

HAPPY CAMPERS - How The Byron Greens Were Led Astray

The story told below is archetypal. In Byron Shire the fundamentals have played out several times over the recent generations of elected councillors. In other words there really is no excuse...

So there were these two men who became "friends" despite having vastly different backgrounds and being of different ages. One, who we shall call Simon, was a graduate of Melbourne University's Department of Wishful Thinking. He grew his hair into the obligatory messy dreads and headed north to Byron Bay, where all young people who basically want to be someone else eventually seem to end up.

In those days Simon channeled Buddha and Jesus and still believed that good vibes can change the world. He started a magazine called 'Tribe', which catered to pleasant noble savage fantasies. Later he taught at a trendy unconventional local school and joined the Greens – who, to broaden their electoral appeal, basically accept just about anybody. He cut off that polarizing hair, the first compromise in a steady progression.

As a clear sign that he must be zodiac-blessed, Simon soon got himself elected as Mayor. In his self-certainty he didn't realize that this position in Byron is actually a poisoned chalice. At university Simon had never studied history, which he regarded as mere baggage from the past. History only started the moment he got elected.

* * * * *

The father-figure chap who was to become his "mentor", who we will call Ken, was a rather different kettle of fish, a graduate of the Academy of Scams. The motto of the Academy was "A Sucker is Born Every Minute". Buddha was not on the curriculum, but a unit called 'Duchessing' was. This was where bureaucrats were taught to use their charm and intellect for political control via the manipulation and flattery of the newly-elected, who invariably came from backgrounds that provided no relevant experience of political trickery. They were not at all street-wise.

Ken's doctoral thesis concerned the effect of calculated smiling and back-patting upon the human

ego. This was merely an extension of the "positive reinforcement" concept then fashionable as a way of changing behaviour: always say something nice, avoid negativity. The local Greens are still stuck in that paradigm, even though their leaders can be quite nasty when their ambitions are threatened.

The faceless right-wing power-brokers of Byron soon ensured that Ken became CEO of Byron Council, where he had an excellent opportunity to test his theories. So successful was he in duchessing the local Greens that the State Government made smiling sessions compulsory all over the state, cunningly disguised as "Strategic Planning Workshops". At these meetings important preliminary decisions of all types were made without the nuisance of public scrutiny, procedural nicety or record-keeping.

Simon and his fellow Greens councillors lapped this up because it made them feel like members of an elite that was above and beyond red tape - and green tape too, as it turned out. How clever of these young pseudo Greens to leap onto the Bob Brown opportunity bandwagon and avoid years of tedious reputation-building and experience!

* * * * *

Quite early on in the relationship Ken proposed a male bonding experience with Simon in the wilderness. He made the suggestion to invite fellow Greens councillors Blah Blah, Wanna-be and What's Her Name but Simon, as Ken predicted, pretended he didn't hear; no point in sharing the glory. "I'm the

important Greens bandwaggoner here" Deep down he knew even then that the Greens Party was merely a vehicle chosen by Destiny for his inevitable personal advancement.

When it was time for the camping trip Ken thought of wowing Simon by helicoptering him into the wilderness. However he knew from his network of developer mates that Simon had previously accepted a helicopter tour of the shire with "eco-developer" John Callahan. This tour had been designed to show Simon "how much room there is in the shire for further development". A previous mayor had received the same offer, but had wisely declined.

Simon did not declare this gift in the pecuniary interest register, and when he naively bragged to a local newspaper editor about it, he insisted it was



The Duchess of Byron

“off the record”. Years later Simon denied that any of this had taken place; well, you move to the right, you start lying; ‘post-truth’, they call it. **And they always move to the right don’t they!** Towards the establishment, the money, the dominant paradigm. Why fight for what’s environmentally right when it’s so much easier to go with the flow?

* * * * *

Ken and Simon walked for hours along a narrow track to a secluded and idyllic grassy area near a bubbling river. Ken had promised to provide all the camping gear but soon had to apologetically admit that he’d neglected to bring more than one large sleeping bag. “Oh well; at least we’ll be warm at night” thought our genius Simon.

Tired from the long trek, they went to bed early. They slept well but next morning Simon felt a bit strange in the lower abdomen area. After a dump in the bushes he soon forgot about it.

