

Something's gotta give

Current talk of the need for an effective exit strategy from our Covid-19 lockdowns brings back memories of the famous story of when Ol' Blue Eyes met the Silver Bodgie

As negotiators we that anecdotes like these can prove useful sometime, you just don't know where or when...

by Robbie Gilbert



♪ *When an irresistible force such as you
Meets an old immovable object like me
You can bet just as sure as you live
Somethin's gotta give
Somethin's gotta give
Somethin's gotta give* ♪



Call me Irresponsible...

It's a tale of Sinatra being too Frank; of the 'Chairman of the Board' ignoring the media's request for a briefing, then publicly launching personal and sexist attacks on them in the middle of a major concert. He was doing so at the wrong time and the wrong place.

It was July 1974. Francis Albert must have had high hopes of his world-wide comeback tour. Instead, it looked like a few upset trade unions would turn a handful of Australian dates into a 'you'll never leave here unless you apologise' siege in Sydney. With a few ill-considered remarks, the singer turned "Ol' Blue eyes is back" into Ol' Blue Eyes is *blacked*.

The leader of the Australian Council of Trade Unions at the time was Bob Hawke. Oxford-trained, his skills and 1956 thesis on wage-fixing won him rapid advancement in the ACTU. Popular and charismatic, by 1974 he was already an expert negotiator with a 'Mr Fixit' reputation. But for him, the best is yet to come.

Within 10 years, he would go on to be one of Oz's most successful Labour Prime Ministers, known as the Silver Bodgie on account of his hair (Bodgie is an Australian term for men with that back-combed look); and sometimes as the Dodgy Bodgy – for reasons that may become clearer shortly.

Back in Britain, it was a very good year – for the trade unions. Premier Edward Heath had just lost an election fought over the issue of who should be in charge of the country: the elected Government or the powerful trade unions. Australia’s labour relations arrangements owed a great deal to working class immigrants from the UK, some of whom had been union activists in the old country.

The lady is a Tramp

This was at least the second time around for Sinatra in Australia. He’d been before with his daughter, Nancy (with the laughing face), back in 1955. The tour Kicked off with the first of 2 concerts at the Festival Hall in Melbourne, to be followed by 3 in Sydney. The first half went spectacularly well, and the audience were loving it. But then he had to spoil it all by saying somethin’ stupid. In his post-interval chat, he spoke about his experiences with the guys and dolls – particularly the dolls – of the Australian Press:

“they keep chasing after us. We have to run all day long. They’re parasites who take everything and give nothing. And as for the broads who work for the press, they’re the hookers of the press. I might offer them a buck and a half I’m not sure.”

Stormy weather

These words guaranteed hurricanes and gales of disapproval and disruption going forward. A strong women’s liberation movement had already taken root in Australia by the end of the ’60s and was shifting the public’s thinking towards respect and equality. Most of the audience would have a good idea of what \$1.50 was supposed to buy. It would be wrong to say that they all laughed. In recordings you can hear an audible intake of breath and hostile murmuring.

Come Fly with Me? No chance



The dispute quickly escalated. The next morning, the Australian Journalists Association demanded an apology. Hawke orchestrated a three-pronged attack. Theatrical unions immediately stopped Sinatra’s second Melbourne concert, due that night, and the Sydney dates would be next. Hospitality unions would not serve Sinatra or his party at the hotels and restaurants or carry their luggage. Transport workers refused to refuel Sinatra’s Gulfstream, or any regular flight on which he tried to book. Bob Hawke warned Sinatra,

“If you don’t apologize your stay in this country could be indefinite. You won’t be allowed to leave Australia unless you can walk on water.”

It’s not clear exactly how Sinatra got back from Melbourne to Sydney. Maybe he managed to sneak on to a domestic flight, unrecognised. Or there may have been enough left in the Gulfstream’s tanks to manage the hour and a half trip back from Melbourne to Sydney; but it would have taken twice as much fuel to reach anywhere in the States. Hawke’s threat was real; and Sinatra’s three-day siege of Sydney had begun.

Frank’s rude and hostile words were bound to alienate the media. Maybe he had grounds for complaint of harassment, but he would have done better to try a little tenderness in voicing it. However, Frank never

apologises, according to his minders: indeed, he thought that it was the Australian media who should be apologising to him.

