



The half-time turning point

Soon after returning from Europe, I was confronted by the stark truth that I qualified as a bastard. The news hit me like a sledgehammer blow to the balls! But as with most things in life, what seemed at first like a debilitating below-the-belt delivery, began to wane in significance with time. There were other things to worry about, such as clawing back the life I had known before leaving those antipodean shores.

By the time of home-coming I had reached my mid-twenties: a long-haired individual with dark sideburns, *Groucho-style* moustache and rust-coloured flares, humming along to *Imagine*, and fascinated by the *Hare Krishna* band that trawled the streets of Adelaide, with their shaven heads and tambourines (perhaps a pointer to my future). But despite the hippie-ish exterior, the inner me remained decidedly influenced by conservative values, whether in family or workplace mode. Then, as my thirties crept over the horizon, it slowly began to dawn that somewhere buried deep down, was a different set of values, to discover and to out!

Many people of course change direction during their thirties: they jump to a different lane on the highway ... even another highway altogether. Halfway there in life, is not unlike half-time at a football match, with a pressing need to re-organise your game and put on a better display for the second part. In life, the number 30 *can* loom as the forward scout: the mid-term alarm bell. In my case this was undoubtedly true; until the thirties I had lived to a large degree, within a protected cocoon of conservative mumbo jumbo. It was at that stage when I became aware of the need to break out of the mold: to change persona; stand by hidden beliefs and spread my wings.

Perhaps *protected* is not the most accurate description. Stultified by my inner circle would be more correct. I look back in horror when I recall that for a while, I admired the likes of Malcolm Fraser in Australia and Margaret Thatcher in Britain. It was Labor leader Gough Whitlam's overthrow in 1975, that started the first stones tumbling, to form an eventual avalanche. Only then, did I begin to grasp the inequities involved, and that I needed to do something to address my very own white man's privilege.

A few years before this, the *White Australia Policy* had begun to niggle at my mind. I remember thinking: "*Why should people be barred, just because their skin is not the same colour as mine?*" To make things worse, I learnt this policy had existed in various forms for more than 50 years! Then when the gin-swilling Queen's representative, Sir John Kerr, threw out Whitlam, my bulwark of home-grown, one-dimensional thinking, was finally breached. But though I admired *Gough* – both physically and intellectually a giant of a man - I was even more enamoured by his left-hand sidekick, Doctor Jim Cairns: at heart an academic, who after being knocked of his exalted perch, took to a soapbox in downtown Canberra. Quite contrary to his boss, Cairns had a tramp-like, alternatively small look about him; but he spoke like an inspired prophet (albeit with a rasping Aussie twang). What he said and wrote, under such titles as *Growth to Freedom*, began to make good sense to my slowly budding conscience. Looking back, this period was a watershed, steering me towards the left side of the pitch.

Yet for a number of years my comfort cocoon remained reasonably intact: jostled and disturbed perhaps, but none-the-less still in place. In the late 1970s for example, I recall hanging on Thatcher's words; thinking of her as an enlightened spirit on track to transform the world. How wrong I was. Years later, in retrospect, I felt slightly less guilty after reading she had a similar effect on much more acclaimed minds, who should have also known better. The late Christopher Hitchens for example - one of my undoubted heroes - tells of how he became mesmerised by the lady, when in her presence.

At the time, my thinking steadily evolved to the point where the mid-thirties brought a much more dramatic shift. This came about in two forms: firstly, a strangely restrained separation from my first wife, and secondly a move to de-list myself from employment in the private sector. These were each quite momentous steps, which in real terms meant

no family and much-reduced income: not quite on the streets, but heading that way! Like a rabbit caught in the headlights, I was blinded and unable to justify my actions; my partner was a delightful person, while the job was fulfilling and paid well. Separation at the personal level was by no means easy, involving a loving relationship - lasting for more than a decade - with many memories at home and abroad and the birth of my first-born child. In hindsight, I must admit it was totally self-inflicted, and to some degree quite self-centred. I should have found a better way.

In terms of the workplace and in a professional sense, it was also quite a seismic shift, marking the end of a career in agriculture, which had spanned almost two decades. The move terminated my links to the Australian farming scene and signalled the end of many close relationships with colleagues and friends in that field. Again, there was some degree of guilt buried along with my friendships; I had turned my back on people I knew so well, in the name of ideology, and in most cases I never even glanced over my shoulder, to atone for something which (like the separation from my partner) I am sure they did not deserve.

Like throwing logs on the campfire, all this happened in parallel with a return to studies and finding a new, loving relationship; both of the incoming branches proving complimentary to my overall re-direction. The university course I singled out, focused on development issues and north-south perspectives, while my new partner was motivated by much of the same, having just returned from ground-level travels in South East Asia. The way it all came together was at the time remarkably inspiring.

Through this transformational period my destiny was guided by an assortment of influential mentors, mostly but not all male. From boyhood through to the later years, a fascination with flamboyant male characters has been one of my distinct personality traits. This is not in any way a sexual attraction; they and I would each recoil in horror and dismay at such a proposition! No, from my side it is something to do with being drawn to those who don't conform to the norm: often, but not always, oddballs, such as Tom the *airborne* boss from my first real job, or Harold my mechanical friend and ex WW2 pilot, well known for his colourful phrases. Both were role models of what not-to-do, as well as what to-do, which I think intrigued and pulled me towards them. I could

liken it to being fascinated by chameleons: creatures with special charms, but with disguised and slightly darker qualities, lurking beneath the surface.

