

A SEPARATION OF MATES

Voice from the pavement Peter Adamis 12 May 2012.



Happier times: Peter Costello and Michael Kroger during the 2007 election campaign. Photo: Craig Sillitoe. Sad by true. If all of the reports according to the news media that are coming in thick and fast are to be taken at face value, then it is certainly a sad day for all Conservative minded people.

A separation of ways for two great blokes, two mates who have been through the thick and thin of politics, two cobbers so to speak that supported each other over the years appear to have called it a day.

One hopes that with that separation the negative aspects that normally follows is diminished. Some may who have battled the pair in past must be wringing their hands in glee, but time has always proven to be a great healer and such life will go on for both men. One hope that the parting of ways will not affect those who have been loyal to both men in the past and that recriminations and paybacks do not become the order of the day. These two men created a stability within the Liberal Party and brought a prosperity that has yet to be acknowledged. The article below by Michelle Grattan of the Age says it all. This author for one is going to miss them.



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Even the best of friends must part Kroger and Costello

The Age Michelle Grattan May 12, 2012.

AS LABOR struggles in its abyss, there has been a flash of cheer from a most unexpected quarter. It's come from the nuclear exchanges between Michael Kroger and Peter Costello, once so close, with the startling claim that the former treasurer had floated the idea of re-entering Parliament by forcing a sitting Liberal to cede a seat to him. One Liberal characterises it as "the falling-out of a long-term relationship". The timing of this political "domestic" between the former friends and allies was spurred by another sort of "domestic" factor: the loyalty between the two Krogers — Michael and Helen — who, while long divorced, remain in a close political partnership.

Kroger lobbied hard but unsuccessfully to head off the demotion of Helen from second to third position on the Senate ticket (from where she is still likely to win). Costello said yesterday that Kroger had contacted him "a number of times" to intervene with senators Mitch Fifield and Scott Ryan to preserve Kroger at No.2. "But I declined ... I am out of politics." At the mid-April preselection, Ryan, the up-and-comer, was elevated from third spot to second by a preselection panel of some 400.

Last Monday a column in *The Age* by Katharine Murphy canvassed Kroger's loss of power. Kroger was then furious when a move started on Tuesday to dump Helen as Senate opposition whip (there had been earlier concerns over her performance). Fifield and Ryan are being particularly fingered in relation to Tuesday's events, but the picture is murky.

In any case, the attempt was nipped in the bud. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott would not countenance a stoush over a minor position distracting from the Coalition's attack on budget day. But Kroger was well off the leash. He now related — supposedly by way of background — what, on his version, was an extraordinary conversation he and Costello had in October over lunch. But after the story was reported by the ABC's 7.30, Costello went on the record, voice steely, denying Kroger's version as "lurid", and taking a sarcastic swipe at "so-called powerbrokers". Kroger then broke cover.

Yesterday he lashed out with a character assassination of the former treasurer, to which Costello in turn responded, wishing Kroger "every success in his business life and his personal life". Meanwhile, Fifield chastised Kroger, declaring, "We should honour the heroes of our party". Other MPs rallied to Costello and some were pressing for Abbott to intervene with a statement backing Costello.

How did it come to this? Costello and Kroger have been towering figures in the Victorian Liberal Party. In their heyday, their alliance focused in large part on trying to make Costello prime minister. Kroger, as state president from 1987-92, strong-armed MPs to make room for candidates who would both boost the then-Liberal opposition and support the rise of Costello (who entered Parliament in 1990), hopefully to the very top. In the end, it was mission impossible. As Kroger said yesterday: "We could never get the numbers against John Howard because Howard was too good, too popular, too great. Peter could never challenge John because John had two-thirds of the parliamentary party".

