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ENTER "THE LITTLE DIGGER"

The roaring nineties produced many memorable politicians, but none more colourful than William Morris "Billy" Hughes (also known as "the Little Digger"). Hughes was to remain a key figure in Australian politics for more than half a century. His description of the way he was originally preselected for the safe Labor seat of Lang in 1894 is worth quoting at length.

In due course the night fixed for the selection came round. There was a full house and all the candidates were lined up on the stage. The chairman, a Liverpool Irishman named MacDermott, who in private life was a coal-lumper, solemnly outlined the procedure, which to my ears bore a terrifying likeness to that which greeted the ears of the early Christians as they were being thrown to the lions. Each candidate was to address the meeting for fifteen minutes, and at the close of the speeches a ballot on the preferential system would be taken. The candidates were to speak in alphabetical order. The publican took the floor first. His name began, most appropriately, with a B.

He was greeted with tumultuous cheers, which he had thoroughly earned, for he had kept `open house' for some weeks past. Encouraged by his reception, he started off in great style, but as he knew rather less than Tutankhamen about the Labour movement he ran out of ammunition in less than five minutes and subsided in a splutter of moist excitement. When the other four floundered in his train, I began to understand why my intrusion had so disturbed. They knew nothing whatever of the Labour platform, whilst I was one of those who had helped to draft it. The five took rather less than half an hour to say all they knew or could think of. I spoke for a full fifteen minutes, which in itself produced a distinct impression. Then came the ballot, which lasted till after midnight. No one had a majority on the first count and efforts to allot the preference votes were frantic but futile.The preferential system was new to my prospective constituents, who were completely baffled by its diabolical subtleties. Motions for a recount were repeatedly moved, and the results, which were entirely inconclusive, were greeted with howls of rage and derision. As a last resort it was decided that only one of the candidates should fall out. Happily I just missed being at the bottom of the poll; I was still in the running, but only just in.

The entertainment ran for three successive nights, feeling rising higher at each performance, which invariably ended in wild confusion. One man fell out each night, but I still kept my place, gathering my strength daily from the supporters of the defeated aspirants - for as each of these took the count, the great bulk of his followers, bitterly resenting their champion's downfall, came over in a body to my standard. When the fateful night fixed for the final ballot came round the odds were only very slightly in favour of my opponent.

An hour or more before the proceedings began the neighbourhood of the Mission Church - which both

parties had chosen as a fitting temple for a contest in which, after a desperate struggle, right was to emerge, perhaps bleeding, but certainly triumphant - was a stirring sight. Large and desperately earnest men came hurrying towards it from every point of the compass. Not all were electors, for the news of these historic preliminary ballots had sounded like a trumpet call in the ears of many enthusiastic lovers of liberty in the remoter parts of West Sydney. Every moment the crowd grew in numbers and animation. And because they were not only lovers of liberty, but men who sniffed the promise of battle joyously, they hoped that those who officiated at this historic ballot would not prove themselves dogs in the manger by declaring the aftermath to be a private fight, but would throw the portals wide open and bid all the world join in. Buoyed up by this pious hope, they had raced through their evening meal, leaving about their mouths and on their chins and moustaches traces of eggs and dubious gravies, and suggestions of crumbs. And some of them, fresh from their work on the wharves, had their wool hooks stuck in their belts.

The place was packed at seven o'clock, when MacDermott - his hair cropped close, his great moustache yellow and curved like that of an ancient Viking - took the chair and called the assemblage to order in a voice that could be heard blocks away. There was an air of intense excitement; every man felt in his bones that he was going to have his money's worth - and perhaps something over. Mac's opening remarks were keyed to the right pitch. He said there had been a lot of sparring and scrim-shanking going on. He didn't hold with these preferential votes - no one could make head or tail of them. Anyhow, they'd done with the damn thing now, and when they went out of the hall that night the Lang division would have elected its candidate (deafening applause). Mac went on to say, `Gentlemen, we're going to have everything fair and above board' - terrific applause. Only electors of the Lang division could vote, and in order to make sure that none others did, Mac looked round and observed in a casual way `I notice a lot of our friends from the Rocks and Pyrmont here. We're glad to see them, but they can't vote, because'- and here Mac smiled broadly -`every elector must produce his "electric right".' (Loud, but not extravagantly loud, cheers.) `Each candidate', Mac went on, `has the right to appoint two scrutineers.'. This seemed to me quite inadequate, but making the best of a bad job I chose the two biggest of lily supporters. I noted with some satisfaction that they both carried wool hooks. If I went down I felt reasonably sure that I should not be unavenged.

