

The man the media tends to dismiss as “boring” and ineffectual has been a key influencer on some of the Abbott government’s more controversial decisions. Meet Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss, the quiet achiever.

Philippa Murray reports.

Tony Abbott’s straight man

IT'S MIDDAY Thursday and a stream of National Party parliamentarians are heading to their leader's office where platters of cold meats, salad and bread are laid out for a casual lunch, continuing a tradition started by former party leader John Anderson almost fifteen years ago.

Warren Truss, Deputy Prime Minister and National Party leader, hosts the fortnightly gathering during parliamentary sessions to provide a forum where the Party's fifteen members and six senators can meet away from the formalities of the party room. Their numbers include two women. At these relaxed affairs the conversations are free-flowing and can range from the welfare of the Truss family cat, a twelve-year-old blue-point Birman, to the leader's background briefing on a complex cabinet issue.

The man who was frequently called "boring" and "unknown" by the media before the last election is turning out to be something of a surprise to those who do not know him. Under Truss's leadership, the party has "achieved our highest primary vote since 1996, and the biggest increase in our party room over two elections since 1949", according to National Party federal director Scott Mitchell.

Mitchell, in his speech to the National Press Club last December, was also keen to point out that 2013 was the first time in 82 years that they had increased their representation in the joint party room "at an election where the Coalition regained government".

Warren Truss, 65, is thriving in the role of Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development, which also includes transport, roads and aviation, and which he chose over the Trade portfolio, once always held by National Party leaders, because he wanted to avoid the large amounts of travel. Truss held Trade in the last year of the Howard government.


The feline fancier and farmer from the southeast Queensland town of Kingaroy is a canny politician who has already demonstrated his influential role in some of the Abbott government's more controversial economic decisions.

First was the government's rejection of a foreign

takeover bid for Graincorp and then its move to allow an increase in foreign stakeholders in Qantas. Both decisions bore the fingerprints of the Nationals' leader.

His somewhat surprising role in both have focussed fresh attention on this modest, quietly spoken politician, renowned among political and industry insiders for his knowledge and detailed research on policy issues. As well as for his tenacity.

Those traits were revealed early in his political career when he destroyed the career of Keating government minister Ros Kelly over how she allocated grants to sporting organizations. In 1993, Truss applied his famous attention to detail to what



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came to be known as the "sports rorts" affair that exposed Kelly's questionable practice of steering these grants to Labor electorates, a claim she denied.

When questioned by the Auditor-General, Kelly defended distribution of \$30 million worth of grants by telling a House of Representative committee established to investigate the matter that the many submissions had been assessed on an office whiteboard.

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Kelly's resignation from the ministry in February 1994 was a victory for Truss, but he scored an even bigger scalp when Kelly was pressured into resigning from Parliament in March 1995. As a result, the

Labor government lost her safe seat of Canberra.

Fellow National Party MP Paul Neville, who retired at the election last year, maintains that Truss's role in the downfall of the Keating government has been grossly underestimated. "It was part of the unravelling of the Keating government, it was fraying at the edges," he tells ASR.

Don't underestimate Warren Truss.

TRUSS WAS ELECTED to federal Parliament in 1990 to represent the Queensland seat of Wide Bay, an electoral mix of small farmers, cane-growers and railway workers with its main centres being Maryborough and Gympie. Kingaroy used to be known as the fiefdom of the Bjelke-Petersen clan but Truss is the towering figure on the local landscape today. Although the town was redistributed out of his electorate twenty years ago, the local council recently named its chambers after him and the road to the airport is Warren Truss Drive.

"He is one of the quiet achievers," says John Anderson, who was Deputy Prime Minister and Nationals leader from 1999 to 2005 during the Howard government. "Warren is very effective and someone of unbustable integrity."

"There is no minister in the current Parliament or in opposition who can match him for knowledge of their portfolio," contends Kay Hull, former Nationals whip from 2006 to 2010. "If only the public knew the calm workhorse he is, the brain, the balanced thinking that Warren Truss puts into every single issue."

