

As a scandal over expenses threatens to dethrone the speaker of the house, a litany of prior missteps highlights self-belief run amok. By *David Leser*.

# Bishop's gambit



On May 31, 1994, Bronwyn Bishop delivered her maiden speech in the house of representatives.

The speech was remarkable for a few reasons, both then and now. First, because after two decades of political ambition – beginning with her unsuccessful tilt in 1974 for the seat of retiring NSW premier Robert Askin – Bishop was finally in the chamber where national governments were formed.

Second, because after 14 months of actively undermining John Hewson's leadership – and indeed helping to mortally wound him – she was no longer a contender for the job that might have delivered her the prize she'd always coveted.

"I am definitely going to be the first Australian woman prime minister," she had told nonplussed friends in 1955, at the age of 13.

Alexander Downer had won the Liberal leadership ballot a week earlier and the new member for Mackellar had withdrawn from leadership consideration owing to lack of support among colleagues.

Her extraordinary rise from virtual obscurity in the polls to the country's preferred leader over the previous two years had come to a screaming halt two months earlier at the Mackellar byelection where – thanks to independent candidate and local writer Bob Ellis – she'd suffered a 4.36 per cent swing against her on primary votes.

But there she was in the house of representatives in the late autumn of 1994 – seven years after becoming the first Liberal Party woman from NSW to be elected to the senate, nine years after becoming the first female president of the NSW party, 13 years after being elected the first female chairman of the state convention. It was a stunning testament to her undoubted intelligence, self-belief and tenacity.

Between 1974 and 1987 Bishop had made seven separate attempts to enter state or federal parliament, and when all but the last of these had failed she had poured her superhuman energy into the organisational wing of the party.

But her emergence as a political force also coincided with a factional war inside the NSW division – a war to which she was central.

Although she has always denied it, she relied heavily on the support of the ultra-right wing of the party, the so-called "Uglies". This, together with her personal style, saw Fahey government police minister Ted Pickering describe her as "the unacceptable face of the Liberal Party".

John Hannaford, the former NSW attorney-general, went further. "In my 25 years in the party," he said at the time, "I have never come across somebody so

Bronwyn Bishop at a news conference last weekend.

prepared to use numbers and use people as Bishop. There was always antipathy between the [progressive] Group and the Uglies – but ... they [the Uglies] were people who were working for an interest or an ideal and you could respect them for that. There's a big difference, however, between acting for self-interest and acting for the interests of an ideal."

Bishop was loathed by the party's moderates, not just because of her alleged preparedness to do business with people accused of branch stacking, character assassination, racism and anti-Semitism, but because of how her personal ambitions were seen to trump party unity.

Both her state director, Graeme Starr, and his successor, Peter Kidman, saw Bishop's constant barnstorming of branch meetings around the state as a thinly disguised attempt at wooing preselectors for her 1987 senate bid. They saw it as a breach of convention.

The state president was meant to provide a sense of harmony, and yet her ability to stir up the pocket branches on issues such as the monarchy, flag and family values ensured a level of hostility and division that the organisational wing had never experienced.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest – as John Hannaford did – that Bishop was not "acting for the interests of an ideal". She did have ideals. And this was the third remarkable aspect of her maiden speech in 1994 – that, unbeknown to anyone at the time, she had decided to borrow heavily for her speech from the pages of one of the most bizarre political tracts ever written in Australia.

The book was called *Egoessentialism* and its author, Bedrich (Rick) Kabriel, was a Czech-born migrant who had arrived in Australia in the 1950s to set up Fontana Films, a film studio and production company in Sydney's inner south-west.

It was there in the grounds of Fontana Films in the mid-1980s that Kabriel's friend, Lyenko Urbanchich, established his Liberty Research office – a consultancy firm for right-wing organisations.

Urbanchich was the most controversial figure within the Uglies, a man who the Yugoslav War Crimes Commission had dubbed "Little Goebbels" for his role as a fanatical propagandist for the Slovenian puppet regime during World War II. Urbanchich always denied the allegations.

