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Of Cousins and others in the family



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Malcolm Turnbull is a stickler for truth, integrity and the Liberal way. We know this because he says so. The telling this week made for great election year theatre. Asked by reporters on Wednesday what he thought of the Sydney businessman Geoffrey Cousins' wondrous bucket of Tasmanian effluent all over him that morning, Turnbull responded with a fine sense of courtroom melodrama: "If I succumb to this sort of bullying political pressure, bullying business pressure ... I've been a businessman, I understand this world, and I've seen plenty of business bullies in my time [but] I am not a minister that will be bullied by anybody, let alone Mr Cousins ...

"What I'm doing is going about this job that I have, honestly, diligently, taking into account all the relevant considerations, seeking input from [the Government's] chief scientist, inviting submissions from the public, comments from the public, for the third time. This is a very transparent process, and for a wealthy businessman to say, 'I don't care about any of that, I'm just going to use my money to bully a minister into acting contrary to [the law]', that is highly improper ...

"Let me tell you, the people of Wentworth [Turnbull's highly marginal eastern suburbs electorate] expect their member, who is the Minister for the Environment, to act honestly, fearlessly, courageously and with integrity, and that's what I'm doing. I will not be bullied by Geoffrey Cousins. I will do my duty to the people of Australia, in accordance with the law."

Of course. Always.

Just like his Prime Minister.

However, what upset Turnbull most, as he made clear to John Howard by phone, was Cousins' declaration, on the front page of that morning's *Australian*, that the businessman "and others" would campaign in Wentworth against Turnbull's "total cop-out" in "fast-tracking" approval of the proposed \$2 billion pulp mill in Tasmania's Tamar Valley. Next day, just as shocking to Turnbull, the paper ran a front-page photo of a hugely smiling Cousins in Tasmania last weekend with Satan himself, the Greens' Bob Brown, a ferocious pulp mill opponent.

And, just as the righteous Turnbull had vowed he never buckled to bullies, so now Cousins was being quoted as saying that he, too, didn't respond to "intimidation". The Labor Party couldn't believe its luck. Kevin Rudd had been utterly spineless - with Peter Garrett his usual invisible self - in signing up with Howard to support the pulp mill proposal, but now two of Howard's closest political friends were publicly brawling over the issue.

Could it get any better?

Yes, it could. Nineteen years ago, in June 1988, Howard, as Opposition leader, and John Elliott, as Liberal Party president, had sat in the boardroom of Elders' Sydney offices listening for six hours to the sales pitch of some of the country's best and biggest image-makers.

When it was over they'd chosen George Patterson Advertising as the Liberals' new agency. Patterson's chairman at the time, and previous chief executive, was Geoffrey Cousins. The agency's blue-chip list of clients included BHP, Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd, and Elliott's Carlton and United Brewery. Now it had added the Liberal Party, Patterson's first plunge into political advertising.

It was not a happy one.

Though Howard and Cousins have remained firm friends - for years Cousins was a consultant to Howard as Prime Minister - Patterson's never got the chance to run a Howard election campaign.

By the time of the 1990 election, Andrew Peacock had regained the leadership by ousting Howard the previous May, and when Peacock quit after losing in 1990 for the second time to the Hawke government, Howard's colleagues preferred Peacock's shadow treasurer, John Hewson, as their new leader. Peacock still had the internal clout to make sure of it. But Hewson could do no better than lose the "unloseable" election in 1993 to a gung-ho Paul Keating and electoral fear of a GST.

That was Patterson's political swan song.

Two campaigns, two leaders, two losers. Cousins would ever after be remembered by the Liberal machine as the man who coined one of the great snooze election slogans, the 1990 "Liberal is the Answer". What voters wouldn't buy, specially in Howard's home state of NSW, was the question.

All these years later, when Howard was confronted on Wednesday about Cousins and Turnbull verbally whacking away at each other on such a delicate issue for the Government as the proposed pulp mill perhaps bugging the pristine Tamar Valley, with its vineyards and high-profile tourism, those early years were just old background.