Fly me to the moon, or at least onto the Midway...

Back home, things were different. Frank was used to having run-ins with the US media. Indeed, in his off the cuff rant in Melbourne, he had harked back to a recent spat with one female journalist in the States, suggesting that she, too, was a hooker, and a dirty one. "Most of them don't even bathe"; and he'd overpaid for her services by giving her \$2.

He also had seriously powerful contacts in the States. Some of these were at the murkier end of the spectrum where, back in the day, the mafia and the unions sometimes helped each other. For a start, the Gulfstream private jet on which he flew for the tour was provided by friendly movers and shakers in Las Vegas. And at one stage, Sinatra even thought of contacting the tainted but effective Teamsters' leader, Jimmy Hoffa, and asking him to get his guys to persuade the US truck drivers to refuse to handle any goods arriving from Australia.

There are suggestions that, as things escalated, his team even spoke, or at least tried to speak, to 'Hank': we know him as the then US Secretary of State and legendary solver of global conflicts, Henry Kissinger.



We do know for certain that Sinatra had flown into Australia directly from Tokyo, where, on the 4th of July, he had entertained navy troops from the aircraft carrier, USS Midway, then lying at the nearby Yokosuka Naval Base.

It seems that Sinatra may also have entertained fanciful notions at some point of having the Admiral bring the famous carrier up to Sydney Harbour and airlift him off the roof of the hotel by helicopter in order to break Hawke's siege. The hotel's young head of PR even used his friendship with the son of the then Australian PM, to speak directly to Gough Whitlam. "He told me that Bob Hawke was the only one who could possibly sort this mess out."

The US Consul General in Sydney weighed in with both Milton "Mickey" Rudin, Sinatra's lawyer and personal manager, and John Ducker, a close ally of Gough Whitlam and a leading figure in both the labour movement and the Labour Party. He complained of a threat to impede Sinatra's freedom of movement "including holding him hostage in Australia;" and cited the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights which guarantees the right of everyone to leave any country.

There's a small hotel...

With a wishing well, Frank? No, I don't think so, Though the Boulevard in Sydney may not have been very grand by modern standards, it was big. Sinatra's suite was on the 23rd floor. We'll never know now what exactly went on in the Southern Cross suite of the Boulevard Hotel during the next two or three days. But eventually on the third day – perhaps appropriately, given his walking on water reference – Hawke arrived at Sinatra's hotel suite, where, it is said, the great man greeted him with unrepeatable obscenities from the far end of the room, before withdrawing.

Here they all were, then, strangers in the night, exchanging glances, wondering in the night what were the chances, the chances of finding a solution. On the table, we're told, was a box of Monte Cristo cigars, and a bottle of Courvoisier or (more likely) Chivas Regal. The talks seem to have been led on the singer's side by

Rudin. There were plenty of other colourful characters around in adjoining suites, including Barbara Marx, ex-wife of Marx Brother Zeppo and soon to be the fourth Mrs Sinatra, and a loud 70 year old cigar-chewing New Yorker who wore a red satin windcheater with his nickname, SHOTGUN, in large letters on the back. How far either they or Sinatra himself were involved, if at all, we don't know.

Hawke, too, had some tricky juggling to do with his side. Feelings were running high, particularly among journalists. It seems that at some stage he was joined by 3, then 15 – or was it 30? – full-time officials from the unions involved. Would one bottle of spirits have slaked all their thirsts? Hardly: a case of whisky seems more likely. Hawke also knew that an awful lot of Australians would not be happy if union action deprived them of the chance of hearing and seeing Sinatra perform in their country. And he may have felt some pressure to settle following Ducker's activities. Could there be a resolution, a form of words that would satisfy all parties?

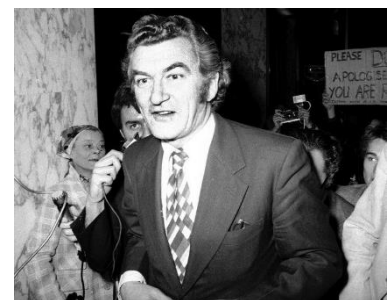
After 4 hours, and just in time, they found it, just in time to renew the tour. Sinatra went on to play with great success not only in Sydney, but in New York; New York and *Chicago – that toddlin' town*. But it was all *rather too close, too close for comfort*.