The next day was spent fishing, swimming, bird watching and gathering firewood. Ken was solicitous throughout and listened attentively to stories of Simon’s forest protest days, while Ken retailed highly selective and censored stories from his time “serving the public”, as he put it - otherwise known as “Milking the Cashcow” and “Feeding the Mushrooms”. In any rural area it went without saying that the National Party had mates who oversaw the harvesting and distribution of funds, particularly State Government grants - “money for jam” they fondly called it. Such money was “free” so nobody looked too closely at how it was spent or felt guilty about misspending it.

Simon so enjoyed Ken’s insider stories that he began to be convinced that fate had placed him firmly among the movers and shakers of this world. **Why do you arrive at a position of social prominence unless you’re inherently special?**

Certainly Simon’s new circle was a step up from teaching spoiled brats according to the whacky whims of Rudolph Steiner. Although the pay was much lower, the adulation of the public was much more important to him. Corruption isn’t always about money or mates.

* * * * *

Next morning Simon awoke feeling uncomfortable again, this time with some soreness of his nipping gear. He put this down to the previous evening’s fish probably being not properly cooked, or maybe he’d been bitten by some bug. By mid-morning he felt almost normal - though he found himself walking with a bit of a mince.

That day Ken secretly consulted his “GM’s Manual for Dealing with Elected Visionaries” and quietly delivered the main point of the expedition. He sat Simon down and explained that people everywhere hated their local council, and there was no pleasing them, no matter what you did. Never repair the potholes; it’s better to give them something harmless to focus on. It’s also best not to get too involved and certainly not too passionate. As Mayor, it was Simon’s job essentially to reassure the masses by smiling a lot, promising a lot, being nice, ignoring criticism and issuing motherhood statements that could mean anything. The important thing is to inspire confidence and to “represent everyone”. Ken especially loved that one about “representing everyone”; it justifies huge compromises and a host of broken promises.

He then moved in for the kill: “The council staff are trained professionals: qualified planners, engineers and other experts. It’s best to leave the technical stuff to them, the experts. Councillors are responsible for policy matters and the staff are there to implement those policies. It’s best to let the staff do their operational work and not to undermine their morale by interfering in what they do or by asking silly questions. Morale is the key to a successful Council; and staff morale is what councillors must therefore focus on”.

Ken did not mention the historical reality that elections are designed to precisely curb the insidious power of bureaucrats/ mandarins/ courtiers. Nor did Ken refer to the **separation-of-powers** principle, according to which a bureaucrat and a politician probably shouldn’t even be on this camping trip - not a good look, not arm’s length.

Simon didn’t notice any such abstract problems; he had a natural tendency to absorb only those things that suited his ever-expanding self-belief. Strutting around importantly dispensing charm and glad-handing like a rockstar suited Simon fine. He’d never previously cut a glamorous figure, but now he had come into his own as the Groovy Mayor of Groovy Byron. If the toilets need cleaning, let somebody else do it...

* * * * *

During the third and final night of camping Simon tossed and turned a lot and had obsessive dreams about lubricants. He woke abruptly with a ring of fire and saw that Ken was already awake, looking strangely self-satisfied. He was propped up with a cushion, his hands behind his head and with a cigarette dangling from his smiling mouth. “Good

morning Simone, my little duchess” he drawled pleasantly. Simon was totally preoccupied with his internal discomfort and noticed nothing amiss.

Ken came to his rescue by producing out of nowhere a tube of Recta-Soothe cream, even offering to apply it for him - but let’s not go there. Simon could only wonder at this further example of Ken’s intuitive foresight and his caring nature. How lucky to have him as a friend and guide.

* * * * *

Later, as Simon’s reputation as the Duchess of Byron grew, he also went camping with a local National Party hero who we shall call Ben, more commonly known as Old Brown-Nose. Eventually the entire male Council senior staff too had camped with Simon, so fond was he of bonding with these “good people”, as he often described them. Simon’s offsider Cr Michael (Wannabe) Lyon had powerful succession fantasies and soon insisted on his own camping trips. However lacking Simon’s endearing chubbiness and his gift of the gab, he was never invited for seconds.

