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SIM COMMINNS FAREWELL

THE AGE, Tu

FEAT

Picture: HELGA S



The best tributes come from old foes

It was a funny old party, the sort that city folk rarely get to attend. Members of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association came down to Melbourne the other night to say a sentimental farewell to their retiring president, Jim Commins, who is greatly loved. They are a dispersed people, so Melbourne was as easy to get to as anywhere.

Not a horse was in sight, not a stockwhip was cracked. In the formal setting of the Gardens Restaurant at Leonda, Hawthorn, which is a fairly posh place, the men were in suits, and the women in smart gowns. When you have seen cattlemen on countless musters, in their broad hats and long coats, their faces dirty and their boots caked with mud, it startles you to see them dressed any other way.

But, by heavens, we were in for a bigger shock, one that is hard to believe. Sitting all night next to Jim Commins at the top table was the Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, Joan Kirner! This is like saying that sitting next to the Reverend Ian Paisley at his retirement party was the Pope (and you can take your pick about who's who).

Joan Kirner, the implacable enemy, was laughing and chatting and waving hello, and when the speechmakers began telling us what a good bloke Jim Commins was because of the way he stood up to the State Government, this did not upset Mrs Kirner one bit.

Nor did it upset two other guests, whose presence was also a shock. Sitting within sight of Jim and Joan were Evan Walker and Rod Mackenzie, two former conservation ministers. Between these three politicians and the cattlemen, a million angry words have flown. Joan

Lahey at Large

JOHN LAHEY



Kirner, Evan Walker and Rod Mackenzie, who are dedicated to creating an alpine national park that the cattlemen say would ruin them, had come to honor the enemy's leader.

This fight between the cattlemen and the conservation forces is not ordinary. It has been long, bitter and spectacular. It has led, among other things, to the famous mass horseride down Bourke Street to the steps of Parliament House in 1984, and to the cattlemen's intervention in the Nunawading byelection in 1985.

That led to accusations that cattlemen misled voters. At this point, the cattlemen's executive officer, Graeme Stoney, tried unsuccessfully to defend them at the bar of the upper house. Remember those stirring days? The alpine fight is not over. Both sides know it is about to break out again.

This is what made Mrs Kirner's presence at the party such a surprise. I said: "What on earth are you doing here?" and she replied that she got on well with the cattlemen and respected Jim Commins. Evan Walker and Rod Mackenzie, who once had a four-day ride with the cattlemen over the alps, said something similar. They were invited to Jim's farewell, so they came.

Well look, it was a great, good-natured night of stories and reminiscences, and I wish you could have seen the last act of the entertainment, when Don Kneebone, the mountains poet, sang to us. He sang 'Waltzing Matilda'. Backwards. The organisers were wise to put Don Kneebone on

last. His act is hard to top.

In the earlier part of the night, we had some speeches straight from the heart, about the way hardship had welded the mountain people together and how they did not refuse anyone hospitality. Tradition, tradition! The word thundered like hoofbeats.

All good stuff. We heard about sports meetings which lasted a day but took a week's ride through the bush to reach. When visitors came for horse events, the girls were given the beds and the young men slept under the willows by the river. "Times have changed," said Clive Hodge, of Valencia Creek. "Everyone bunks in together now."

Mostly, the talk was of Jim Commins, 64, and I hope you don't mind if I tell you a bit about him. He was the mountain people's president for 10 years and was associated with every big event of their struggle to halt the national park. He is from Ensay, and his ancestors were 1850s Gippsland pioneers.

This does not make him notable, but his lifetime of service to his own small town does. He seems to have been in everything: school council, swimming pool committee, bush nursing centre, rural fire brigade, Cattle Council of Australia...

He played football until he was 45. It is a pleasure to list these things (there are many more) because he is a distinctive type of rural Australian who rarely becomes honored or even talked about. There are many men in the bush like Jim. Take these people away from their towns, and things begin to wither. Suddenly, you don't have a bush nursing centre or a swimming pool. Perhaps the reason Jim played football until he was 45 is that it kept the team intact.

Finally, Mrs Kirner rose to address her old adversary. She said: "I want to thank you for your willingness to talk through an issue, to stay firm on your principles, but most of all to deliver what you said you would deliver, or not deliver what you said you would not deliver, with an utter sense of integrity. And you don't get that too often in politics, and when you do get it, it is really sincerely appreciated."

This brought applause from the audience, who had been wondering all night what the foe was thinking. There was no way, however, that Mrs Kirner was going to offer any compromise.

"The mountain cattlemen have their traditions," she said. "What is not often recognised is that the Labor Party has its traditions. Ben Chifley created a workman's base and the vision of the light on the hill. Jim Commins represents the workman's base of other people and his own particular light on the hill. There is room for the two traditions. We believe the mountain cattlemen's tradition can fit within the national park."

It sounds like an olive branch. The prelude to everyone living happily together. But Mrs Kirner's words do not change government direction one centimetre. She has said in the past that in creating the park, the Labor Party is adding only one per cent of land to the four per cent that the Liberals proposed to take from the top of the mountains. The Government view is that cattlemen can still graze their herds in summer.

Jim made a good speech, everyone had a good night and everything is exactly as it was. But isn't it nice to see warring Australians behaving to each other with such courtesy?

▲ **...entice politicians learn their trade**