Urbanchich and Kabriel saw eye to eye on a range of issues – both were virulently anti-communism and fanatically pro free enterprise, and both were active on the fringes of the Liberal Party, although Urbanchich had become

president of the Five Dock branch of the Liberal Party in 1974.

Bishop shared – without attribution – Kabriel's thoughts in her maiden speech. She told the House that the remedies employed by the Labor "collectivist" government were based on two assumptions:

"... first, that the Australian people will accept a further restriction of their liberties in order that negative trends might be averted; and, second, that every solution requires an increase in the centralisation of power and more control of government."

On page two of *Egoessentialism*, Kabriel wrote: "Every major remedy is based on the assumption that (1) people will accept a restriction on their liberties in order that the trend might be averted and that (2) every solution requires the increase of centralised control and government."

Bishop then said: "The continuous rise in tax of every sort imaginable, government plans and controls restrict individual decision making. All result in the inability of small, new enterprises to establish themselves."

Again on page two of his manifesto, Kabriel writes: "The continuous rise in tax of every sort imaginable, the various plans and controls which restrict individual decision ... all result in the inability of small, new enterprises establishing themselves."

Kabriel divided the world between "egoessential" societies and "egoregressive" ones. Those who believed in the primacy of the individual were "egoessentials". Those who believed in collectives were "egoregressives".

As a man known to defend white South Africa, murmur against racial co-existence and political compromise, and conceive the world in terms of "egoessential" lovers of freedom and "egoregressive" enemies, he was a curious choice from which to draw inspiration. Unless he was a political mentor. Which he was.

The focus is now, of course, not on Bishop's ultra-conservative politics, but rather the very serious allegation of inappropriately claiming entitlements – namely, chartering a helicopter at taxpayer expense to attend a party fundraiser.

Bishop's sense of entitlement around money has long caused consternation among her colleagues. There was the question of travel expenses, but there was also the question of fundraising activities.

Four months before the 1990 federal election, the state executive of the NSW Liberal Party ordered Bishop to stop going

outside the organisation to raise funds for her senate re-election campaign.

The intervention followed a cocktail party in which Bishop reportedly received pledges of up to \$5000 a head, money she wanted to put into a private bank account for use as she saw fit.

This breached party conditions that said neither members of parliament nor candidates could accept money on the party's behalf for their own campaigning.

As former party director Peter Kidman told me in 1994: "No one in modern political history could have been more aware of the fundraising guidelines than Bronwyn because it was unfortunately during her reign as president that the issue came to such a head."

Two months after her maiden speech, Bishop was in trouble again over another alleged breach of funding guidelines. During her last months in the senate, and following her move to the lower house and appointment as shadow minister for health under Downer, Bishop had employed a researcher whose wages were being paid by Rodney Adler's FAI Insurance.

The donation of the staffer only became public because she was required to declare "gifts" in the register of members' interests. She listed the gift as an "additional staff facility", a nondescript term the then Australian Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot said could have meant a fax machine.

Bishop was forced to sack the employee after it was pointed out to her by the party's then federal director, Andrew Robb, that the appointment breached the party's rules on fundraising. She later re-employed the staffer.

Bishop claimed she was unaware of the fundraising code, despite the memorandum on fundraising having been issued to all state divisions as far back as 1985, while she was NSW president. The memorandum specifically proscribed the very thing Bishop had done in accepting the FAI donation.

In the twilight of her career Bronwyn Bishop is now in the eye of a hurricane. For 35 years her narrow conservatism, combined with her personal ambition, sense of privilege and capacity to polarise, have infuriated many of her colleagues, although obviously not her prime minister.

Despite her considerable successes and, at one time, her almost rock-star appeal across the country, she has often seemed to ignore the old maxim about being nice to people on the way up because you're going to meet them on the way down.

There are legions waiting for her to fall. ●



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