

"IN THE BUSH WITH BALLOTS, BOXES AND COUNTRYMEN"

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An interesting insight into the work of a member of parliament in a highly individual electorate showing that no matter how electorates differ some things are common to most electorates.

I WAS ELECTED TO THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY AS THE MEMBER FOR NHULUNBUY ON THE 27TH OCTOBER 1990 FOLLOWING THE RETIREMENT OF THE FORMER MEMBER MR DAN LEO WHO HAD HELD THE SEAT FOR TEN YEARS.

HAVING BEEN THE CANDIDATE FOR 18 MONTHS I HAD USED THE TIME TO GET TO KNOW THE PEOPLE OF THE BUSH COMMUNITIES OF GALIWIN'KU ON ELCHO ISLAND, GAPUWIYAK, YIRRKALA AND THE MYRIAD OF SMALL HOMELANDS IN BETWEEN.

OFTEN THIS INVOLVED SINGLE AIR CHARTERS, CESSNA 172'S, VERY SMALL, VERY LIGHT AND LIABLE TO BE BELTED AROUND BY EVEN SLIGHT STORMS.

RETURNING FROM ELCHO ISLAND LATE ONE AFTERNOON WE SCRAMBLED TO GET AWAY WITH STORMS THREATENING TO CLOSE THE STRIP.

THE PILOT STAYED AS LOW AS POSSIBLE TO KEEP CLEAR OF THE MASSES OF CLOUDS PILING UP ABOVE US AND ALL AROUND, AND I REMEMBER THE WING TIP ALMOST TOUCHING A MASSIVE BLACK FRONT WHICH WE FOLLOWED LIKE A FENCE LINE, STRAIGHT AS A DYE, FOR MILE AFTER MILE.

THE PROBLEM WAS AT SOME POINT WE HAD TO BE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FRONT TO GET IN TO GOVE AIRPORT.

FINALLY THERE WAS A THIN BREAK IN THE CLOUD AND A FLASH OF SUNLIGHT AND THERE THROUGH THE GAP WAS GOVE AIRPORT. SOMETIMES YOU GET LUCKY FOR THAT WAS THE ONLY BREAK WE FOUND, AND IT WAS EXACTLY WHERE AND WHEN WE NEEDED IT.

THERE IS A LOT TO BE SAID FOR THE MISSIONARY AVIATION FELLOWSHIP PILOTS, MANY OF WHOM HAD PRIOR EXPERIENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND FOR WHOM THE GOVE REGION, EVEN IN THE WET SEASON, HELD NO REAL FEARS FOR THEM COMPARED TO THEIR PNG EXPERIENCE.

HAVING BEING ADOPTED INTO THE VERY LARGE YUNUPINGU FAMILY I ALSO RETAINED STRONG LINKS WITH THE EVEN LARGER MUNUNGGURR FAMILY WHICH WAS THE ADOPTED FAMILY OF MY PREDECESSOR.

WE ACTED ON THE BASIS THAT GIVEN THE SIZE OF EACH OF THESE FAMILIES AND THEIR GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD THROUGH EAST ARNHEM LAND THAT THERE WOULD BE VERY FEW COMMUNITIES SMALL OR LARGE WHICH WOULD NOT CONTAIN A YUNUPINGU OR MUNUNGGURR RESIDENT IN THEM, AND USUALLY BOTH.

THIS MEANT THERE WAS SOMEONE WE ALWAYS KNEW THROUGH FAMILY WHO WOULD RECOGNISE US AND MAKE US FEEL WELCOME.

IT WAS THESE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE FAMILIES AND CLANS THROUGHOUT THE ELECTORATE THAT ULTIMATELY WAS THE GREAT REWARD FROM BEING THEIR LOCAL MEMBER.

THEIR LOYALTY INSPIRED AND SUSTAINED ME THROUGH TOUGH TIMES AND MANY OF THESE FAMILIES REMAIN CLOSE TO ME TODAY.

SO WHEN IT CAME TO THE MOBILE POLLING ROUND FOR THE 1990 ELECTION I STOOD TO BE WELL SERVED ON THE ONE HAND BY LALAMBARRI YUNUPINGU, MY ADOPTED BROTHER, AND ON THE OTHER, MINYIPA MUNUNGGURR A WELL TRAVELLED COMPANION WITH MY PREDECESSOR.

MOBILE POLLING THROUGHOUT THE NHULUNBUY ELECTORATE WAS SCHEDULED IN THE 7 TO 10 DAYS PRIOR TO THE ELECTION.

