

**THE AUSTRALIAN** 🇺🇸

## **All in the family: Nationals still moving with times**



LARRY ANTHONY

---



Cartoon: Eric Lobbecke

12:00AM MARCH 13, 2020

One hundred years is an amazing record and what better way to tell the story of the Nationals than through the eyes of one family that has been involved from the start, the Anthonys.

My family's parliamentary representation spans 56 years, but our party connections are much older. I want to take you back to some of the great moments of our history and the characters of those times.

Our party's history was shaped during and after the Great War. My grandfather, Hubert Lawrence Anthony, was 18 years old and recovering from war wounds received in Gallipoli when he was visited by prime minister Billy Hughes in London. This left a lasting impression, and was to plant the seeds of his political ambition.

HL Anthony was elected to parliament as the member for Richmond, NSW, in October 1937 and entered the ministry in 1940.

His wife, my father Doug's mother, died unexpectedly in 1941 when Doug was 12. The boy was sent to boarding school and spent many school holidays living with his father at the Kurrajong Hotel in Canberra and with the run of Parliament House.

"That was my playground — the parliament," he'd tell us. "I used to rollerskate around the lower floors of Parliament House and could virtually go anywhere in the building ... I could go up to the prime minister's office, where I knew the staff, many of them living in the Kurrajong Hotel."

It was a handy grounding. In 1957, my father was elected to the seat of Richmond at the age of 27, following the death of his father.

When Liberal Party founder Robert Menzies retired in January 1966, Harold Holt took over as prime minister. Disaster struck that December, as Doug, possibly one of the last ministers to have a meeting with Holt, clearly recalls.

"I can remember the occasion very clearly. I was having a BBQ at my neighbours' on a Sunday afternoon and suddenly a policeman turned up at the front door and said: 'Ring John McEwen immediately.' I rang him, and he said: 'I have to tell you that Harold Holt has disappeared, and I am now prime minister. Come to Canberra immediately, there is a plane on the way.' "

Doug was back in Canberra in a few hours and spent time that night with McEwen in his hotel room. "We talked about all the consequences of the loss of the prime minister. Our main concern was who was going to be his successor. There was no way McEwen was going to tolerate Bill McMahon nor Paul Hasluck, highly intelligent but he had been behaving a bit peculiarly and stupidly in some recent cabinet meetings. The only one that seemed likely was John Gorton, but he was in the Senate."

About 11pm, Doug was sent to Gorton's home. He knocked. A light came on and there was Gorton in pyjamas. Dad said: "John, I want to talk with you."

In a not-so-dissimilar way, this was to repeat itself in November 1970, when Black Jack McEwen lifted his veto on McMahon, enabling him to take over from Gorton after a leadership spill in March 1971.

My father, who succeeded McEwen as leader in February 1971, was, like McEwen, distrustful of McMahon, describing him as "treacherous and disloyal". With some justification: in the 1972 election, McMahon refused to tell my father when the election would be held, and Dad had to use his own detective work to find out.

Of course, Gough Whitlam won with the It's Time campaign. The Liberals had a wipe-out, but the Country Party held all 20 lower house seats.

The Whitlam years were tough as the nation plunged deeper into financial crises between 1972 and 1975. But the Country Party's cunning manoeuvring — Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's appointment of Albert Field to fill a casual Senate vacancy, and the party's unwavering support for blocking supply, something that Malcolm Fraser described as "critically important" — helped ensure the 1975 election.

Some may say these were the halcyon days of the Country Party, with Doug Anthony, Ian Sinclair, Peter Nixon and the likes of Ralph Hunt at the helm of government, and John Howard as the young treasurer.

But there were huge difficulties. Britain abandoned Australia and joined the European Economic Community, leaving our trading market stranded, an act McEwen and Doug saw as unforgivable. I witnessed much of this as a boy growing up in a political family and had a window into its complexities, going backwards and forwards from our family home in Murwillumbah on the Tweed River to Canberra.

During Doug's period as deputy prime minister, he would come home to our Canberra house and crash on the couch for a 15-minute snooze during the parliamentary dinner break. He would often bring home his top-secret briefcase, which would be left open, sprawled on the floor. Being a curious lad, I would often read from it. Thank god there was no internet, otherwise I could be joining Julian Assange.

Another novel moment was seeing Doug run the nation from a beachside caravan and his refusal to have a phone. This drove Fraser crazy. The choice was between fishing and talking to Malcolm — fishing always won.

Then came another disastrous drought, fires and the 1983 election that saw Bob Hawke installed as prime minister. They were difficult opposition years, containing the Joh for Canberra campaign in 1987 and simultaneous spills against Howard and Sinclair in 1989. Charles Blunt became the new National Party leader.

I was given the opportunity of running for Richmond when Blunt was defeated in 1990. But it was not until 1996 that I became the third Anthony to represent the seat.

When the Coalition was returned to office in March 1996, it was a further case of history repeating itself. The government of Howard, Tim Fischer, John Anderson, John Sharp and Mark Vaile had to do substantial budget repair after Paul Keating's recession we had to have.

Repairing debt, introducing reform to the waterfront, taxation and strong border policies served as the hallmark of those years from 1996 to 2007. That era ended with the election of Kevin Rudd's government in November 2007.

But one could argue that the Nationals played a key role in removing opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull in 2009 on climate change policy, and again in 2018 as prime minister on the same policy.

Once again, we are dealing with drought, fires and floods, and the new challenge of coronavirus. But Britain has left the EU — it's back to the future — with new markets opening up for Australia.

Let's hope history similarly repeats itself in another 100 years, with us still thriving as an independent party in an independent, sovereign nation — and our detractors still predicting our demise.

*Larry Anthony is the president of the Nationals. These are edited extracts from his keynote speech in Melbourne on Friday night to mark the party's centenary.*