I guess, if I had to admit it, I was indeed intrigued by the hidden side – the dark side of their moons - and the fact that I was sometimes pulled into their web as an accomplice; organizing one-off dalliances for Tom or hiding *hot* TVs for Harold: that fascinated me. They each came with a flamboyance and devil-may-care attitude, with non-conformist, at times objectional views, toward life ... and they both drank too much. I was drawn to them, in much the same way I was attracted to *Christopher Hitchens*, who though highly intellectual, exhibited similar traits to Tom and Harold, in his role as multi-media star, and in so doing, managed to offend half the population.

Hitchen's famous line: "*If I'd known I was going to live so long I would have taken better care of myself,*" could have applied equally well to either Harold or Tom.

I guess these somewhat eccentric beings appealed to me as the personality I would like to inhabit if I hadn't been so shackled by the normalcy of home and work routines, which also sounds like a cop-out and a good excuse for not proclaiming a similarly strident approach to life, as they had done. Maybe in the secrecy of my own soul I even thought that I mirrored these oddballs of the human species and could spar with them on an equal footing. In that thought I was decidedly wrong; these characters were extroverts who oozed charisma, drunk or sober, where in contrast - and for the times when I was out of their environs - I was inclined towards hiding my light under the proverbial bushel. The truth could be that I simply enjoyed being in their vicinity: basking in their resplendent and even at times reflected glory.

Through those early years in Australia there were a couple of other male mentors - Albert and Ian - that I identified with, each of them being my superior, one at CSIRO (the leading Australian Government scientific research body), the other in private industry. In fact, I progressed in work mode from Tom, to Albert, to Ian, whilst Harold hovered around in the ether, well-known as a unique individual to all of them.

When I think about all this interchange between four remarkably diverse individuals, each dedicated in his own way to his work, I can truthfully say I was the conduit that

brought them together. They were on independent branches of their life's tree, but through me they connected to new branches, and I was well aware that other connections followed (as they always do) along those fresh branches. This was something I noticed throughout my life, that often I acted as the connector between colleagues and friends who were progressing along parallel branches.

Now with hindsight, I am able to see that I developed these match-making skills during my time in agriculture, but it was later in life – after I myself had jumped to a different branch during my thirties (and away from my four mentors) when this particular skill came even more to the fore, both within and between countries and continents. When I look back over the years, I can testify to a formidable number of academics, teachers, students, administrators, and many others, all meeting each other – and I say this in a humble way – with myself as the instigator: the go-between. And it happened, in part, because I never turned away a contact. I always held on to the philosophy: *'You never know, something might come out of this.'* Even if I was crap at everything else on the table, I proved outstanding at bringing people together!

Through all this time on my *life's tree* I was uniquely bound to Australia. Just prior to mid-twenties I had spent 18 months in the UK and Europe; then later, as my clock rolled past mid-thirties, I was re-invigorated to resume travels to the northern hemisphere (which has continued to the present day). Looking back to this twelve-year period – my longest single span in Australia – I feel it helped me develop a new set of values, but then on the negative side, it prevented my reaching and knowing my biological father in Scotland: something - seen now from the *Brunclie* viewpoint - I will always regret.

I can now see my late 20s through to late 30s as being more transformational than any other period in my life; not only the time when I gained a new partner and a new type of work, in addition it provided the space to discover new ways of thinking and new perspectives, that incorporated and empathized with ideals related to equality and equity. For me it was a seismic fracture with my previous world and caused me to leap to a totally different branch on my tree of life.

In the finale of this period, I had risen to heights I could have only dreamt of when I first landed on Australia's shores less than two decades before. I had reached the point

where I graduated to work alongside my old boss Tom, in his fledgling farm management business: a bit like a young doctor or lawyer being taken on board as a junior partner in an esteemed practice. It was quite a compliment, and promised to be a move that would carry me forward to greater things. As a result, and perhaps not unexpectedly, my first real mentor in this *land of opportunity* was devastated, when after a couple of years, I announced my imminent exit. He was unable to understand why, after so many years wedded to agriculture, I wanted to leave such a promising career - and by doing so, also leave him high and dry - after he had singled me out from a line of interns, then nurtured and finally anointed me as his partner. I was overwhelmed with guilt at letting Tom down, as well as a host of farmers who had become close friends, and other colleagues, in the world that I knew back then.

But by that stage I was ready and wanted to move on. When I first knew Australia it was such an eye-opener; I was mesmerized by the open spaces and my lofty ambitions. The first time I left the country, after eight years in residence, was to rubber stamp the blueprint of young Aussies doing the ritual trip – their *gap* year - back to the motherland: the mandatory coming of age custom, but always with Australia fixed firmly as the base. I had become one of them, with my home in the South and periodic forays to the North.

But this time, a decade after returning from those European travels back to my southerly base, my point of view had swung around 180 degrees, to see – in my (perhaps distorted) mind's eye - the island continent for what it was: an island a long way from anywhere ... an outpost on the way to antarctica! Now, it started to feel as if I had placed myself too far from the centre of the action; and that placement seemed to grow further and further away with the passing of each year. Spurred on by my new partner - a historian who had just spent two years in England and wanted to return to rekindle the flame - we both sought avidly to resume the connection, before the line was unplugged, and it all became too late.

From that point on I focused on goals which included academic studies, overseas travels and broadening my horizons beyond Australia. I wanted to bridge across to different perspectives that weren't white, and in so doing, contribute in some small way to reducing inequality. Grand ideals perhaps, which might be hard to meet.

These objectives came together when I travelled to India for the first time. The main agenda was to complete a mini-thesis which focused on an *Oxfam*-supported project in western *Maharashtra*. In practice the six-week journey was an exotic adventure from beginning to end, opening a whole vista of new perspectives on life as I knew it. It also marked the start of a lifelong love affair with the wonder that is India.

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