THIS REQUIRED EARLY MORNING STARTS TO PICK UP THE TEAM AND GET TO THE AIRPORT BY 7.15AM TO LOAD THE 172 AND HIT THE AIR TO VISIT 4 OR 5 HOMELANDS FOR THE DAY ALWAYS STRIVING TO BEAT THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND THE OPPOSITION TO THE NEXT COMMUNITY.

BEING LATE OCTOBER AND THE TOP END BUILD UP COMMENCING THE PLANE WOULD GET VERY HOT AND STUFFY AND THE AIR QUITE TURBULENT WITH HOT AIR POCKETS. USUALLY THIS COULD BE BORNE WITH REASONABLE GRACE AND DIGNITY.

MINYIPA IN THOSE DAYS WAS A VERY LARGE AND VERY STRONG MAN WITH AN APPETITE TO MATCH. NO AMOUNT OF DELICATELY PREPARED SANDWICHES WOULD EVER SATISFY HIM.

ON THIS THE FIRST DAY OF THE MOBILES IN THE SECOND COMMUNITY WE VISITED, MINYIPA DISCOVERED A SURPLUS OF UNCOOKED TURTLE MEAT. A FAVOURITE STAPLE OF HIS WHICH WAS DULY DONATED TO HIM AND FOUND ITSELF A SPOT IN THE REAR OF THE PLANE. THE PROBLEM WAS THE BUCKET HAD NO LID AND WITH THE TURBULENCE AND BUMPS THE TURTLE JUICE WAS ABLE TO SPILL OVER THE TOP OF THE BUCKET AND SLOP AROUND THE FLOOR OF THE PLANE WHILST EN ROUTE TO THE NEXT HOMELAND. I DON'T KNOW OF ANY CLEANING AGENT THAT WOULD EVER HAVE GOT THAT SMELL OUT OF THAT PLANE.

AT GURRUMURU THE NEXT STOP THERE WERE JUST A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE WAITING FOR THE REST OF THE COMMUNITY TO RETURN FROM HUNTING AND THE OTHERS FROM SHOPPING IN TOWN.

NO FOOD IN THE COMMUNITY PRESENTED THE PERFECT OPPORTUNITY FOR MINYIPA TO COOK THE TURTLE AND SHARE IT WITH THE RESIDENTS WHILE WE WAITED FOR THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION.

AS RICH AS TURTLE MEAT IS THAT OUGHT TO HAVE BEEN ENOUGH FOOD FOR ANYBODY ON ANY ONE DAY BUT OUR LAST STOP WAS HOWARD ISLAND, A FAIR HAUL ACROSS FROM GURRUMURU. BEING SO LATE IN THE DRY SEASON WATER WAS SCARCE BUT THERE WAS ONE LAST SUBSTANTIAL WATER HOLE JUST NEAR THE COMMUNITY WHICH WE FLEW LOW OVER ON APPROACH TO THE AIRSTRIP.

THE WATER HOLE WAS ALMOST TOTALLY COVERED IN MAGPIE GEESE CROWDING ON TO THAT LAST AVAILABLE WATER.

IF THERE WAS ANYTHING MINYIPA LIKED AS MUCH AS TURTLE IT WAS MAGPIE GEESE AND I HAD TO RESTRAIN HIS EXCITEMENT AS WE CAME INTO LAND.

WITHIN MINUTES OF ARRIVING IN THE COMMUNITY MINYIPA HAD LOCATED AND CLAIMED POSSESSION OF TWO MAGPIE GEESE WHICH ACCOMPANIED HIM BACK TO THE PLANE ONE PLUMP BIRD IN EACH HAND.

IN BETWEEN MINYIPA FORAGING FOR FOOD THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION ARRIVED AND THE VOTING BOOTH OPENED FOR 30 MINUTES TO AN HOUR DEPENDING ON THE POPULATION AND THE VOTE WAS TAKEN.

THE LAST WORD ON THIS EXCURSION WAS FROM THE OUTGOING MEMBER DAN LEO WHO ROUNDED ON HIS BROTHER MINYIPA TO ACCUSE HIM OF STEALING FOOD FROM THE POOREST PEOPLE IN THE COUNTRY.