Despite doing everything to block Costello's ascension, Howard did recognise him as his successor. He was as surprised as other Liberals when Costello declared after the 2007 election that he would not take the job. Costello went to the backbench, gave up his pursuit of the leadership, wrote his memoirs and quit Parliament in 2009. Kroger yesterday gave as one reason for their fallout that Costello was unhappy about his agreeing to be "ears" for then leader Malcolm Turnbull in Victoria. He also felt Costello was unhappy that he was friendly with Howard; as well, he had the sense of being rather cast aside by his old comrade.

There seems little doubt Costello misses politics. Sources not involved in this imbroglio say he is exercised by the strong prospect Abbott will become prime minister. In a nutshell, he doesn't think Abbott is up to the job. Costello came into Parliament amid expectations he would one day be PM just as Andrew Peacock did before him. Neither made it. Yet here is Abbott, about whom nobody had any great expectations, on the cusp of seizing the prize. That's hard to watch for a man like Costello. But would he seriously contemplate a comeback? This would be so deluded it is near impossible to believe he would think about it. (Liberal sources have told *The Age* that some business people with Higgins links were talking earlier this year about how good it would be to have Costello back in Canberra.)

Kroger insists Costello was serious and had first mentioned the seat of Kooyong, held by Josh Frydenberg. "And I said, Peter I know Josh, but not very well. I certainly wouldn't know him well enough to say 'Hey, would you give your seat away you have just won?'" Kroger said Costello then referred to other seats. "And I said I don't know Dan Tehan [Wannon] and Alan Tudge [Aston] at all ... I said, listen, I'm happy to ring Kelly O'Dwyer or Tony Smith, who are two of his former staffers. And he said, don't ring my former staffers."

Kroger conceded he and Costello might have had different interpretations of what Costello said. He added, not a little provocatively, "I don't drink and I'm not suggesting he drank too much at that lunch, but I've got a very clear focus, I know what happened, I know the date, I know where it was, it was in Melbourne, in late October." Costello declares, "I have not sought to return to Parliament. I have not sought Mr Kroger's assistance to do so", adding in a stinging riposte to yesterday's attack, "The events of this morning indicated why I would not repose a confidence in him".

A Liberal makes a couple of pertinent observations. "Peter is a great tease", he says. "And he's very risk averse". The first just might explain the discrepancy in accounts; the second indicates the unlikelihood of Costello contemplating such a journey. The idea that Costello might seriously consider this scenario is, after all, preposterous. To bully someone out of a seat would look terrible and, in any

case, not be feasible. And what if he did get to Canberra? He would hardly want to be treasurer again (also not feasible). He delivered a dozen budgets and remarked, after a handful of them, that he wondered how many more he had in him.

So, it would have to be the top job. Would a party just elected with probably a good majority (and maybe much better than that) say, "Come on in, Peter and replace Tony"? That would put Labor's replacement of Kevin Rudd in the shade. Whatever happened at that lunch, Costello was never going to do a Lazarus. More relevant is Kroger's critique of Costello, whom he accuses of undermining Abbott by casting doubt on his economic credentials and suggesting he has DLP instincts.

Costello had attacked everyone, Kroger said, including Howard, Alexander Downer, Turnbull, party president Alan Stockdale, John Hewson, Andrew Peacock, the Kemp brothers, Helen Kroger: "The list goes on and on." Kroger claims to be trying to inoculate against Costello's criticism of Abbott, who, he said, was "not an economic illiterate — he's a Rhodes Scholar for god's sake".

"I think what this will do, hopefully, is clear the air and make it understood to people that when Peter criticises Tony Abbott, this is nothing unusual, Peter's criticised every former Liberal leader." Costello responded in yesterday's statement: "I frequently speak to Tony Abbott and advise him as he requests." It's a fair bet Abbott yesterday just wished both of them would shut up. The present ugly fracas will do damage if it goes on. But with the reforms of recent years (driven by former president David Kemp), the Victorian Liberals have moved beyond the factional mud map of the Costello-Kroger days. It has also moved beyond Costello and Kroger, although Victorian federal MPs are identified with one or the other. Their era will be even more definitively over if or when there is a Coalition government in Canberra.

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