

NOTES ON BILL COLBOURNE By Kevin Moss

INTRODUCTION

William Regis (Bill) Colbourne was well known to me, as he was my great uncle. Born in Sydney in 1895, Bill was the 11th of 14 children. His parents and some older siblings came to Australia from County Clare, Ireland, in 1890.

In Ireland Bill's father, Richard Colbourne, had been a prominent member of the Land League (the forerunner to Sinn Fein) and was convicted and gaoled on two occasions for his Land League activities. In 1891 soon after his arrival in Sydney, Richard Colbourne convened the Chippendale Branch of the Labor Party. A number of important early meetings were held at the Colbourne home in Shepherd Street, Chippendale including one where R.D. Meagher was endorsed to contest the seat of Sydney-Phillip in 1895.

Another active Party member of Bill's family was his brother Paddy who, during the 1930s, twice contested the State seat of Petersham. However, with Lang Labor candidates also contesting, the conservatives won Petersham on both occasions.

In a motion of commendation at the 1969 State Conference, on the occasion of Bill Colbourne's retirement as General Secretary, reference was made to Bill as a young boy ringing a bell on street corners to attract attention before his father spoke at Labor rallies. Bill started attending party conferences as a delegate as soon as he was old enough. Obviously the environment in which he grew up had a profound impact on his abiding commitment to the Labor movement.

Bill Colbourne was educated at Marist Brothers' St Benedict's, Broadway. As a young man he worked as a clerk for the smallgoods firm of Denham Brothers, played rugby league on the wing for Newtown Reserves and served in the AIF during World War I. War service was spent on the home-front and Bill would joke about how his unit managed, under much difficulty, to defend Goat Island and hold the Hawkesbury Bridge. In the height of the Depression he became a commercial traveller for Holbrooks Sauce. At that time wages were so low he supplemented his income by selling gramophone records. In the 1930s he also worked as an insurance agent for T & G Insurance. Bill married Hyacinth (Hycie) Burgess in 1936 and had two sons who are both Capuchin Priests, Fathers Patrick & Damien.

A staunch supporter of the Scullin Government, Bill served as Secretary of the NSW Federal Branch of the Labor Party from 1931 to 1936. He was an Alderman on Leichhardt Council from 1940 to 1944. The 1940s also saw Bill as Secretary of the Industrial Life Assurance Agents' Union, the Union which he had earlier help establish. In 1951 he took up the position of Research Officer for the Federated Ironworkers' Association followed by a period as Research Officer for the Federated Clerks' Union. During this time he was also State ALP President (1952-1955). In 1955 Bill was elected ALP NSW General Secretary and held the position for a record period until 1969. Throughout this time he also served on the Party's Federal Executive of which he was Federal President for one term (1961-1962).

ATTEMPT TO ENTER PARLIAMENT

In his younger days Bill ran for Labor Party endorsement for the State Seat of Petersham. Two selection ballots were held and in those days voters assembled in a hall and voted by way of a 'show of hands'. Colbourne won both ballots but they were overturned by the Executive of the day for either factional or personal reasons.

ESTABLISHMENT OF INSURANCE UNION

While working in the Insurance industry Bill was instrumental in the formation of the Industrial Life Assurance Agents' Union. At the time the Clerks' Union wanted to incorporate the Assurance Agents into their Union. However, Colbourne and other insurance workers were opposed to this move. The matter ended up before the courts with the workers having no funds to fight for their independence. Bill was told to approach an 'up and coming' barrister who may take on the case free of charge. When he approached the barrister Bill explained that they could not pay for his services but if he won the case it would enhance his reputation.

The barrister accepted the case and won independence for the Assurance Agents, resulting in the establishment of an autonomous Union. The barrister was Garfield Barwick. Undoubtedly Bill was grateful for the victory but subsequent events in Barwick's career would not have endeared him to Bill Colbourne.

LABOR WOMEN'S SUPPORT

Following three terms as NSW Party President, Bill Colbourne was elected NSW General Secretary in 1955. However he found it more difficult getting re-elected at the 1956 Conference at which the Left candidate was successful in his bid for President. Bill attributed his re-election in 1956, by a handful of votes, to Left-wing Labor women.

A close associate of Bill's, Gertie Melville, who was the President of Labor Women and prominent in the Left, had aligned herself with Federal Labor in the 1930's split. Gertie approached Bill and said "You're a naughty boy for running against our candidate, but I have to support you because you practically held this party together single-handedly in the 1930s." Subsequently Gertie mustered up enough support from Left-wing women to swing the vote in Colbourne's favour.

OPERA HOUSE ORIGINS

While Bill Colbourne and Assistant Secretary, Tony Mulverhill were discussing strategy and policy for the 1956 General Election, Bill stated "All the great cities of the world have an Opera House. Sydney is a great city so we should propose one." The rest is history.

Although members of the Arts and Entertainment industries had, in prior years, campaigned for an Opera House, Sydney's cultural elite would find it difficult to acknowledge that the decision to go ahead with what has become Australia's premier entertainment venue and a National Icon, had its origins in Room 32 of the Sydney Trades Hall.

CENSURED

The NSW Central Executive censured Bill Colbourne, by one vote, over his involvement in the 1959 Rockdale Preselection. Some Party members who were interested in the seat had not nominated, as it was assumed the sitting member, John McGrath, would recontest and be selected unopposed. However, when nominations closed only one from Brian Bannon was produced.

There was great speculation in the build up, that if censured, Colbourne would resign as General Secretary but when the censure motion was carried, Bill just said to the President/Chairman "Call the next business." Years later, when questioned about the incident, Bill said that at no time did he consider resigning because he had, in earlier times, survived much bigger 'donnybrooks'.

