GETTING WHAT YOU ORDER

BY JOE ATKINSON

FORMER LEADERS HAVE a bad habit of hanging around to make a nuisance of themselves. Sir Robert Muldoon did it to both Jim McLay and Jim Bolger, hounding the former out of politics and causing a succession of difficulties for the latter. But with the rise of political commentary and the commercial speaker's circuit giving platforms and financial incentives to the deposed, this perennial problem is getting worse. Helen Clark is currently assailed by no less than three former leaders.

Sir Geoffrey Palmer doesn't mean to cause trouble, but he is regularly in the public spotlight, which makes him a formidable presence to be acknowledged. Mike Moore has done his very best to cause trouble but is still dithering about how to administer the most telling blow. So the immediate problem for Clark is her old friend David Lange, who has lately taken to pronouncing tendentiously on any number of issues: New Zealand troop deployments in Bosnia, the ideological character of the parliamentary Labour Party, the selection for his successor in Mangere, the New Zealand response to French nuclear testing and so on.

Former leaders are often anxious to make out that they could do the job better than their successors. David Lange is no exception here, but his willingness to rewrite history in doing so is reminiscent of Daniel Defoe.

Lange talks now as though he stood alone against Roger Douglas, when in fact his attack of social conscience was a belated one. He talks as though he invented New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy, when in truth his conversion was somewhat reluctant. He talks as though he actually deserves the media-awarded mantle of international statesmanship, when in fact he handled the issue of nuclear-ship visits with the finesse of a skateboarding hippo.

Having himself showboated with the French over the Rainbow Warrior and being forced to back down over imprisonment of the convicted agents, he now has the effrontery to criticise others for grandstanding on Moruroa. His charge that the parliamentary Labour Party is more conservative now than it was under his own leadership is breathtaking in its audacity. Similarly, in trying to appoint his own successor in Mangere, he cheekily suggests that the electorate needs an MP who will stay put, rather than one who gallivants all over the country – as if he'd always been there when they needed him!

Cartoonist Tom Scott caught the shameless casuistry in one of Lange's comments last year when he pictured the former PM lying in a hospital bed flanked by two doctors in white coats. The doctors look intently at the patient, shaking their heads, as one says to the other. "Worst case of false-memory syndrome I've ever seen."

WITH HIS IMPRESSIVE physical presence, prodigious brain and extraordinary verbal dexterity, Lange possesses many of the attributes of greatness. His command of the rhetoric of moral outrage in his Oxford Union debate with the Reverend Jerry Falwell deservedly won him (and New Zealand) global plaudits, but the finish has not been worthy of the start. Perhaps it never is, but with Lange the gap between promise and performance is wider than usual.

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It has always been so apparently. Nobody I've spoken to who knew Lange at school or university reckons that he worked particularly hard in those days. His brilliance is freely acknowledged, but with the common caveat that it was flashy and just slightly oversold. A more inappropriate minister of education would be hard to find, for he appeared to despise his teachers and they sometimes resented him, thinking he wasn't at school to learn, but to show off.

Lawyers make a distinction between admired colleagues who have mastered difficult areas of law and courtroom actors who know less law but are lightning quick on their feet. David Lange was one of the latter. His speciality was the plea in mitigation for guilty but indigent clients. Picking up legal aid briefs shortly before his clients were due in court, he improvised defences against poor odds, and when the inevitable verdict was handed down he did a brilliant job of explaining why the normal penalty ought to be reduced.

He was a superb legal aid barrister, morally committed to his hapless clients but by all accounts less than fully committed to the profession he practised. And as with his teachers, there was the barest hint of disdain in his manner, as if conceding more than minor effort on his part might reduce him to their level.

Lange carried this dilettantish guise into the political arena. His rise was meteoric, but his appetite for the battle was always slightly suspect. It is hard to say how much his health problems had to do with this, though when standing down as prime minister on August 7 1989 he assured the press that poor health was not a conclusive factor in his decision.

A retrospective look at a transcript of that final press conference makes interesting reading, for some of his answers are a lot funnier now than he could possibly have intended them to be at the time.

When asked, for instance, what he wanted to do as a backbencher, Lange responded facetiously: "Well, I won't be a political columnist." He was also asked what he would miss most in his old job, and he made three evasive replies, each one of them inadvertently revealing.

The first thing he said he'd miss was "press conferences". Everybody laughed, but never was a truer word spoken in jest. Lange had more obvious enthusiasm for prime ministerial press conferences than for any other aspect of his job. He relished the contest because he won it so easily. His minders advised him to cut off reporters' questions after 15 minutes maximum, but Lange would amble out under the television lights, with chest puffed out and hands pushed down at his sides, like a boxer taunting his opponent to take a shot at him. As the ineffectual queries pelted down on him – seldom getting close, never hurting – the big man ducked and weaved with obvious gusto, drawing out the bout for 20 minutes, 40 minutes, sometimes longer. His staff couldn't get him to stop.

But at the 1989 press conference, the journalists pressed him again for a satisfactory answer. Apart from the press, what else would he miss? Lange now became more obviously evasive, referring to himself in the third person. "oh," he responded, "there are lots of things you miss, and there's lots of things that you're glad you did, and lots of things you don't feel like." "Like what?" someone insisted. The final replay was vintage Lange: "I don't know whether you've ever tried to order breakfast in a New Zealand hotel," he said, "but I have yet to get one that I ordered." Again the laughter roared forth, deflecting, as it was meant to, the chance of self-revelation. Lange had won another round.

And yet in a sense he had also lost the battle, for what he hid from his audience, perhaps even from himself, were his real reasons for leaving: the truth was,

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he found the job too much like hard work. It wasn't just the hotel breakfasts Lange loathed, but many other things about the role as well. One of the crucial things he "didn't feel like" as prime minister, for instance, was going to meetings, including cabinet meetings which he habitually left early.

For whatever reason – angina pains, boredom or some inner demon – he found it hard to sit still and often turned over the cabinet chair to Geoffrey Palmer while he ambled off to the toilet, to his office, or even to the self-drive car which he liked to take out for a recreational spin on the Wellington motorway. When his staff responded by having a car phone fitted, he took it off the hook. He has never really grown up.

But he got a real kick out of press conferences, public performances, rhetorical pyrotechnics. It was the nitty-gritty of politics he couldn't stand, the endless face-to-face wrangles and policy consultations with people he though boring or worse.

HE SAW THE ENDS of politics so clearly but he couldn't sit still long enough to get agreement on policy details. That must have been part of his problem with Roger Douglas. It was a job he preferred to leave to others, and yet it was a job that, as leader, he had to do himself or it wouldn't be effectively done.

It must gall David Lange that several of those others, those inferior mechanics (Clark, Cullen and Caygill among them), are now running the Labour Party and doing a vastly better job of it than he was ever capable of doing.

That must be why he so often puts them down. For if the fourth Labour government under his leadership had been saying and doing what it is now saying and doing, it would surely not have been so thoroughly discredited among its followers.

She may not have Lange's wit or genius, nor his effortless command of the popular media, but Helen Clark is vastly superior to him as a policy-maker and party manager. I'll bet she also has no trouble getting the breakfasts she orders in New Zealand hotels.

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