

WOBBLING

the

WHITEBOARD

five satirical squibs

by

KIM LEE



KAFKA PUTS THE CASE FOR PROCRASTINATION

My cousin K and the rest of us in our sub-section began preparing the Case for Procrastination about fifteen years ago. Or was it twenty years ago? I can't quite remember. But I know it was recently. Post war, in other words.

Please be assured, however, that we didn't rush into the project impulsively. Some of the other departments might choose to go at things like bulls at a gate. Not us. Steady As She Goes. That's the departmental style we prefer. Canberra wasn't built in a triennium.

Our predecessors in the public service had been studying the problem for some years, of course, back in the 1930's, during that brief hiatus between the wars. And we ourselves had discussed the issue more than once in the years before preparation of the 'Case' became a regular agenda item.

Then, one day, Jim Briggs, personal assistant to the Under Secretary's Deputy Assistant, suddenly said: 'Let's stop talking about it and just plain make a start!'

Tom Dutton could hardly believe his ears. 'What? Now? This year?'

'Right now!' Jim exclaimed. 'Tomorrow!'

There's no stopping Jim when he gets the bit between his teeth.

And on the Friday of the week after that, he actually sent K and one of the office juniors down the corridor to fill in a stationery requisition form.

We were up and running.

I won't summarise the main points comprising the Case for the moment. Let me put that off until later. But it may be useful if I say something about the background to the matter, the personalities involved.

Jim Briggs was about thirty years of age when we first began tossing a few ideas around. He must have been about forty five when we began talking seriously of 'putting something up' to the Minister.

I forget which Minister it was, quite frankly. I can't even remember which government it was. The sixteen years of the Menzies government simply 'disappeared'. The seven years of the Fraser government went like a flash. Hawke. Keating. Howard ... You blink, and they're gone. Whenever it was, it was certainly at a time when Jim was still young and impetuous, ardent enough to set a cracking pace.

'Earl Grey?' Tom Dutton raised the steaming tea pot.

'Wait!' Jim raised a restraining finger instinctively. It was only a few short months since we had sent K and Marcia – the office junior – out for the stationery. Now Marcia was being told what to write.

'Yes, please.' Marcia held out her cup. Notebook at the ready, she had been waiting patiently for a long time. Those of us at the inaugural brainstorming session couldn't seem to find an opening line.

We were searching for a phrase which would put the Case for Procrastination memorably, succinctly, comprehensively: words which the Minister could put to Parliament unequivocally but without commitment. A statement which would remind the people of their heritage but which would, at the same time, by emphasising the pluralism of Australian society, drag the nation into the twenty-first century.

For some reason or other, the words we wanted just wouldn't come.

‘Not so fast,’ Jim muttered irritably, watching the tea splash into Marcia’s cup.

‘What have we got so far?’ Tom asked.

Marcia glanced at her notebook. ‘The Case for Procrastination.’ She held up her notebook to show us the heading on the page.

There was a sigh of relief around the table. We were on our way.

‘Let’s sleep on it,’ my cousin K suggested.

‘No!’

Most of us were already half way to our feet ... but at the sound of Jim’s command, we resumed our seats. He was a stern taskmaster, a slave-driver, some people said.

‘What we’re looking for,’ Jim reminded us, ‘is a phrase which will put the case memorably, succinctly, comprehensively.’

‘Words which the Minister can put to Parliament,’ K murmured, as if to himself. ‘Unequivocally. But without commitment.’ He gave us all a dark-eyed, fearful look. ‘Midwife words to drag us kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century.’

‘Which century?’ Tom asked.

My pale cousin eyed him warily. ‘This century,’ K replied. ‘The twenty-first.’

Tom ignored the response, splashing Earl Grey into the remaining cups. Noisily. Like a horse urinating. I sensed an ambush.

‘If appropriate,’ I added smoothly. ‘Into the twenty-first century, if appropriate.’

‘What about if I just put down something like this?’

Marcia was already scribbling.

‘If a problem can be got rid of then it isn’t a problem. If it won’t go away after years of delay then it must mean something. It must be a real problem. Procrastination is a means of finding out what the real problems are.’

Jim looked doubtful.

‘It’s only a draft,’ K murmured.