

The facts and the 'Elliott push'

By DEREK PARKER

THE PROSPECT of a leadership challenge is always a good story, especially when it threatens John Howard, the person who the Press Gallery, according to its president, Paul Kelly, wants to "nail" (*The Australian*, September 22). That the facts of the matter fail to fit is not a problem, it seems, that cannot be solved with a little journalistic imagination.

The statements of the supposed protagonists are, in the view of some journalists, of little concern. For example, John Elliott has made his support for Howard clear whenever the issue has arisen. It is difficult to imagine any statement more unequivocal than his most recent (October 27): "My decision is very clear. I do not intend to consider the matter of going into politics until after the next election — which I am sure we will win." He has made his support for Mr Howard as Leader of the Liberal Party — and the next Prime Minister — as clear as it is possible to be.

Of course, any statement made by someone in politics must be taken with a grain of salt. Due caution, however, is not the same as assuming that a statement is necessarily untrue, which seems to underlie articles such as that by Niki Savva on "a new bid by John Elliott to enter Federal Parliament" (*The Sun News-Pictorial*, October 27). Such a view can only be based on the view that Mr Elliott is an intrinsic liar, an attitude which goes beyond ordinary media scepticism.

Ms Savva's article was not written in response to any statement by Mr Elliott, or Mr Howard, or Mr Peacock, or Mr Eggleton. The trigger was a speech by Mr Kroger, Victorian Liberal Party president, regarding possible changes to preselection procedures. But Mr Kroger's speech did not mention Mr Elliott, nor Mr Howard, nor anyone else. To go from a speech about procedural reform to a leadership challenge — in the face of all

public statements to the contrary — is a very long jump. It may be significant that Ms Savva, when questioned about the "new Elliott push" article, said that it had been written because "it was a quiet day".

It seems that there is no event which is not fuel for speculation. A social gathering at Mr Elliott's home takes on added significance, and even the reference of Elders' proposed takeover of Scottish and Newcastle Breweries to the British Monopolies Commission "could prompt Mr Elliott to renege his political ambitions" (*The Herald*, Melbourne, November 11). It is difficult to escape the belief that some members of the Press Gallery would respond to the simple comment, "Nice weather, isn't it?" with "Yes, a good day for a leadership challenge".

The only person who seems to make public statements about a "push" on Mr Howard is Mr Hawke. In a way, this is not surprising. Seeking to destabilise your opponent is a logical political strategy. The surprise lies in the apparent acceptance by some members of the media of the head of the ALP as an authority on events within the Liberal Party.

THE HAWKE strategy — essentially a strategy against Mr Howard — goes back many months, as does its acceptance by many members of the Press Gallery. In April, Mr Hawke said he had "ascertained the sort of things" said by Mr Elliott at the Liberal Party conference. Geoff Kinney of *The Australian Financial Review* duly reported (April 14) that "the tension is likely to fuel speculation about a possible bid [by Mr Elliott] at the Liberal leadership". But the only evidence of "tension" that Mr Kinney cites is Mr Hawke's allegations of "disgusting language".

Mr Hawke played the same tune again in a press conference on November 3. In response to a journalist's question, he replied that "it would be fascinating to be able to tell you the conversation I had with Mr Elliott... but it would not be appropriate to share with you the delicious conversation".

It was this comment that most television



John Elliott: his support for John Howard could hardly be clearer.

news programs featured, though the press conference also dealt with a new accommodation-assistance package, military cooperation with New Zealand, the Charles Perkins issue, X-rated videos, and the election in Israel. Yet Mr Hawke's non-statement was what the media chose to highlight.

Does the Press Gallery seriously accept the leader of the ALP as a source of information on the Liberal Party? It seems that at least some of its members do. It was, after all, a journalist who sought Mr Hawke's views. Aside from Mr Hawke, other sources are cited as evidence, or at least reason, for a "push". Mr Hawke's poor personal rating in opinion polls is a recurring theme — most members of the Press Gallery pay a great deal of attention to opinion polls. Because Mr Howard rates poorly (the argument goes), there must be challenge.

It is, of course, an argument which is hardly convincing. Just because most of the Press Gallery is obsessed by opinion polls

does not mean that everyone else is. If popularity ratings were as significant as some members of the Press Gallery believe, the conservative parties would not have won more votes than the ALP in the 1987 election: nor would the Hawke Government have suffered four record by-election swings in 1988.