...I could write a book...

All of this must seem very long ago and far away to today's practitioners. For some of us, of a certain age, it is very familiar: this really is the World We Knew (over and over). But we'll spare you the longer version, at least for now.

One simple lesson for all negotiators is this: never leave it to the other side to communicate the deal.

It seems from all the reports that it was left to the ACTU leader to deliver the message without a balancing voice from Sinatra's camp. Why? Bob Hawke, observers tell us, had to be helped to the lift, the implication being that he was drunk and not very capable by the end of a heavy, liquid negotiating session.



Such sessions were typical of the era, as those of us doing that stuff at the time in the Anglo-axon world can recall (sometimes patchily). And, back then, Hawke had a reputation as a notorious boozier, a 'pisspot' in Oz terms. In Oxford, he had reputedly set a new world record for beer drinking by downing 2½ imperial pints (1.4 l)—equivalent to a yard of ale—in 11 seconds.

One for my baby (and one more for the road)?

But Hawke was not just some bumptious larrikin who liked a drink. He was a Rhodes scholar. He had moved from academia to the research department of the umbrella union body, the ACTU, where he was quickly entrusted with developing and pursuing the unions' pay strategy. He was a seasoned drinker, unlikely to let Sinatra or anyone else drink him under the table in a high-stakes negotiation, especially when he may have had the better hand, but it still needed very skilful playing. He was no alcoholic: he later stopped drinking overnight before becoming PM and then stayed dry for 10 years, night and day.

In other words, he was a modern labour leader, quicker than most to realise that unions needed to reposition themselves as champions of women in the workplace – which was really the issue at the heart of

this dispute. And he seems to have masterminded a strategy which left Sinatra and his party with no way out that didn't involve some backing down.

True, he revelled in the Australian beer-drinking culture. Nice work if you can get it. And he saw such makin' whoopee as contributing to his popularity.

But how drunk was he really after that 4-hour session in the wee small hours of the morning? At the end of the lift ride he seems to have walked out and done a very skilful job of presenting the deal, highlighting what Sinatra was conceding rather than what was being offered in return to the singer.

All the media accounts after the briefing led with the part of the statement where Sinatra said that "he did not intend any general reflection upon the moral character of working members of the Australian media." And that's still what mostly gets remembered. Quite widely reported, too, was Sinatra's express regret for any physical injury suffered by persons "as a result of attempts to ensure his personal safety" – a reference to some 'roughhouse' involving Sinatra's security and the press.

In fact, the full statement went on to say on the one hand that Sinatra "accepts that the working members of the Australian media would be doing less than their professional duties require if they did not make every effort to keep the public informed about the visit of an international celebrity" but on the other hand that he "of course reserves his right to continue to comment upon the quality of the professional performance of those working members of the media whom he believes are subject to criticism on professional grounds".



Frank was not grovelling, not saying, "please, let me try again". Few in the media gave any space at all to these words or to later passages in which the Unions reportedly stated that they had no desire to embarrass or misrepresent Sinatra, expressed their regrets for any physical inconvenience that may have been caused to him and his party, and recognised his unique international stature and his desire to be protected from an uninhibited exposure to the media.

Did Sinatra's party not realise that Hawke, in their absence, was hardly likely to flag these concessions up for the media? Maybe they were thinking that he would go downstairs in a drunken stupor and publicly embarrass himself in front of the hectic scrum of world media awaiting the outcome of this legendary spat. And maybe that was exactly what the Dodgy Bodgy planned.

We can well imagine that for almost too long, Sinatra insisted that, "We'll do it My Way". But the truth is, he didn't have an exit strategy. Neither Hank nor the Admiral were on-side. And if you want to attempt or to defend a high stakes gamble in a negotiation, you must have an exit strategy; a realistic plan for what to do if the other side call your bluff. That's Life.

Still, when he got back stateside, the Chairman of the Board did admit to one mistake on his fraught trip down under: "I got off the plane." It was just one of those things.

PS The toddle was a dance.

Further info:

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06w8ns8>
- <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/people/2015/12/11/frank-sinatra-despised-australia/>
- <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2009/october/1295849506/shane-maloney/frank-sinatra-bob-hawke#mtr>