Hull says the Graincorp and Qantas decisions are vintage Truss: "considered, researched and delivering the best outcomes for Australians".


John Kerin, who held a variety of portfolios in the Hawke and Keating governments including Primary Industry, Transport, Trade and Treasurer over a 23-year parliamentary career, also says Truss is a well-researched politician on top of his brief.

He remembers Truss's arrival in Canberra. "In politics, to quote Paul Keating," says Kerin, "you are either a straight man, a fixer or a maddie. Warren is definitely a straight man."

The national capital was already familiar territory to Truss, a frequent visitor in his various roles in Rural Youth (an organization that promoted young Australians and rural interests), in local government and as a grain-growers' representative.

He traces his political awakening to the Whitlam government: "He (Whitlam) seemed to make it quite clear that he had no time for rural Australia," Truss told ASR. "Country people felt spurned and ignored. It led to me going to farmer rallies. I was in Rural Youth at the time and I was invited to a farm summit in Canberra."

Truss spent his early years on the family farm near Kumbia, a half-hour drive from Kingaroy. The



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eldest of three boys, he was sent to Concordia, a Lutheran boarding school in Toowoomba, but left at fifteen because, he said, "it was not a particularly enjoyable experience".

I spoke to Truss by phone in mid-March. He was in his Canberra office and it was a busy sitting week but he gave me an hour. During our conversation his passion for regional Australia, a result of growing up in the country, was very evident.

His father Errol was a pioneer of intensive small-scale farming in the district. In 1946-47, he began growing navy beans for the US Army. He proved to be an innovator, importing machinery, building one of the first bulk grain-handling and drying facilities in the region

and exporting corn to Japan. His brother Gary now runs the family farm while the youngest sibling Rowan is an associate professor at the University of Queensland's School of Mechanical and Mining Engineering.

Truss says it was rare in his youth for someone from his area to go to university. "Your career path was on the farm. I went home after school and got involved in the farm. In fact, if that hadn't happened, I wouldn't be doing what I am today."

Truss spent fourteen years as a local councillor, serving half of that as chair of the Kingaroy Shire Council. He was involved in the Queensland Grain Growers' Association, Bulk Grains Queensland and the regional tourism representative body. Truss also presided over Rural Youth Australia and the Lutheran Youth of Queensland.

The Bjelke-Petersens were a formative influence in Truss's early years. ("Florence in particular was always encouraging.") They were also farmers and fellow Lutherans with strong community ties. Joh was the local National Party member for 31 years, nineteen as Queensland Premier. His wife Florence became a National Party senator in 1981, a position she held for twelve years.

"Bjelke-Petersen was very much the local hero," says Truss. "He had 80 per cent of the vote in the electorate."

Truss cites Charles Adermann, also a party legend and Kingaroy peanut farmer, as another mentor. Not only did they share the same hometown, they both chaired the local shire council, entered federal Parliament and became agriculture ministers. Both were also modest and unassuming—unlike the outspoken, rambunctious Bjelke-Petersen.

"I was a bit hesitant about that," is all that Truss will say of the Premier's ill-fated attempt to enter federal politics in 1987, although his memory has to be coloured by his humiliating loss in 1988 when he stood as the Nationals' candidate for Bjelke-Petersen's seat.

Truss suffered a shock defeat after party diehards, upset by their MP's involuntary retirement, swung their support behind the Citizens' Electoral Council's Trevor Perrett. This extreme right



Warren Truss beat Peter Slipper in a three-way pre-selection battle for the the Queensland seat of Wide Bay.

candidate held the seat for the next decade after he defected to the Nationals.

The following year Truss found himself another seat—and a wife.

Clarrie Millar, Deputy Speaker and long-standing party member for the federal seat of Wide Bay, announced his intention to retire. In sixteen years, Millar had taken the seat from a prized Labor electorate to a safe National stronghold.