Now, for the first time this chaotic election year, Howard was sitting on the fence. He told niggling

journalists: "Look, my view is that Mr Turnbull is an excellent minister and Mr Cousins is an excellent bloke. I don't have anything further to say."

Reporter: "Malcolm Turnbull said this morning the Government had made a mistake appointing Cousins to the Telstra board."

Howard: "Well, I haven't seen that, but in any event, Geoffrey's on the board and he's done a very good job and I think he's an excellent person and I think Malcolm's a great minister."

And that was that.

Here is a story with legs. The Gunns pulp mill has great resonance for environmentalists. So, too, the election outcome in Wentworth. Turnbull is in trouble. But if Howard has to get tough with somebody, you can be sure it will be Cousins, despite his years of friendship. Yesterday on radio the Prime Minister was still fence sitting.

Elsewhere, too, he was in trouble with friends.

The Exclusive Brethren sect gave massive financial and physical help to Howard's Government in the 2004 campaign. Howard does not advertise his occasional meetings with its senior people, but he won't abandon them, either. This election he desperately needs help wherever he can get it.

Yet this quite sinister group, whose clandestine support destroyed one New Zealand conservative party leader last year when it became public, owns and runs schools in all Australian states and is the beneficiary of large lumps of taxpayers' money under the Howard Government's contentious recurrent federal funding regime. The *Herald's* Michael Bachelard reported last December that funding to Exclusive Brethren schools totalled \$6.6 million last year. One school in Howard's own electorate of Bennelong got \$70,000.

After a meeting with Exclusive Brethren elders in his office last week became public, Howard told reporters this week: "I have met all sorts of people. I am the Prime Minister. The Exclusive Brethren is a legal, legitimate organisation. I meet them from time to time. As to matters relating to financial support, they're things you should talk to them about, or to the Liberal Party organisation. I don't handle, in a direct sense, any fund-raising matters.

"But I do not deny for a moment that I've met representatives of the Exclusive Brethren. And why not? They're Australian citizens. It's a lawful organisation. I find it quite astonishing that people think it's odd I meet representatives of a lawful organisation."

No you don't, Prime Minister. This Brethren mob can be such a nasty bunch, and you know it. Ask New Zealand's Prime Minister, Helen Clark.

Which brings us to Farmer Bill Heffernan, Howard's loyal Senate mate who can't stay out of trouble any more than he can resist the limelight. Last week, during a Senate debate on government legislation to legalise its enforced martial law in 70 remote Aboriginal settlements in the Northern Territory, Heffernan made one of his rare Senate speeches. At one point he said this, in supporting what the Government was doing:

"I will take the Senate on my journeys over the last year or two around the bush ... Last September I

went to Wadeye [near Darwin] and I could not believe it ... I went to Yuendumu [in Central Australia] and discovered within 20 minutes who was running the drugs at the school. I went to Mount Theo, which is the removal camp for the petrol sniffers. I discovered that one of the key managers was having sex with all the kids.

"When I came back to Canberra, I rang the policeman at Yuendumu and said I had been there for a day and described all these dreadful bloody things that were going on there. I said, 'What are you going to do about it?' He said, 'I just want to get out of here, Senator'."

Next day the Yuendumu community complained bitterly. Heffernan, it said, had not been to Yuendumu since 2001. He had never raised the issues with anyone. His accusations were false. "We are distressed the senator could make such damning, unsubstantiated comments under parliamentary privilege," six people who run the Mount Theo-Yuendumu program said in a statement. "The accusations are even more offensive in light of the fact that on Thursday, August 16, Mount Theo's three founders will receive Order of Australia medals for their work with young petrol sniffers ...

"False accusations of such an inflammatory nature cast an undeserved cloud over 13 years of extraordinary community commitment to young Waripiri people. Mount Theo calls for an apology from Senator Heffernan."

Northern Territory police announced in Darwin this week they wanted to talk to Heffernan about his claims. They knew nothing of them, they said.

John Howard and his friends.

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