
PRIME MINISTERS ARE HUMAN BEINGS

The concert had been a triumph. Mendelssohn's violin concerto played with technical brilliance and artistry had transported the audience to a stratosphere into which Beethoven's 7th had continued our journey to musical bliss. Berlioz had also had his say with his *Roman Carnival Overture*, so the afternoon had passed all too quickly. The 'grey army' of the Thursday afternoon audience was homeward bound, struggling down the more than sixty-odd steps from the Concert Hall to reach the ground and then to continue a long walk back to the Quay for transport home.

One of the features of the Sydney Opera House is a series of wave-like shallow steps that stretch out to the flat walk along East Circular Quay. These are very wide with metal railings on either side of the walkway. Each step is like a descending platform, approximately a metre and a half distance to the next riser. As I said, it is rather like waves reaching the shore. But 'poetry' aside, these are killers for people with physical disabilities. They are not brightly marked out, rather each step blends with the next and they are made either of cobbles or concrete – I can't now say which – but I do know that the ground is very hard.

Normally I would have used the escalators to leave the Opera House precincts. These require a slight deviation in route from simply walking across the forecourt so perhaps it was because there was a blue sky up above and my mind still occupied with thoughts of the concert I had just enjoyed that made me ignore the obviously 'safer' method of exit. Whatever... I took off along the footpath which leads to these wide steps that lead to the even longer walk along the front back to Circular Quay..... and the buses that would take me back to where I had parked my car in Leichhardt. Why was my car at Leichhardt? Well, this was another story. I had not been feeling 100% that day. My back and legs were really hurting me and the thought of taking two buses (or a bus and a train) and then walking at either end of the trip did not appeal. I tossed up as to whether or not I would drive direct to the Opera House and park there, but I have done this on at least one other occasion only to find the 'full up' sign outside the parking area. This caused me to have to turn around and drive back home, missing the concert on that occasion and using up all that precious petrol. So, I had decided on an alternative: Drive to Leichhardt, park the car at the Forum and get one of the more frequent buses in to Circular Quay. It would cost me, but not any more than if I chose to park at the Opera House and I should have got home more quickly than relying on public transport. These are the 'big' decisions that these days exercise my mind whenever I need to get to the Opera House. Well, as the saying goes..... *The best-laid schemes o' mice and men Gang aft a-gley.*

Where were we? Oh yes.... Just about to take that fatal last step: Things unravelled very quickly at that point. There was an old woman (note: I think she must have been much older than I am because obviously I am not old! Anyway, she was clinging to the rail on her way down those shallow steps and I decided I could manage the last one without hanging on. Well, I *thought* it was *the last* step. I stepped down the step and believing I was now on the level was about to step out along the walkway when I was distracted by someone calling out as if they had fallen. I half turned to see what was happening behind me and placing my foot forward at the same time discovered there was nothing to step onto and losing balance I went straight down onto my knee caps and hand. I believe I may have screamed. The pain was so shocking. I rolled over and lifted my knees into a roll position as I couldn't bear the pain. This action caused quite an audience to gather around me each one concerned with my welfare.... and bang went my plans for getting back within a reasonable time to pick up my car at Leichhardt!

All the questions... *are you OK? NO! Can you straighten out your legs? NO! Someone, call an ambulance.... Someone, take her pulse.... Someone, cover her up....* Coats were stripped off and I was covered, shivering from shock and the cold that was creeping through the cement on which I lay helpless, my knees tented to relieve the pain. Oh well, what's the point of worrying about the car... maybe I'll just have to take out another bank loan to pay for getting it out of hock. Ambulance.... Oh... not another trip to hospital!

Oh look, said someone, it's the Prime Minister! I looked...and yes, so it was. Kevin Rudd himself, hastening towards our little group, his minders in tow, deviating just enough to walk past on his way in the Circular Quay direction. Fancy that. Not every day do we see the PM in the flesh. *He's coming back,* said someone. There was quite a division in focus as he made his way into a space to the left and front of my vision. *What's happened here? She fell down the steps. Etc. etc. etc.* Plenty of explanations... plenty of 'how can I help' bits from the PM... *Has anyone called an ambulance? Yes, but that was 20 minutes ago and they still haven't arrived...Can we get her into my car and we'll take her to the nearest hospital? No.. she can't be moved. Oh...er... right...*

Being of sound mind and disposition, I decided to intervene.... *Mr Rudd, I said, you are a busy man. You have a country to govern. You can't spend your time worrying about me.* and his response? *'If I see one of my people lying on the ground in pain and I do nothing to try to help, my Mother would never forgive me.'* Now that's what I'd call a well brought up Prime Minister.

At some time earlier in the piece I had identified myself as not just someone who had voted for him.... but also as a Queenslander. I think **he** may have been impressed, but I'm not sure about the other helpers who immediately wanted their coats back and also wanted to know who Kevin had backed in the recent State of Origin... He and I both said '*we did*' which went down really well! But, they didn't take back their coats.

Meanwhile, during this long wait I was getting colder and shivering. I would not be surprised to find that KR (or maybe his entourage who were nervously – I'm told – standing around waiting for him to come to heel) had something to do with my suddenly being surrounded with people from the Opera House (a nurse and a wheelchair appeared although I can't be certain of the latter's origin. I may have been brought by the ambulance when it finally arrived) a doctor (a paediatrician – *I'm from the wrong end of life,* he said - more people taking my pulse and blood pressure, a paramedic and eventually the ambulance crew). Mr Rudd said goodbye as a relieved escort retrieved their charge and they disappeared just as the para got me back onto my feet – no bones broken – shaken but not destroyed – my poor old body managed to take a step or two and they all decided I'd live.

A taxi was ordered (*'Thank you Opera House*) which took me back to my car at Leichhardt where I finally had a cup of coffee and then drove home.

I am still a bit sore but on the recovery road. So, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Oh, by the way, I received a phone call from the Prime Ministers' office on Monday afternoon – checking on me and making sure I didn't need any further assistance. I reckon I'll vote for him again.

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