

# No match for 'Christine', row

Alan Ramsey

**L**ABOR'S Fred Daly got it right. "I think a lot of members now mistake name-calling and abuse for debate," he lamented. "And humour, that's practically gone." Fred has been dead five years. He was in Parliament for 32 years and out of politics for 11 years when he made those comments on ABC radio. So no, what Fred Daly had to say had nothing to do with Parliament's shenanigans three days ago. And yes, despite the hysteria of some innocents with no memory, this week's events were a gentle sideshow alongside some of the genuine parliamentary stouthes of earlier years.

You don't have to go back too far, either. For instance, February 18, 1986, and the infamous Christine episode. Participants: Labor's Treasurer, Paul Keating; Opposition Leader, John Howard; Western Australia's Liberal MP for O'Connor, Wilson Tuckey. As an hors d'oeuvre to the banquet, Tuckey interjected on Keating, who responded: "Read it, you clot." That set the tone for the exchanges 20 minutes later.

Keating, about Howard: "This is a character who's up lecturing us about fiscal rectitudes, His Oiliness, the man who put all the oil [excise] money up [as Malcolm Fraser's Treasurer], the Member for Benelong." Tuckey: "If you want me to talk about Christine, you keep up with this 'His Oiliness'." Deputy Speaker: "Order, order. ORDER!" Tuckey: "And I'll give it to you." Deputy Speaker: "The Member for O'Connor!" Tuckey: "You play it straight." Deputy Speaker: "The Member for O'Connor might have an early afternoon if he keeps this up." Keating: "The Member for O'Connor is a member with a criminal intellect." Deputy Speaker: "Order!" Keating: "And is a

criminal in my view." Deputy Speaker: "Order, order." Tuckey: "Withdraw!" Keating: "Point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was speaking, he didn't raise a point of order. If disciplinary action is available, it ought to be taken against him." Opposition MPs: "Withdraw!" Deputy Speaker: "The Member for O'Connor claims the words used by the Treasurer were offensive to him. Will the Treasurer withdraw?" Keating: "I'll withdraw nothing." Tuckey: "I object to the words 'His Oiliness'. I've now also been accused of having a criminal intellect, and I ask that be withdrawn. I certainly don't mix with criminals." Keating: "I don't get someone to hold somebody against a wall while I belt him with a truncheon." Deputy Speaker: "Order, order!" Opposition MPs: "Name him." Deputy Speaker: "The Treasurer will withdraw." Keating: "Mr Deputy Speaker, in deference to you I withdraw, but can I point out that the Leader of the Opposition hurls all sorts of abuse at me, and all through Question Time these two panisies over there want retractions. They're a bunch of nobodies going nowhere."

Don Cameron (Lib, Qld): "Point of order. The Treasurer has even called people over here pansies. When are you going to put an end to all this rubbish he is going on with?" Deputy Speaker: "Members of the Opposition are busily provoking the Treasurer and the Treasurer is busily provoking the Opposition. If both parties continue in this mode, I guess they have to expect to take what they get."

And, later, when Ian Sinclair, as National

Party Leader, sought to embarrass Keating by urging he be given extra speaking time, Keating quipped: "Listen, George!" a reference to Sinclair's dead father and a contentious court case involving Sinclair snr's will. "That's all right, Warren," Sinclair shot back, referring to Keating's friendship with the entrepreneur Warren Anderson. "I can respond to you any day, my friend. Would you like an extension of time, Warren?"

All this against continual uproar from both sides, with the insults coming thick and fast and nothing from the Deputy Speaker, Leo McLeay, Keating's friend and factional ally, to enforce discipline. Next day, the fuse burned down to the powder.

In a speech in which Keating began bating Sinclair about his generous use of parliamentary perks, Tuckey rose and said, ominously: "The Treasurer has commenced a personal attack. I am about to warn him what he will get if he does."

Keating: "This loopy. Let me just make this clear ..."

Tuckey: "I ask the Treasurer to withdraw that remark, or I shall mention Christine."

Keating: "If you stop interjecting, I'll withdraw it. The loopy crim from O'Connor is at it again."

Deputy Speaker: "The member for O'Connor will resume his seat."

Tuckey: "Christine had a little girl called Paul ..."

Keating: "You stupid foul-mouthed grub."

Tuckey: "No, you are, you grub."

Keating: "You piece of criminal garbage."

Deputy Speaker: "I warn the Member for O'Connor."