And then the votings began. I shall not forget that night in a hurry. I have never found life dull; I like life, bustle, movement, and I thrive on excitement; but, after all, one can have too much of a good thing. From the word go the electors of the Lang division made it willing - they poured into the little Mission Church like flood waters rushing down a mountain gorge. They wanted not the spur of compulsory voting. The trouble was not to get them to vote, but to induce them to leave off. They were so desperately in earnest that it was only by unwearying vigilance backed by force majeure that they were prevented from voting again and again. They would go out, refresh themselves with beer, rearrange their hats, turn up the collars of their coats, and jauntily re-enter and once more endeavour to record their vote. Baulked in one direction they tried another. Since they could not vote twice on the same `electric right'- or vote at all unless they had one - they immediately set out in search of loose or unattended rights. Some sneaked furtively into their homes and lifted the old man's right while he was at tea. The tedium of those stretched in beds of sickness was relieved by numerous callers, who, oozing sympathy at every pore, sought to coax from the invalid `the loan of your electric right'. And many a man dead these six months and more put in his little vote that night through the hand of one who had not forgotten him, or where his elector's right was to be found.

At nine o'clock MacDermott announced in thunderous tones that the ballot had closed, and that the result would be declared as soon as possible. The narrow street was crowded, an air of suppressed excitement prevailed. I waited near the door, trying to give a lifelike imitation of a man serenely confident of victory. I indulged in airy persiflage with some of my friends who had come down to the war zone to see how things were going. What we talked about I do not know. Words just dropped out of my mouth mechanically. I was waiting for the verdict, straining my ears to catch the first murmurs that meant that the numbers were up. But, for what seemed to me an eternity, an ominous silence remained unbroken. Then, suddenly, the end came! The crowd, which had been unnaturally quiet, sprang into life. A roar burst upon my ears. `What is it?' I asked. `Run for your life,' said one of my friends, `you have been selected.'

There was something about his words, and particularly about the way he said them, that spurred me to instant action. While the words still hung upon the air I was racing across Kent Street, then up Bathurst Street I tore at full speed, and, turning into Clarence Street, came in less than thirty seconds to the police station, unto which I rushed as if pursued by Chicago gunmen.

“Hullo!” said the sergeant, who had been peacefully reading the evening paper, “What's the matter?”
“There's trouble, sergeant, down in the Mission Church,” I said breathlessly.
“Trouble?” repeated the sergeant, eyeing me curiously. “What sort of trouble?”
This was some question because when one looked at the thing calmly, I was the trouble. But as it was of no use trying to go into a long, laboured explanation, I said shortly, “They're fighting.”
“Fighting, are they?” said the sergeant. “All right, I'll send a man down.”
“One man's no good, sergeant,” I said.
“Oh,” said the sergeant, “it's that kind of a fight, is it?”
“It is,” I replied earnestly.
“Very well! I'll send down a couple of men.”
“Thank you!” I said, and then raced back to the hall again without loss of a moment.

As I entered a mighty roar shook the building, which again reminded me of the hungry lions impatiently awaiting the arrival of another Christian. Somehow I managed to fight my way to the pulpit around which a knot of my staunchest supporters were gathered. One of these, Ringer Byrnes, summed up the situation in a nutshell, “They've got the numbers,” he whispered hoarsely, “but we've sent out scouts, and our mob'll be here in a few minutes.” I quite understood, and with an injunction to Ringer not to let them get me from the side - the hall was shaped like an L - I stepped into the pulpit and turned to face the crowd, which howled savagely, and seemed on the point of rushing the pulpit in order to tear me limb from limb. As far as I could judge, we were outnumbered by at least two to one. Things looked very ugly. Our only chance was to stall off an immediate rush in order to give our reinforcements time to get up.

Taking advantage of a momentary lull, I held up my hand. “Gentlemen,” said I, in my best Chesterfieldian manner. I got no further. To be defeated when they had counted so confidently on victory was bad enough, but to be addressed in this fashion was not to be borne. They gibbered with fury; they covered me with abuse. My band of supporters gathered more closely around; those who had wool hooks grasped them firmly. As for me, my eyes never left the doorway, through which the reinforcements were trickling in. I noted with satisfaction that the two constables had arrived. Pandemonium reigned for some minutes. Again and again I attempted to speak, but in vain. Every time I opened my mouth the crowd howled with

fury. I stood there, apparently impassive, but with my eyes glued on the doorway through which a steady stream of men was coming. At this rate the tables would soon be turned. The back of the hall was now densely packed with my supporters.

At last, Ringer leaned over to me and shouted, “We’ve got “em”, and surging forward, closely followed by his band, he made his way towards the most turbulent of the crowd, shouting madly, “Three cheers for Billy Hughes!” And that was the end of the famous ballot for the Lang division, which had lasted for many nights, and at length resulted in this glorious triumph for the cause of right.

All this happened many years ago, but once bit twice shy. One such ballot was more than enough for me, and from that day to this I have never had another.

Hughes, Crusts and Crusades (1947), pp. 112 ff: An extract from “POLITICAL ANECDOTES”, by Mungo MacCallum, ISBN 1 876631 74 0