MINYIPA WOULD HAVE NONE OF IT DECLARING THE PEOPLE AT HOWARD ISLAND TO BE THE RICHEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD GOING ON THE SIZE OF THE MAGPIE GEESE POPULATION, THEREBY PROVIDING A UNIQUE INSIGHT IN TO THE YOLNGU WORLD VIEW ON WEALTH.

THIS EXERCISE WAS TO BE REPEATED WITH DIFFERENT CHARACTERS AND PERSONALITIES THROUGHOUT THE 1994, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008 AND EVEN THE 2012 NORTHERN TERRITORY ELECTION WITH FEDERAL ELECTIONS AND BY ELECTIONS THROWN IN BETWEEN OVER MY ALMOST EIGHTEEN YEARS IN PARLIAMENT.

ON MANY OF THOSE OCCASIONS WE DID NOT HAVE THE OPPOSITION TO DEAL WITH IN THE SMALLER COMMUNITIES SO THESE TRIPS WERE MOSTLY A LOT OF FUN.

IN FACT DURING THE 1990'S I WONDERED WHETHER THERE WAS AN UNWRITTEN RULE THAT STATED IF WE DIDN'T TRY TOO HARD TO WIN SEATS FROM THE GOVERNMENT IN DARWIN THEN THEY WOULDN'T TRY TOO HARD TO WIN OUR SEATS FROM US IN THE BUSH, HOWEVER IF THIS WAS THE RULE THE 1994 ELECTION WOULD PROVE TO BE AN EXCEPTION WITH EVERY SINGLE VOTE CLOSELY CONTESTED.

I REMEMBER AN OLD SPANISH AUSTRALIAN SITTING DOWN WITH ME MID AFTERNOON AFTER HE HAD VOTED. PAPA TORIBIO HAD LIVED IN TOWN FOR MANY YEARS AND WE KNEW EACH OTHER ON A CASUAL BASIS. PAPA PUT HIS ARM AROUND ME AND TOLD ME THAT HE LIKED ME SO MUCH HE GAVE ME 2 VOTES ON THE BALLOT PAPER, AND THE OTHER MAN JUST ONE. I COULD HAVE WEPT KNOWING THAT THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION WAS GOING TO BE CLOSE BUT IT DID NOT SEEM APPROPRIATE AT THAT POINT TO TRY TO EDUCATE PAPA ON OUR VOTING SYSTEM.

BUT AT THE VERY SAME ELECTION A DEAR FRIEND FROM THE MUNUNGGURR FAMILY WHO WAS IN DARWIN ON THE GROG AND LIVING IN WHAT WE REFER TO AS THE LONG GRASS, TURNED UP AT A VOTING BOOTH WITH 10 OF HER COLLEAGUES TELLING THE ELECTORAL OFFICIAL THAT SHE AND HER TEAM HAD COME TO VOTE FOR SYD STIRLING.

THAT IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE DEPTH OF LOYALTY I RECEIVED FROM THE PEOPLE I REPRESENTED, LOYALTY YOU COULD NEVER BUY AND IS SOMETHING THAT WILL REMAIN WITH ME FOREVER.

DURING THE BY-ELECTION TO REPLACE THE LATE MAURICE RIOLI TO THE SEAT OF ARAFURA WE WERE DEEP IN THE HOMELANDS OF RAMINGINING AROUND THE ARAFURA SWAMP ON MELBOURNE CUP DAY. ON THIS OCCASION WE HAD TO GET THE LABOR PARTY PEOPLE, THE CLP WHICH INCLUDED IN THEIR NUMBER TWO MINISTERS OF THE CROWN, AND THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION STAFF TO PURCHASE MULTIPLE SWEEP TICKETS IN ORDER TO RUN THE TRADITIONAL MELBOURNE CUP SWEEP.

LATE IN THE DAY WITH VOTING FINISHED IN THE LAST HOMELAND AT THE DELIGHTFULLY NAMED YATHALAMARA WE SIGNED OFF THE BALLOT BOX FOR THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND MY CAMPAIGN COMPANION, ALFRED DJUPANDUWAY REMARKED AS HE PULLED A CRUSHED PACK OF SMOKES FROM HIS POCKET WITH JUST 2 LEFT " STRONG LABOR PARTY COUNTRY THIS ONE, STRONG WINFIELD TOO". I LOVE THAT MAN AND I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED THAT QUOTE.

THERE IS A TINY COMMUNITY ON A VERY SMALL ISLAND JUST OFF NHULUNBUY WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN INCLUDED ON THE MOBILE SCHEDULE.