Truss was pitted in a three-way preselection battle, including against a tenacious Peter Slipper, then a National Party member who had lost the federal seat of Fisher in the July 1987 double-dissolution election called by Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Slipper excelled at "working the traps", according to another party stalwart. Slipper looked to have the contest sewn up until Millar jumped to his feet and exhorted the 60-odd council delegates to consider who would be the best member.

"It changed the mood of the whole exercise. Things had changed with that utterance," Millar recalls. Truss won by a small margin of six votes and was Canberra-bound.

He also married for the first time at the age of 41, to Lyn, who was 38, and who had been Millar's electorate secretary. The couple has no children, Truss explaining to me that they were too busy with his new job when they started their life together and then time conspired against them.

So how did he feel when his coalition colleague, Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan, said that former Prime Minister Julia Gillard was incapable of being an effective leader because she had no children?

"It wasn't a particularly helpful contribution to political debate," was all Truss would say in an interview earlier this year with the *Courier Mail*.

The new National MP arrived to a Parliament overshadowed by the Labor leadership intrigues of Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his deputy Paul Keating. In December 1991 Keating became Prime Minister.

Paul Neville remembers late-night parliamentary sittings during the Keating government when he would leave his office, bleary-eyed, to snatch a few hours' rest. "Along the corridor, Warren's light was always on."

In 2007, Truss was elected unopposed as party leader when Mark Vaile, who had succeeded John Anderson, vacated the chair, calling for generational renewal. It was—Truss was eight years older. "He was old before he was young," says Kay Hull. "He has always been like that. He is so competent, he doesn't have inbuilt prejudices. Everything is assessed, churned, considered."

While a reluctant conscript, Truss's acumen, experience and work ethic stood him in good stead against a reinvigorated Labor government led by Kevin Rudd.

"If I hadn't been thrust into the leadership, I would have retired at the 2007 election," Truss tells me. In the 2007 election, the party sank to its lowest level of political representation since 1943, winning just ten of the 150 seats in the lower house. Another two were clawed back in 2010 election but it was hardly what you'd call a resurgence.

"I felt demoralized," he tells ASR. "After the

2010 election, it was depressing early on. But it is surprising how quickly the gloss went off the Labor machine, particularly with the government in disarray and the changes in leadership."

Truss has played a considerable role in rebuilding the National brand. Colleague Paul Neville says he spent many hours cultivating party support in Western Australia, attending functions in places judged ready to support the party and backing up colleagues in regional areas.

NSW National colleague, Mark Coulton, who holds the seat of Parkes, says Truss skilfully handled the role of leading a minor party in opposition, "which at times had a different point of view" to its coalition partner. "Warren was very good at sticking up for the Nationals in a way that didn't antagonize or cause tension," he says. "There is no doubt he has kept the relationship going, otherwise we might have fragmented."

Although Truss is a devout coalitionist, describing the relationship as a case of "big brother recognizing little brother's priorities", he has publicly criticized the Liberals at state level. Speaking at a Liberal National Party convention dinner in Brisbane last year, Truss said the electoral mood towards the coalition was positive "unless it's the day after Newman has closed a hospital".

Truss later explained the line was partly in response to Queensland Premier Campbell Newman's health cutbacks in Maryborough, where he now lives on a small block, while still keeping a house on the Kumbia farm.

While Truss's deputy Barnaby Joyce is seen as the natural successor, after he moved to the lower house at the last election, Joyce is on record as saying he would never challenge for the job. Party members regard the partnership as a nicely balanced act. Introspective, low-key, calm Truss countering passionate, vocal, exuberant Joyce.

Truss describes Joyce to me as a "colourful character" who makes a great contribution although their views do not always coincide. "No-one agrees on every single point."

Truss appears to have the top job for as long as he wants it. "The effort to get us where we are now

means Warren deserves to leave at a time of his choosing,” says Mark Coulton.

