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THE AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPER – SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST EDITION

At the time of the appearance of the first edition of The Australian newspaper in July 1964, I was working in Canberra as a Research and Tariff Officer for the Canberra Secretariat of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of Australia (ACCA). The Associated Chambers of Commerce (now known as the Australian Chamber of Commerce) was one of a leading group of national business organisations with representation in Canberra having their say on national policies – especially economic policies. The others included the Associated Chamber of Manufacturers of Australia (ACMA) whose main activity was to seek tariff protection for the development of the manufacturing sector and the National Farmers Union (NFU).

I had come to Canberra from the only vaguely known (at that time) small city of Cairns in the tropical far north after three years studying economics at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. After two years as research officer in the Tariff Policy Section of the Department of Trade, I had secured the prized position with the ACCA Secretariat partly due to my research with the Department on the new protection afforded with the value added in Australia net of imports rather than the industries value of output, something that revealed in some industries ridiculously high rates of protection.

The Chamber of Commerce policy at the time was basically in favour of a policy of tariff protection to stimulate, in the words of the United Kingdom Australia Trade Agency, ‘infant’ industries assured of some prospects of success but recognizing that there were limits to the extent and level of protection that should be granted. Naturally, the editorial stance of the proposed new ‘national’ daily newspaper would be of great interest and indeed importance in the national policy making framework.

At the time, one of my major tasks had been to prepare and present to the Tariff Board on behalf of the Australian Wholesale Softgoods Federation the case against further increases in the tariffs on cotton textiles. As one of a small staff of three executive officers of the Chamber Secretariat, the launch was a much awaited and very special event. My interest in the new Australian newspaper was further heightened by the fact that within the Secretariat, one of my tasks was to scan the major newspapers making me very familiar with the layout and editorial approaches, especially of the Sydney Morning Herald, the Melbourne Age, the Canberra Times and the Australian Financial Review.

On frequent occasions, Ray Pelham Thorman, director of the Australian Chamber, Dick Graves, Secretary and myself would retire after work to the back bar of the Canberra Hotel. Here, my interest was even further deepened by the fact that I met the first editor of the new newspaper Max Newton, a friend of Ray’s and of consequence John Stone, then working at the Treasury who would go in subsequent years to become Secretary of the Treasury with his signature on Australian bank notes. Ray, Max and John Stone shared a common background – they were all from Western Australia, had received Rhode Scholarships to study in the UK, had all studied economics at Cambridge and had all worked for the Australian Treasury.

The great day arrived and we received our copy of the first edition. The appearance and layout of the paper was impressive – artistic without being ‘arty’ – a design that has stood the test of time over sixty years.

The lead story was right into the politics of the time – it accused the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Country Party ‘Black Jack’ McEwen of ‘Riding the Socialist Tiger’ by pursuing policies of industry protectionism all round and setting up government sponsored primary industry marketing boards and the like, inferring that if you trust riding tigers they will turn around and eat you up.

It was a message that was music to Chamber of Commerce ears. While the Chamber of Manufacturers was pursuing a policy of even wider and higher tariff protection, the Chamber, while not opposing a protection to stimulate the development of manufacturing, were warning that there were limits – that it was not in the country’s interest to have ever wider and higher tariffs. I had in the preceding years been developing and presenting to the Tariff Board the case against further increase in the tariffs on cotton textiles and manmade fibres.

The message in that lead story of the first edition would predate the major national policy changes that would take place over the next decade that saw Australia move away from policies of protectionism and in the rural industry government sponsored marketing boards.

In the coming few years, my contact with the Australian and the players involved would deepen. The following January, I married Janet and bought a house in the new sheep paddocks turned suburb of Curtin. Owen Thompson, who worked at the Australian, built his house next door.

My contact with John Stone increased. I was playing A Reserve hockey as centre half with the ‘United’ team – a name that reflected the moves at the time for the Presbyterian and Methodist churches. John Stone joined the team as an accomplished full back. When Max Newton left the Australian as editor, in an effort to get some exercise after a tumultuous period, he joined our team for a number of games as a not too skilled winger. Last time I heard, many years ago, he was in New York.

Four years after the first edition, we left Canberra to use my education and skills to help promote the development of our native Far North Queensland.

Sixty years later, I still seek to read at least the front page of The Australian to keep contact with national news and perspectives, also the Financial Review and the local Cairns Post – something that, I am miraculously able to do by being able to access the paper on a computer, click on the article, and have the audio function read the articles to me.

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