AT ONE ELECTION THERE WAS JUST ONE OLD LADY, DHUWARRWARR WHO PROUDLY SERVED US AFTERNOON TEA COMPLETE WITH SILVER TRAY, SUGAR JAR AND MILK JUG.

SHE WAS THE SOLE VOTER WHO DREW 3 AIRCRAFT, US, THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND THE OPPOSITION. DEMOCRACY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY CAN BE A VERY EXPENSIVE BUSINESS.

DURING OUR CUP OF TEA OUR POLITICAL OPPONENT DROPPED IN AND SEEING US ENJOYING TEA WITH DHUWARRWARR STATED THAT AS THERE WAS ONLY ONE VOTER HERE AND IT WAS NOT LIKELY HE WAS GOING TO GET THAT VOTE HE WOULD GO ON TO THE NEXT COMMUNITY.

HOWEVER, AT THE VERY NEXT ELECTION AT THE SAME PLACE, WHEN WE DROPPED IN THERE WERE 97 VOTERS ATTENDING AN IMPORTANT CEREMONY.

I RECALL THE CONFUSION AND CHAOS WITH SO MANY PEOPLE JAMMING IN TO THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION'S TENT TO VOTE, BUT WITHIN A SHORT TIME AND WITH NO APPARENT DIRECTION

FROM ANYWHERE THERE QUITE SUDDENLY APPEARED 2 ORDERLY LINES, MEN ON ONE SIDE AND WOMEN ON THE OTHER PATIENTLY WAITING THEIR MOMENT TO VOTE. SOMETIMES, JUST SOMETIMES IT CAN ALL COME TOGETHER QUITE BEAUTIFULLY AS IT DID ON THIS DAY.

I NEED TO COMMENT ON THE EFFORTS OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION OVER ALL THESE YEARS.

SOMETIMES WE THOUGHT IT WAS HOT AND TOUGH WALKING IN 1 OR 2 KILOMETRES TO REMOTE HOMELANDS ON DUSTY UNEVEN ROADS FROM THE AIRSTRIP CARRYING ELECTION POSTERS, A BOTTLE OF WATER AND A HANDFUL OF HOW TO VOTES, BUT THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION STAFF HAD TO CARRY ELECTORAL ROLLS, CHAIRS, FOLDING TABLE, VOTING PAPERS AND OF COURSE THE BALLOT BOX, NONE OF WHICH OBVIOUSLY WE COULD ASSIST WITH.

AT EVERY ELECTION RELATIONS WITH THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION STAFF WERE FORMAL TO THE POINT OF BEING STRAINED AT THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE WEEK, BUT RELAXED THROUGHOUT THE WEEK TO USUALLY ONE OF MATESHIP IN WORKING TO A COMMON CAUSE - THEIRS TO GET THE VOTE IN AND OURS TO GET THE VOTE IN FOR OUR CANDIDATE.

I COMMEND THE COMMISSION FOR THEIR DILIGENCE IN ENSURING SMALL NUMBERS OF PEOPLE SCATTERED IN SMALL COMMUNITIES ACCROSS MANY THOUSANDS OF SQUARE KILOMETRES HAVE BEEN ABLE TO EXERCISE THEIR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS. IT IS A HUGE EXERCISE IN NUMBERS AND LOGISTICS, AND THE CONDITIONS CAN BE REASONABLY TOUGH ON THE PEOPLE INVOLVED, SO I SAY WELL DONE ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND STAFF FOR YOUR GREAT WORK OVER THE YEARS.

ONE OF THE DIFFICULTIES FACED WHEN PREPARING SCHEDULES FOR MOBILE POLLING IS TO TRY TO ESTIMATE HOW MANY PEOPLE MAY BE IN ANY ONE PLACE AT THE TIME VOTING IS TO TAKE PLACE, AND I USED BREMER ISLAND AS AN EXAMPLE EARLIER.

YOLNGU ACCROSS NORTH EAST ARNHEM LAND ARE HIGHLY MOBILE AND CAN LITERALLY BE ANYWHERE WITHIN NORTH EAST ARNHEM LAND ON ANY GIVEN DAY.

THIS IS PART OF THE REASON WE STILL MISS MANY VOTERS DESPITE THE BEST EFFORTS OF THE COMMISSION.

THE COMMISSION IN TURN HAS TO RELY ON PAST VOTING PATTERNS AND THE WORK OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS AND THEIR FIVE YEARLY CENSUS.