Frequently the staff could be heard quietly but deliberately whistling a tune which sounded a lot like Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire”, but Simon remained serenely oblivious. The emerging evidence of staff duplicity, massive and suspicious cost-overruns and policy-on-the-run completely by-passed him. “That’s an operational matter”, he would tell himself smugly. “My job is to smile. The critics are merely jealous, conspiracy theorists and nimbies one and all. They just want to rain on my parade”. Political debate to the Greens soon became a game of point-scoring and name-calling; no issue was ever debated thoroughly, no definite conclusions ever

reached. Neither Simon nor Cr Wannabe saw any duplicity in signing their name to scripts clearly written by lawyers and other staff spin merchants for their own ends. Anything was valid in the pursuit of their ambition, especially as they also happened to be on the side of righteousness, eh.

Some observers became so depressed by Simon’s brick-wall gullibility and the damage all this was doing to the Greens (and indeed to the entire shire) that they began to entertain rumors that he was actually on the take. **“No-one could really be that stupid”** they whispered among themselves. **“It must all be cunning act! He’s probably got a Swiss bank account”**

So it came to pass that Simon’s status actually rose with the prospect that he was as corrupt as the shameless Council staff shysters who had systematically led him up the garden path! Yes they had bled the shire dry, trashed planning law and procedure and compromised the local environment in pursuit of growth, but what the hell; better a reprehensible crook than an embarrassing moron.

* * * * *

Our villain Ken always had a mischievous streak: Fast forward a few years and he could no longer control himself. He sought to demonstrate just how stupid the Greens actually are, just so he could have something to snigger about in the pub with his developer and National Party mates.

Now every year the elected council gives some of its power and responsibilities over to the Mayor or the GM in a process called “delegation”. One year Ken very quietly snuk in a proposal that council give **all** its power to the GM, meaning that most Council meetings would be unnecessary. Just as



Senior Council Staff attend a smiling worksop, An essential component of it’s duchessing course.

he expected, **councillors unanimously voted in favour**, without suspecting a thing! Councillors are notorious for not reading the documents - and for failing to understand them even when they do read them.

Of course it's not much fun having a joke at other peoples' expense if they don't even know about it. Six months later Ken couldn't stand the anti-climax any longer. He had already announced his resignation, so he drew attention to what he'd done via a letter to a council critic known as Fast Buck\$. The shit soon hit the fan – but Simon remained totally secure behind the rock-solid ramparts of his denial; it never sank home that his mate Ken had deliberately made a fool of him and that he actually detested him as a vainglorious fool. Ken had proved his point, while Simon had once again demonstrated his immense powers of denial.

Roll on another couple of years and Simon started coming out with rationalisations for his increasing pro-development stance. None of his new “insights” (normally referred to as “sell-outs”) constituted a mandate because he had never said a word about them during his election campaigns. In other words he betrayed his constituency. Maybe he had simply been an impostor all along?

His understudy Michael (Cr Wannabe) Lyon, suffers from a similar malady. He is a pot-hole politician bereft of original thought, who saw in the Greens a vehicle to improve his status vis-à-vis women. When the Greens failed to select him as their next preferred mayoral candidate he spat the dummy and left the party. He then conspired with the mayor and the council staff to become deputy mayor, meaning

that if Simon quit early, Michael would automatically become the mayor until the next election. Formerly it was Cr Sarah N'daiye who had been Simon's preferred successor, but she had begun to show signs of (God forbid) independent thought! Simon demands total personal loyalty while himself showing nil loyalty to the Greens, to planning law, to procedure or the environment. But that's not a problem for Simon; for him politics was never about policy or ideals, it was always about personal relationships with those people who thought him wonderful.

And that's how the Greens basically degenerated into a social club, unable to confront the difficult problems facing the planet, and indistinguishable from the major parties.

Duchessing Explained

by David Day – SMH 8 June, 2012

“The British were masters at having their imperial interests accepted as Australian interests. One of the main ways of doing so was by “duchessing” Australian politicians when they visited London. This often involved feeding their sense of self-importance by inviting them to a country house for a weekend of informal mingling with British politicians and minor royalty.

Hence the term “duchessing”, whether it was being entertained by a duchess or treated like a duchess. The derogatory term seems to be peculiarly Australian and was used by journalists to disparage Australian politicians, particularly Labor ones, who were beguiled by British flattery into promoting British interests as their own. It was hard to resist such flattery”.



Dear Reader: Do you have any copies of Tribe Magazine? Photos of Simon's Dreads? Details of Wannabe's Amorous Ventures? Other compromising material? Yes, these guys have made it personal by humiliating the writer at every opportunity.

**Send to:
fastbuck\$@greaspalm.net**

Illustrations by G.Cavanagh