Tuckey: "What about him?"

Michael MacKellar (Lib, NSW): "Is it in order for a member to refer to another member as a piece of criminal garbage and get away with it?"

Deputy Speaker: "The Chair did not hear it ..."

That's when it really became bedlam. And did anyone get chucked out? No. Was Keating forced to withdraw his remarks? Yes, eventually, but not before Tuckey got in another below-the-belt swipe ("I request he withdraw. Now I know how Christine felt.")

And next day Keating, his anger still white hot, announced, in what is now folklore, on the front steps of the Old Parliament House: "From this day onwards, Mr Howard will wear his leadership like a crown of thorns, and in the Parliament I will do everything I can to destroy him."

He never quite managed, of course, but Keating never forgave Howard. He blamed him for inciting Tuckey and for not insisting Tuckey agree to have the Christine exchanges expunged from the Hansard parliamentary record. I've never seen or heard Keating so angry. "If this is his tactic, of having Mr Tuckey raise smears against me which are totally fictitious while they titter on the backbench, well, now we will do everything to obliterate him." A few days later, his anger having dimmed a little, he said on national television: "I just don't think politics has to go that low."

Howard, as sanctimonious as ever, responded: "Personal exchanges are, of course, regrettable, but Mr Tuckey was provoked... Mr Keating rang me, yes, and he was rather heated... He went off his head..."

No, I won't repeat what he said... If Mr Keating chooses to have a go at me and drop his bundle and get diverted into personal attacks, let him. He'll be the loser..."

Q: "But did he say to you that he was going to make you wear a crown of thorns?" A: "Oh, far more colourful things than that. It was really an uncontrolled monologue. He used words I don't normally use."

In truth, as Howard conceded at the time, the Opposition had set out to provoke Keating, quite deliberately using Tuckey's thick hide and big mouth to bait him, and Keating fell for it. He was the Government's premier politician and the Opposition couldn't get within cooee of him at the time in Parliament. So it went the low road. Bingo! Fourteen years later and the comparative kiddies' behaviour in Parliament three days ago was pretty anaemic. The new House procedures adopted in 1995 allow the Speaker to suspend MPs for as little as an hour. Previously, any punitive action involved at least 24 hours' suspension and as much as a week. Given the incendiary abuse in the Keating/Tuckey exchanges in 1986, here's the remarks for which the six MPs were each penalised an hour's suspension on Wednesday:

Labor's Cheryl Kernot: "He gave me an assurance, Mr Speaker, and I will not have this person vilified in Parliament." Labor's Chris Zahra: "He should be ashamed of himself." Labor's Bob Horne: "Apologise!" Each remark had been directed at the Government's Tony Abbott, the latter-day equivalent of Wilson Tuckey circa 1986. Abbott himself got his marching orders after moving in a threatening manner towards the Opposition benches after Labor's Graham Edwards, a legless Vietnam veteran, had interjected: "You're a disgrace."

Two other Liberals were ousted — South Australia's Chris Pyne for a remark no more inflammatory than "You haven't got any choice" after Horne had been suspended and announced he was "quite happy to go"; and Pyne's South Australian colleague, Trish Draper, whose remark, whatever it was, was not identified by Hansard. All six suspensions were simply the Speaker, Neil Andrew, seeking to exert his authority.

Abbott was being Abbott, a hard-nosed political hoon. The only constant between this week and February 1986 was the role of John Howard, then Opposition Leader, now Prime Minister. It was Howard whom Keating was slagging when Tuckey launched his offensive 14 years ago. It was taxpayer-funded payments to the workers of the Prime Minister's brother's failed company, National Textiles, at the heart of two questions Abbott and Howard blatantly evaded answering, that set the political temperature rising three days ago. How those workers got their full entitlements, where the money came from, and why no other worker of any other failed company has Buckley's of getting the same 100 per cent of their entitlements, is an issue, it seems, still set to sorely embarrass the Government. Certainly, the way Howard and Abbott dodged and weaved three days ago suggests this is so.

In the meantime, if you want another meaty parliamentary brawl of similar abuse and decibels to the Christine episode, get hold of Hansard and look up the John Dawkins speech of September 17, 1980, and the subsequent adjournment debate. That, too, makes this week's events seem like play school, as well as disclosing, in all its wondrous detail, how "Ironbar" Tuckey got his nickname.

It's a cracker of a yarn.