Yet some journalists of the Press Gallery (such as Laurie Oakes, *The Bulletin*, November 8), to support the allegation of a "push", continue to cite surveys which show that Howard's public approval rating is low. The reason for the connection is hard to find. For example, the first popularity poll won by Margaret Thatcher was in 1982, three years after becoming Prime Minister and six years after becoming Conservative Party Leader. This raises the question of how important popularity ratings are in electoral success. Not very, though a good story would be spoiled if the Press Gallery accepted it.

The final type of evidence for the "Elliott push" is that from anonymous "sources". A journalistic device, the "well-placed source" (*Financial Review*, April 14), the "senior figure" (*The Australian*, November 12) or simple "speculation" (*The Sun*, October 27) has many advantages: it cannot be checked, confirmed, or questioned. It can say anything the journalist wants it to say. Indeed, there is not even a way to confirm that the source actually exists, let alone what it may have said. When asked, the journalists who use such "sources" invariably say that their identities cannot be revealed. Convenient, that.

Should the Press Gallery's use of anonymous sources be accepted? There would be no reason to raise the question at all if the gallery had shown itself to be neutral and even-handed. But not when its president says there is an intent to "nail John Howard". This brings into question the use of uncheckable, unconfirmable sources to make their case, especially when those anonymous comments stand in total opposition to public statements.

Acceptance of anonymous sources re-

quires trust as to the media's neutrality — a neutrality which journalists themselves say does not exist. If the Press Gallery expects the public to believe it, then the evidence has to be stronger. When Mr Elliott says, "I support Howard", a journalist can hardly say, "someone has told me that someone says that Elliott does not really support Howard" and expect to be believed.

SO, IN the end, what evidence is there of an "Elliott push"? First there is the opinion of Mr Hawke — who is hardly a disinterested observer. Second, there is poll data showing that Mr Howard is not popular — although there is no public evidence that the Parliamentary Liberal Party sees this as important, especially when put against the evidence of recent electoral contests. Third, there are statements which cannot be verified, made by people who cannot be named, at times and places which cannot be given.

Against this must be put the public statements of everyone who could conceivably be involved — Mr Elliott, Mr Howard, Mr Peacock, Mr Kroger, and Mr Eggleton — which indicate that a "push" is not, and has never been, contemplated.

That assertions of a "new Elliott push" can be made on such evidence tells us more about the Press Gallery than about Mr Howard or Mr Elliott. As with their selection from the Hawke press conference, the interest of some journalists in the issues of government is secondary to their interest in "nailing" Mr Howard.

The Press Gallery has, at least, revealed one kernel of truth on John Howard's leadership. As the *Financial Review* (November 11) states, "John Howard's leadership is now under permanent siege." Mr Howard's enemy, however, is not within; it is those members of the Press Gallery who see the laying of a siege as a proper journalistic role. If there is so little interest in professional and substantive journalism, it may be time to question whether Australian politics needs an institution such as the Press Gallery at all.

Derek Parker is writing a PhD thesis on the political role of the Press Gallery.

War crimes again under spotlight

By JANE ROBINSON

AUSTRALIA appeared to have closed the lid on the war crimes issue 30 years ago. By refusing numerous requests in the 1950s from the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and West Germany for the extradition of suspected war criminals, Australia made it clear that it was prepared to give every refugee from war-ravaged Europe a chance to start again in a new country.

However, Australia is one of three countries which took in large numbers of European refugees in the post-war years which has had a change of heart. In 1979, the United States set up the Office of Special Investigations to handle proceedings against suspected war criminals. In September last year, Canada passed legislation allowing the prosecution of Canadian citizens who allegedly committed war crimes during World War II. Australia has watched these developments with great interest.

In 1985, the US Office of Special Investigations announced it had started deportation proceedings against Latvian-born Konrads Kalejs, who lived in Australia from 1950 to 1959 and was an Australian citizen. He was accused of having served in a Latvian unit known as the Aras Kommando during the Nazi occupation of Latvia. The unit allegedly executed thousands of Jews and other civilians.

From 1950 to 1953 Mr Kalejs worked as a documentation and processing clerk at the Bonegilla Migrant Centre, near Wodonga on the NSW-Victorian border.

The question was raised — what would happen to Mr Kalejs if he was deported to Australia and there was no legislation under which he could be prosecuted? (Last month a US immigration judge did order his deportation, but Mr Kalejs had until Monday this week to appeal.)

Leaders of the Jewish community

asked the Federal Government to look into the Kalejs case and in April, 1986, the ABC ran a series of radio programs called *Nazis in Australia*. As a result of allegations in those programs the war-crimes issue was raised in both the Federal and the NSW Parliaments.

