.'

As Warren drove Alice down the road to the Mitsubishi plant to meet John Button, she said, 'Warren, you may know that Nancy, one of Jack's staff, will be retiring after the election, so I'll need a replacement. Would you be interested in being on my staff if I win?'

'Yes, I would,' he said without hesitation. 'But you'd better speak to my boss about it.'

'Yes, of course I will. But I needed to know first whether you were interested.'

She went to see John in his electorate office and he reluctantly conceded that Warren should go if he wanted to. 'He's wasted here – in state politics, I mean. His expertise is in foreign affairs, defence, immigration. But in my office it's all bus stops, dolphins, hospital waiting lists and that tedious woman, Laura Norder.'

She grimaced. 'Well, I've told him that a job with me won't be all that interesting to begin with. Even if I win this election, my margin will be tiny, so I'll have to spend my first term shoring up local support – being a slave to the electorate. Only if I win a second term will I grant myself the luxury of getting involved in policy development and making a real contribution.'

On the Wednesday afternoon of the last week of the campaign, Alice and her Liberal opponent fronted up to the ABC TV studios to pre-record a segment for ABC National to be aired that evening before the 7 o'clock news. She wore the red crepe suit that everyone liked and refused to let the studio make-up person do anything more to her face. 'I don't want to look like some painted doll,' she said to Warren who was acting as chauffeur again.

The producer welcomed her and explained briefly what would happen. Alice greeted her opponent and they were seated side by side at a brightly lit studio console. She didn't really feel nervous until the program front-woman, Dale Sinclair, wearing a sexy leather skirt, walked in and sat opposite them. It was then that Alice's stomach turned to water. She breathed deeply and mentally recapped what she'd learned at the candidates' media training session: stick to the issues, be civil to your opponent, stick to the issues, no vocal pauses, stick to the issues. Then she thought what a pity it was that the viewers wouldn't see Dale's sexy leather skirt under the console.

The cameras rolled and the questioning began. After a minute or so she gained confidence and spoke reasonably well, she thought, about retirement income policy. Her young opponent had been well-briefed, it seemed, because he was making some sense too. There were further questions about education and the cost of living, and then Dale turned to the Liberal and asked him a pointed question about a past political act of his, something unsavoury of which Alice had only the vaguest inkling. The Lib put up a terrible show of defending himself, the matter was put to him again, he blustered again, and that was the end of it.

After the segment was aired that evening she had a congratulatory call from her campaign manager. 'You creamed him,' he said.

'No credit to me, John. It was all that dirt they had on him. Was he set up, do you think?'

'Yes.'

'So who set him up? Us or the Libs?'

'I don't know.'

'You must know.'

'I really don't. But good old Auntie, eh?'

Election day was cold and showery. Thank God for compulsory voting, Alice thought. She wasn't too nervous, being fully occupied cleaning the house and preparing food for the election night party.

After lunch she drove to the primary school to vote for herself. An old bloke from the Glenelg sub-branch was there, handing out her how-to-vote cards and she waved to him as she went into the booth. He gave her a Churchillian 'V for Victory' sign. She was tempted to ask him how things were going, but didn't dare hang around for long in case she was suspected by Electoral Commission staff of trying to influence the voters. 'My mere presence could influence them, apparently,' she'd said to Michael. 'They would be seduced by my aura.'

On the ballot paper she penciled number one in the box next to her name, gave number two to the Democrat, a nice man who was standing in the seat for the third time, number three to the Unite Australia Party who were Democrat dissidents, number four to the Lib and number five to the Joh Nationals man. As she walked out through the school gate she was accosted by an officious young man conducting an exit poll. He asked how she'd voted. 'I voted for the Free Nelson Mandela Party,' she said. He looked puzzled and was still consulting his papers when she looked back a minute later.

She drove to the supermarket to stock up on party food. As she was waiting to be served at the deli counter and considering whether to buy Italian or Hungarian salami, a woman she didn't know came up to her and said, 'It's Alice Perry, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

The woman was clearly amazed to see her. 'I can't believe you're here calmly doing your shopping while the election is going on.'

Alice shrugged. 'Well, there's nothing I can do at this stage.'

'No, I guess not.' The woman smiled and shook Alice's hand. 'Well, good luck. I hope you win.' And she moved on.

Alice didn't know why, but she suddenly started to cry, and had to make a great effort to compose herself before her number was called.

That night the Holder Labor faithful gathered in her rumpus room to consume her superior finger food and copious quantities of beer and red wine, and to follow the election count on TV. The first batch of Holder figures to come in were a bit scary, but Alice assumed that they were from smaller booths in what she called Tory Territory – Somerton Park, North Brighton, Hove. 'It's the *swing* that matters,' she kept telling herself.

Jack, the retiring Member, stayed home for the first couple of hours to collect figures from the Labor scrutineers phoning in from the polling booths. At about nine-thirty he appeared at Alice's front door and took her aside. 'It's looking all right,' he said with tempered, but obvious relief. 'There's a swing against us of about two percent, but you're still fifteen hundred votes ahead and the Democrat preferences are running more than two to one in your favour. We'll probably lose some ground over the next week as they count the absentee and postal votes, but I'd say you're there.'

She smiled broadly. 'And, Jack, it looks like we've retained government – easily. Hawkie didn't need my seat. But he's got me whether he likes it or not.'

Jack smiled and shook her hand. 'Congratulations, Alice. I'm very glad the seat is in safe hands. If we'd lost it I'd never have forgiven myself for retiring at this time.'

She couldn't help but give him a hug and then found herself blubbing again. 'Sorry, Jack. I promise this is the last time you'll see me cry.'

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