Richard Allsop reviews a book on Bert Kelly, one of the most important Australian parliamentarians of the 20th century.
Kelly's subsequent career provides a lesson for any careerist politician with an interest in his or her place in history. In a 19-year parliamentary career, which saw his government in power for 16 of them, Kelly was only a minister for three years. He became a minister in 1966, initially in Works and then in Navy, the latter clearly a significant portfolio as the Vietnam War raged. He became embroiled in controversy when the HMAS Melbourne collided with the US Destroyer Frank E. Evans in Subic Bay in July 1969, resulting in the deaths of 74 US sailors. Without waiting for the results of an inquiry, Kelly immediately expressed confidence that the Melbourne would 'come out with a clean sheet' and while this was not given as the reason for his subsequent demotion, suspicion lingered. Further notional 'failure' came in 1977 when he was defeated at a pre-selection by a colleague whose adjoining seat had been abolished.

Yet, far from a failure, there is a strong argument to say that Kelly was one of the most influential Australian politicians of the 20th century, and the only thing that arguably interrupted that influence was his time as a minister.

One interesting anecdote the book describes is Kelly taking Whittlam to task in the early days of the latter's government for having made an announcement at a press conference rather than in the House. Whittlam accepted Kelly's criticism with good grace.

Of course, it comes to buying a farmer, Kelly was particularly sensitive to just how little of the mass of Australia was actually suitable for farming and he did not approve of subsidised immigration that provided a workforce for the protected motor vehicle industry which in turn led to the building of housing for those double-subsidised workers on prime farming land on the urban fringe.

Trade policy may have been in a worse state then in the 1960s than it is today, but on the other hand there is an argument that parliamentary democracy was healthier. Kelly regularly posed difficult questions—without notice to his ministers on his own side of the House. While Colebatch explains that there is evidence that in the post-Melville resignation controversy Menzies was annoyed that Kelly had not flaged his intention to raise the issue with him first, at other times he was happy to give him a reasonably free rein.

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