In June, 1986, the Federal Government set up an inquiry into allegations that many Nazi war criminals had been knowingly helped into Australia by the Menzies Liberal Government in the 1950s.

The inquiry, headed by a retired deputy secretary of the Attorney-General's Department, Andrew Menzies, reported at the end of 1986 that there was no evidence that an Australian government had helped suspected war criminals to enter the country. However, lax security and immigration operational difficulties after World War II meant it was more than likely that a significant number had entered Australia. The Government then appointed Robert Greenwood, QC, to head a special unit to investigate 70 cases supplied by the inquiry.

A Senate Estimates Committee was told last month that the unit was investigating 414 files to decide if there was enough evidence to recommend prosecution. 110 cases had been closed because further action was deemed unnecessary.

The Government's decision to prosecute suspected war criminals 43 years after World War II was meant to heal divisions in the Australian community caused by the war-crimes issue, but has in many quarters widened the rift.

Most of the Special Investigations Unit cases involve people from the Baltic states and Ukraine. Leaders of those communities in Australia fear that the publicity of investigations and trials will stir up racial hatred aimed at them.

Also, most of the alleged victims were Jewish and some commentators predict an anti-Jewish backlash.

— AAP

A small taste of things to come in the USSR

By NICHOLAS ASHFORD

THE MOST vivid impression I brought back from a trip to Moscow earlier this month was of a dinner I had at a restaurant called the Glazour with a group of friends on my final evening there.

Moscow is not, of course, a city one normally associates with gastronomic delights. But by Moscow standards this restaurant was exceptional. First, it served food that would have been quite acceptable in any good Western restaurant (I had marinated wild mushrooms, pork fillet stuffed with plums, and a miscellany of office creams).

A dinner-jacketed, no played cool Stan Getz-style music which a slightly plump Soviet version of the popular American singer Barbra Streisand sang about blue moons and broken hearts. Second, the restaurant was breaking new ground by being run both as a cooperative by 30 members of its staff and as a joint venture with Belgian brewer Stella Artois. There are a number of cooperative restaurants now operating in Moscow but none maintains such high culinary standards as this one — for which, I presume, one must thank the Belgians.

The reason why I remember the evening so vividly was that just after we started our meal there was a loud rumbling noise in the snow-covered street outside and a convoy of T72 tanks roared by. More tanks went by, then more and more. They were followed by armoured cars, missile carriers and a procession of other heavy military equipment. This display of military might — the vehicles were returning to barracks after rehearsing for the November 7 military parade in Red Square — continued throughout our meal. It gave me a new insight into the debate over conventional imbalances between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

One other point needs to be made about the restaurant. In the evenings it is only possible to reserve a table if one undertakes to pay the bill in hard currency (all major credit cards accepted, Sir). In other words, no dollars or Deutschmarks meant no dinner. Thus the vast majority of rouble-paying Soviet citizens were excluded from enjoying the pleasures of this cooperative. It struck me as incredible, and ultimately as indefensible, that any self-respecting nation, particularly one that regards itself as a superpower, should encourage the establishment of commercial ventures at which the national currency is not welcome.

But then, a precedent was set long ago by the Beriozka hard currency shops which sell Scotch whisky, German beer, American cigarettes and a few Russian luxuries such as caviar and fur hats in exchange for any European Community currency, but which will not accept the currency of the Soviet Union or its Comecon partners.

My experience over dinner that evening neatly symbolised the guns-and-butter dilemma confronting Mikhail Gorbachev as he seeks to overhaul the Soviet economy. About 15 per cent of Soviet Gross National Product is accounted for by defence. The success of his reform program rests to a considerable extent on his ability to transfer resources away from defence towards programs to develop the civil economy. Hence his enthusiasm to press ahead with arms control agreements which will allow him to devote a smaller portion of the Soviet Union's economic resources on keeping abreast with the Americans in the super-power arms race. The INF agreement was a first step in this direction. But real savings will only be achieved once Mr Gorbachev can make reductions in Soviet conventional forces — and progress in this area will ultimately depend on the success of the conventional stability talks which are due to begin in Vienna next year. Judging from past experience, progress in these talks is likely to be painfully slow.