LISMORE SELECTION

Bill and Party President Fred Campbell travelled to Lismore to 'suss-out' the two party members who were favourites to contest the 1959 Lismore By-Election. While there Bill was approached by the local Catholic Bishop, Patrick Farrelly, who said "Don't support the Catholic. The person who can win this seat for Labor is Keith Compton."

Bill felt that Fred Campbell would more than likely support the opposite candidate of his choice, so on the way back from Lismore Bill told Fred he preferred the other candidate. As predicted, Fred said "I prefer Keith Compton" to which Bill replied, "Well Fred, have it your own way."

Ultimately, Compton was endorsed, won the By-Election and went on to retain the seat for a further term.

GOOD JUDGEMENT

Always a good judge of character, Bill Colbourne once 'set up' a Head Office staff member, who he suspected of dishonesty. Bill sent the employee on an errand to collect a donation of X amount of pounds. On return the employee said that the amount donated was more than anticipated. Bill then pointed out that the donation amounted to even more than the employee had handed over. No doubt, Colbourne had evidence of the actual amount donated, and the employee was dismissed.

COLBOURNE'S WIT

Bill was renowned for his wit which he often used to alleviate tension. One example was a quote at a State Conference which became 'Quote of the Week' in the *Herald*. During debate on the Central Executive report, the last speaker in opposition concluded by stating "The General Secretary of this Party is nothing but two faced." Bill then spoke in reply and commenced by saying "I'll have this conference know that the General Secretary is not two faced because if I was, I'd leave this one at home and bring the other one!"

FEDERAL PRESIDENT

Bill was elected Federal President for one term in 1961. The vote was tied and initially his opposing candidate was announced the winner. Bill's co-delegate, NSW President Charlie Oliver, then called to see the name drawn from the hat, together with the name left in the hat, and for them to be passed around. It was then discovered the opposing candidate's name was listed on *both* slips of paper. An uproar ensued following which a redraw was conducted and Colbourne was declared elected.

After the election, Oliver assured Colbourne that the second draw from the hat was legitimate but Bill later stated, "No-one will ever convince me they didn't put two 'Colbournes' in that hat the second time. He felt this would have occurred to appease his supporters in the hope word would not get out about the earlier 'rorted' draw.

BLAXLAND PRESELECTION

The controversy surrounding the 1969 Blaxland Preselection is well documented. However Bill Colbourne was overseas at the time of the Preselection and returned to the threat of Federal intervention into NSW. He approached the issue by obtaining information from friends in Victoria and Western Australia on recent 'dodgy' Federal selection ballots held in those states.

When the matter came before the ALP's Federal Executive, Bill stated that he would not oppose intervention into NSW provided a number of seats (which he named) in Victoria and WA were also investigated. Following this it was agreed by all that selection of Federal candidates was best left in the hands of individual State branches.

MOVE TO RE-ADMIT LANG

An attempt to readmit Jack Lang into the Labor Party was proposed at the 1970 State Conference. Before Bill spoke, the numbers in favour of readmission were reported to be 3 to 1. However, by the time Colbourne opposed the motion he had swung the vote *against* readmission by approximately 3 to 1. What irked Bill most was that he had to 'go in cold' as no one had alerted him to the proposal.

He pointed out to Conference that back in 1931 he heard, in the nick of time, that the Lang Labor MPs were going to cross the floor and vote against the Scullin Government. At Central Railway Station on their way to Canberra for the crucial sitting, Bill managed to catch up with 'Stabber' Jack Beasley and the other Lang Labor Members. He told the Conference "I pleaded with them not to 'rat' on the Government, and even ran down the platform calling out to them as the train moved out. They took no notice of me, they crossed the floor, putting a Federal Labor Government out of office, and now this Conference is considering inviting back into the Party the instigator of that move."

LANG'S RE-ENTRY

A similar motion for Lang's re-admission, proposed by Paul Keating and Tony Luchetti, was put to the 1971 State Conference. Bill was warned by President Charlie Oliver not to 'take them on' as they had 'sured up' the numbers. Bill however approached Keating and Luchetti requesting they support an amendment, which they initially rejected. This was until Colbourne reminded Luchetti that in 1936 just before the first merger of the two parties, Luchetti said he would never abandon Lang, however when terms of the merger included endorsement without Preselection to former Lang Labor candidates (which Luchetti had been) he had no hesitation in 'dumping' on Lang. Bill then explained that if his amendment was not accepted by the mover and seconder, he would expose Luchetti for his duplicity. Records show the amendment was accepted.

The amendment was simply that if Conference agreed to Lang's re-entry, it would only eventuate if he *applied* for readmission, like every other person who had been expelled from the ALP. Walking Out of the Town Hall at the next recess, a delegate called out to Bill, "They got their way this time, Bill", to which Bill replied "Oh yes, but they didn't get it all their own way."

CONCLUSION

- When nominated for ALP Life Membership in 1979 (the year of its introduction) Bill commented, "Had Life Membership been introduced in 1978 there would only have been about 4 of us left who would have been eligible. However, as it's now 40 years since the 1939 Unity Conference, most nominees have just managed to clock up sufficient continuity."
- Bill considered the highest honour bestowed on him by the Party was that of Federal President.
- Bill maintained his greatest ally and supporter throughout the turbulent 1950s and 1960s was Labor Council Secretary, Jim Kenny.
- Bill said one of the finest compliments he had ever received was from Premier Joe Cahill who introduced him to the guest of honour at a State Reception as "The person who runs the ALP."

Bill Colbourne died 'with his boots on' in 1979, at an ALP function in Broken Hill.

I remember all that he relayed to me with great affection but the statement that stands out in my mind is:

"Although workers may not always give a full eight hours, their labour is all they have to give, which far exceeds the contribution from those who just throw capital around."