THE ABS FACES SIMILAR DIFFICULTIES TO THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION.

WHEN I WAS TREASURER OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY I DID EVERYTHING I COULD WITHIN MY POWER TO ASSIST THE ABS IMPROVE ITS POPULATION COUNT.

EVERY SINGLE PERSON WAS THEN WORTH MORE THAN \$8000 IN REVENUE TO THE NT, A FIGURE PROBABLY CLOSE TO \$13,000 NOW SO IT WAS INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT TO THE NT TO GET THIS COUNT AS ACCURATE AS POSSIBLE.

SOME YEARS AGO THE ABS RAN AN INNOVATIVE CAMPAIGN TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE CENSUS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS.

THE CAMPAIGN RAN ON THE CHORUS OF A FORMER WARUMPI BAND HIT SONG ENTITLED BLACKFELLA/WHITEFELLA AND THE CHORUS LINE WAS "STAND UP, STAND UP AND BE COUNTED", AND FEATURED PROMINENTLY ON TELEVISION IN THE WEEKS PRIOR TO THE CENSUS.

SO EFFECTIVE WAS THE CAMPAIGN THAT WHEN THE ABS STAFFER, ARMED WITH ABS FORMS TURNED UP AT THEIR FIRST HOME AT GALIWIN'KU, THE SENIOR RESIDENT, THE GRANDMOTHER BROUGHT THE 18 RESIDENTS FROM OUT OF THE HOUSE AND LINED THEM UP FROM OLDEST TO BABE IN ARMS ALONG THE STREET, LITERALLY STANDING UP TO BE COUNTED.

SUCH A SIMPLE THING TO DO, ONE WONDERS WHY THE ABS HAS TO MAKE ITS PROCESSES AS COMPLICATED AS THEY DO.

I UNDERSTAND IT TOOK THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON TO GET ALL THE FORMS FILLED IN THAT WOULD SATISFY THE ABS AND THE DILIGENT STAFFER.

SO I DO RECOGNISE THE EFFORTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, AND THEIR POPULATION COUNTS ARE GETTING EVER MORE ACCURATE.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY PRESENTS ITS OWN UNIQUE CHALLENGES TO THE BUREAUCRATIC PROCESSES OF THIS COUNTRY. A CLIMATE THAT IS HOT AND WET IN THE WET SEASON RENDERING GREAT TRACKS OF COUNTRY IMPASSABLE FOR MANY MONTHS, FLOODING RIVERS AND CREEKS AND ROADS, OR IN THE DRY SEASON, HOT AND DRY AND DUSTY AND BUMPY IN THE AIR.

IT IS PRETTY UNFORGIVING EITHER WAY AND CAN WRECK VEHICLES AS WELL AS TAKE ITS WEAR AND TEAR ON THE HUMAN BODY.

27% OF THE POPULATION IS INDIGENOUS, MANY OF THEM WITH ENGLISH AS A SECOND OR THIRD LANGUAGE AND MANY OF THEM LIVING IN SMALL REMOTE AND WIDELY SCATTERED COMMUNITIES AND HOMELANDS, MAKING SERVICE DELIVERY, HEALTH, EDUCATION, LEGAL SERVICES, MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION, DRIVER LICENSING ETC. VERY DIFFICULT.

BUT GUESS WHAT – IT IS FOR THESE REASONS AND MANY OTHERS THAT THOSE OF US WHO LIVE AND WORK HERE LOVE THE TERRITORY AS MUCH AS WE DO – THE TERRITORY HAS CHALLENGED ALL WHO HAVE COME TO ITS SHORES EXCEPT FOR THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS WHO MANAGED TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ALL OF ITS NATURAL ELEMENTS FOR MANY MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS – PROBABLY SOMEWHERE WITHIN THAT LIES THE KEY FOR THE REST OF US.

IN THE MEANTIME UNTIL WE UNCOVER THAT KEY, MYSELF AND MANY OTHERS WILL CONTINUE TO RELISH THE CHALLENGES AND THE OPPORTUNITIES THE NORTHERN TERRITORY AND ITS PEOPLE PROVIDE.

THE OLD LINE ABOUT THE NORTHERN TERRITORY WAS THAT IT DREW MISSIONARIES, MERCENARIES AND MISFITS IN.

EACH OF US WHO COME TO LOVE THE NT AS HOME PROBABLY CARRY A LITTLE OF EACH OF THOSE TRAITS WITHIN US.