SHOULD the West, and in particular the European Community, try to help the Soviet Union out of its economic difficulties? And if so, how? By increasing economic cooperation with the Soviet Union and its east European partners? Or possibly by showing a greater willingness



Mr Gorbachev: faced with guns-and-butter dilemma.

to make concessions in talks on conventional force reductions (assuming Mr Gorbachev shows similar flexibility)? The question of the West's future relationship with the Soviet bloc will be high on the agenda of the talks which Margaret Thatcher will hold with president-elect George Bush in Washington next week. Their talks will lay the framework for the NATO summit which Mr Bush has said he will call soon after he assumes the presidency, before he holds his first meeting with President Gorbachev later in the year.

It is to be hoped that Mrs Thatcher will persuade Mr Bush not to heed the advice of right-wingers in the US who argue that the West should do nothing to assist Mr Gorbachev's reform program. They base their case on the belief that the Soviet economy is so decayed it cannot be saved by large injections of Western capital and technology, and that a collapse of the Soviet economy would benefit the West as it would lead to the demise of Communism and with it the threat which Soviet-style Communism poses to the West.

THESE arguments are, I believe, based on a misreading of the reforms taking place in the Soviet Union. In trying to restructure Soviet society and the economy, Mr Gorbachev is responding to the aspirations and wishes of a new generation of Soviets who recognise the failures of the Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras and also the futility of maintaining a barrier of hostility between East and West. They are not interested in spreading world revolution or trying to gain military domination over western Europe. They want to improve living standards in the Soviet Union and share some of the advantages which we enjoy in the West — such as going to good restaurants.

The West must continue to be cautious in its approach towards the Soviet Union. *Perestroika* may fail, as Andrei Sakharov warned this week. But we are presently faced with the opportunity of contributing to a process which, if it succeeds, will make the Soviet Union into a more prosperous, happier and ultimately less threatening society. And in so doing we can contribute, through increased trade and investment (but not through some fuzzy notion of a Marshall Plan for the Soviet bloc), to our own enrichment by helping to develop a largely untapped market of 275 million people.

— The Independent

Heroin epidemic in Italy

From MICHAEL SHERIDAN, in Rome

IT IS a common enough sight in the streets and piazzas of big Italian cities: two armed policemen stop a young person, usually long-haired or dressed in a non-conformist style; they demand to see the pink identity card which Italians are supposed to carry at all times.

Then they search their catch. He turns out to have two joints of marijuana in his pocket, or a small quantity of cocaine to live up to the evening, or even a dose of heroin, should he be so inclined.

"Nessun problema", say the officers and he goes on his way. No offence has been committed.

Such has been the liberal state of affairs since 1975 when a law was introduced intended to avoid persecution of the drug addict while, theoretically at least, freeing the forces of law and order to deal with the traffickers.

But in spite of the change Italy has been gripped by a heroin epidemic over the last decade. So far this year alone more than 600 people have died of overdoses, with 75 heroin addicts being found dead in Rome further evidence that the Sicilian mafia, once sworn to avoid fouling

its own doorstep, is supplying a booming Italian market.

The Sicilians are also thought to be engaging in a novel form of commodity brokering — high quality heroin for the finest Colombian cocaine. So Colombians are now marketing Sicilian heroin in the United States while South American white power is available for the nouveau riche of Rome and Milan to sniff up their elegant nostrils.

Addiction has struck the most illustrious industrial dynasties. Heroin has cut like a scythe through the wealthier middle classes.

Inevitably, it was the shrewd Socialist Party leader, Bettino Craxi, who first perceived a political issue in what is now known as "the drug emergency". Mr Craxi returned from a visit to the US much enthused by the Reagan administration's "war on drugs". General Noriega and expert enforcement opinion on that conflict notwithstanding.

Mr Craxi argues that the time has come to penalise the customer as well as the supplier.

Unfortunately, the Socialist leader was at once contradicted by his son, who is known as Bobo and heads the party's youth movement,

who told a magazine he enjoyed smoking dope. Then he hastily denied saying such a thing. Then he said that "like everybody" he had tried it.

Mr Craxi's fresh-faced deputy, Claudio Martelli, also dissented, insisting that criminalisation of users was the wrong way to tackle a serious problem. Mr Craxi's brother-in-law, the Mayor of Milan, Paolo Pillitteri, agreed with Mr Martelli.

Christian Democrat politicians rushed to condemn Mr Martelli and the Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, said his words left people disorientated.

Opinion among the people who run a number of private detoxification clinics is divided.

A sociologist and expert on organised crime, Pino Arlacchi, said, "Italy is one of the only Western countries with an intelligent drug law. If the police are told to spend their time hunting down addicts, then who is going to chase the traffickers?"

Public opinion is probably with Mr Craxi.

— The Independent

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