Electing Abbott put ‘principal lunatic in charge of the asylum’: Tom Hughes

A very heavyweight line-up of legal luminaries turned up for the launch of Tom Hughes QC, A Cab on the Rank, in Sydney last night. Along with many senior members of the bar, current and former politicians Pru Goward, Barry O’Farrell and Brendan Nelson came to hear the 92-year-old “venerable lion of the Sydney bar” talk about the book, written by historian Ian Hancock.

The best bit of it, of course, is the letter that “Frosty” wrote to his brother, art critic Robert Hughes, after son-in-law Malcolm Turnbull lost the Liberal leadership to Tony Abbott in 2009.

In it, Hughes said that Turnbull had “paid the price” for supporting an emissions trading scheme and it was “to his great credit” that he stood up for his principles.

“To elect Abbott in his place is the equivalent of putting the bull in charge of the china shop or the principal lunatic in charge of the asylum,” Hughes wrote.

The Turnbulls weren’t there last night — detained in Canberra — but the family was well represented by Hughes’ former wife, Joanna, spouse Chrissie, children Michael and Tom Jr and a few members of the next generation, including a pregnant Daisy Turnbull Brown.

Several clients of Hughes’, including Ainsley Gotto, the former adviser to the late Sir John Gorton, was there. She is married to Nicholas Carson, for whom Hughes won a famous defamation case in 1992. Fergie’s sister Jane Makim also turned up; Hughes acted for her in 1990 against The Sunday Telegraph after it published a defamatory story implying that she had been too close to an Argentinian polo player.

Hughes won the Sydney seat of Parkes for the Liberal Party in 1963 in a campaign managed by local party member John Howard. Six years later he was appointed attorney-general by Gorton (Lady Gorton also came to the launch) but was sacked by then prime minister Billy McMahon in 1971. His crime had been to say publicly that the laws regarding homosexuality, which was then illegal, needed to be changed. In his introduction, former High Court chief justice Murray Gleeson AC QC said that the right wing of the Liberal Party, whom Hughes called “Troglodytes and Termites” had moved against him.

He also related a story about a lawsuit brought by television personality Jessica Rowe, whom former Nine Network CEO Eddie McGuire had said that he wanted to “bone” (meaning sack). As he swept to the bar table, Hughes had muttered to Gleeson: “You and I are going to make sure that they only person who is going to be boned in this case is Eddie McGuire.” Rowe won her case.

In his long career at the bar, Hughes acted for a raft of people, including Rupert Murdoch, Robert Holmes a Court, High Court judge Lionel Murphy and Clive Lloyd, the West Indian cricket captain. One of his most famous victories involved the publication of a full-frontal naked photo of footballer Andrew Ettingshausen, for which he received $100,000, on appeal.

In his speech, Hughes thanked Gleeson and other current and former judges Sir Anthony Mason, Dyson Heydon and Tom Bathurst AC along with Carson, former merchant banker Aleco Vrisakis and Kevin McCann. He also thanked all his family members, Ann Sloan, his former secretary of 40 years, the manager of his rural property, Mark Boileau, and Phillip Price, who “works with me at the farm, as did his father before that”.

Tom Hughes, Ian Hancock and Arthur Moses
“It’s been a long life, but I’ve been very, very lucky.”

In the book, Hancock quotes a letter written by Tom Bathurst AC to Hughes in 2011 after the barrister had congratulated him on his appointment as chief justice of the NSW Supreme Court.

“Like many of my contemporaries I sought to model myself on you not only in relation to your outstanding forensic and legal abilities but also the dignity, honesty and integrity you brought to any matter in which you appeared. The profession has every reason to be grateful to you.”

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