“He still works like a Lutheran farmer,” says Queensland National Senator Ron Boswell. “He is dedicated to making a strong contribution and leading a reinvigorated party.”

WARREN TRUSS'S INFLUENCE was very evident in the decision by Treasurer Joe Hockey in November 2013 to reject a \$3.4 billion takeover of Graincorp by American giant Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), which would have effectively handed control of grain-handling along the eastern seaboard to a foreign company.

Truss made an unusually forceful public intervention into the issue (which was technically outside his own portfolio) on the ABC's *Insiders* program on 3 November 2013 when he said: “There is no doubt that if this sale proceeds, international companies will control our ports and our handling facilities, and, therefore, if we want to export grain to other parts of the world, grow our industry, that decision will ultimately be made in a foreign boardroom rather than in Australia.”

Hockey stunned the markets and many within his own party when he rejected the takeover, but Truss is adamant today the decision was the only one to make. “I am very comfortable with that decision,” says Truss. “I have never resisted foreign acquisitions so long as they are of benefit to Australia. This was one that wasn't.”


ADM did not present itself well, he tells me, and was not offering Australia anything. Until the eleventh hour, there was no capital-expenditure plan and no vision for the company. “It is very important for Australia to maintain and control its food security. If you own the supply chain, you effectively control agricultural production.”

Insiders in Canberra say that Truss was the main influencer in the decision to amend the *Qantas Sale Act* to allow Qantas to increase its foreign ownership level but that he drew the line at Qantas's request to guarantee its debt. Truss says he's satisfied the airline has good financial reserves but by allowing increased foreign ownership, it levels the playing

field with its rival Virgin and will allow the airline to grow. As minister responsible for transport, including aviation, Truss would be expected to have carriage of this policy but, as with Graincorp, his comments were uncharacteristically forceful.

When asked by the media what would happen if the Qantas rescue package failed to pass the Senate, he said, “There is no Plan B.”

As Infrastructure Minister, Truss has announced a \$35.5 billion package to boost the country's choked and inadequate road system, including flood-proofing the Bruce Highway between Brisbane and Cairns, upgrading the Pacific Highway in NSW and construction of the West Connex motorway



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in Sydney. He has revived plans for an inland rail freight route between Melbourne and Brisbane, with \$300 million promised for pre-construction activities, and is expected to make an announcement soon on Sydney's second airport. Truss is on the record as saying Badgerys Creek is his preferred site, but he won't be drawn on a timetable for the new airport except to say, “I suspect I won't be turning the first sod.”

During almost 24 years in parliament, Truss has been Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, Transport and Regional Services and Trade. Since 2007, he has seen off four Labor and three Liberal leaders. If this makes the Nationals' leader world-weary, he doesn't appear to show it, although he



PHOTO: ANDREW MEARES

confesses he hates having to endure meetings of the Expenditure Review Committee where some of his beloved infrastructure projects risk the axe from a government needing to prune spending.

“It’s a struggle, torture even, to have to sit through those,” he tells ASR.

Truss says his relationship with Tony Abbott is one of mutual respect; he uses words such as “good”, “cordial” and “businesslike.”

Truss tells me they are not as close as his predecessors John Howard and John Anderson were. “We haven’t been working together as long and we have not had as many trials and tribulations.”

Many within the coalition believe Prime Minister Abbott has come to rely on the sound business

head and judgement of his deputy. Truss’s forensic, thoughtful approach to policy tempers the Prime Minister’s more direct, impetuous tendencies. As former independent MP Tony Windsor wryly observes, “Warren would rather get things done than butcher his opposition.”

“His is very much the steadying hand,” says Paul Neville. “As Tony Abbott said, he was never quite sure whether Warren is his elder brother or a very fine father figure.”

An attack dog in Parliament he isn’t, but, as Windsor says, “If possible, I think he would do everything he could to talk it through behind closed doors. He likes to work things out quietly.” ❖

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