

356 of 678 DOCUMENTS

The Daily Telegraph (Sydney, Australia)

February 19, 2005 Saturday

The accidental politician

SOURCE: MATP

BYLINE: ROGER COOMBS

SECTION: FEATURES; Inside EditionSaturday Interview; Pg. 28

LENGTH: 931 words

ROGER COOMBS meets one minister who's on a fast track to getting the job done properly

When Michael Costa burst into the NSW Parliament as a member of the Upper House in late 2001, he came with the aura of a bloke who didn't want to hang around for decades building a political career.

From day one, he wore the bearing of a person determined to "get cracking", to get things done. He challenged people and challenged conventional thinking and wisdom.

In his maiden address, he declared his conviction that the great social theorist and reformer Karl Marx, remembered as the co-author of the political philosophy of Communism, would have been "a vocal advocate for globalism" had he been alive today.

"In all probability, he would have been a member of the Centre Unity faction of the Labor Party of NSW," Mr Costa declared with mock seriousness. There is a confronting unorthodoxy about Costa which has made him hard to characterise, hard to pin down, and the press gallery in Macquarie St have attached various labels to him, none of which have quite managed to describe him fully.

"I got into politics by accident," he says.

"I was basically the typical working class wog kid interested in anything else but politics. It was largely under the influence of

a high school teacher who got me involved in left-wing politics. He was at Balmain Christian Brothers. We were basically a bunch of kids and he got us together at a left-wing "education camp" and we just went along because we thought there'd be girls, and a good party to be had. That didn't turn out.

"They were all very serious but unfortunately, I got interested in what they were talking about."

But there's the sense that the roots of the head-on Costa approach are deeper -- inborn in fact -- than anything that could have germinated on a weekend camp for young lefties. Costa was born in Newcastle in 1956, he's a first generation Australian and is the son of parents who came here from Cyprus "as a part of the post-war wave".

He says: "Dad started in the steelworks here and ended up working at Broadmeadow on the railways. We moved to Sydney when I was about five. So I went to school in Sydney, at Leichhardt, which was very different to what it's like today.

"The high school I went to was, I think, the first disadvantaged school.

"It was Ibrox Park Boys' High, which is now Leichhardt High School."

The accidental politician The Daily Telegraph (Sydney, Australia) February 19, 2005 Saturday

But the interest in economics and politics which has been the intellectual motivation of all his adult life was brought into sharp focus on that camp with his mates, Costa says.

"I certainly don't regret any of that. And you have to remember, that was the era of the Vietnam War and issues to do with potential nuclear holocaust ... interesting times.

"But I didn't stay long with that group. I was about 16 or 17 when I got involved and got out when in my early 20s, very disillusioned."

So getting into politics was "an accident of the Cold War environment" and he didn't expect at the time it would lead him into politics. At that time in Australia's social and economic development, parents were preaching the virtue of "security" to their children.

"So I followed my dad's advice which was, 'Go on the railways, it's a good job'", Costa says. "That advice would have been given in lots of migrant families at the time, so I took it. I went into the railways and it was horrible.

"I started in the school holiday breaks at places like Darling Harbour before it was transformed, the Sydney Parcels, places like that, and the culture, the inefficiencies, the way the place ran, it was just horrific.

"You'd have a sign-on machine and bundy clocks and somebody rostered to bundy the whole crew on and bundy them off."

Change has been a constant for Costa. From the railways he went to Garden Island, which wasn't much better, so he took his father's advice and went back to the railways.

"That was the time of Bernie **Willingale**. There were strikes ... every second day, so I got involved with a bunch of people who wanted to set the union straight. I ran a ticket and actually won the election and it all sort of started from there," he says. "So while [his start in politics] might have been accidental, I mean accidental in terms of organised, institutionalised politics, not accidental in terms of having an interest in world issues."

So what next? Structures have been put in place, Costa believes, for major improvements in the rail services and the culture of policing has be remodelled. Now it's roads. There's a job to be done. Challenges to be faced, targets to be set and met, then you move on.

To where? To the lower house? To Canberra? Probably not. In fact, Costa says he may not even run again when his present term expires. Without dwelling on it, he acknowledges the influence his psychiatric illness -- he suffers from bipolar disorder -- has had and continues to have on life choices he has made. New challenges, new goals and targets, new stimulation seem to be part of the therapy. The idea of 20 tedious years delivering incremental change isn't part of his plan.

He cites people such as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan -- practitioners of "conviction" politics, he calls them -- as the politicians he most admires.

"In terms of politics I like to be pretty straight about what I do. I try to be forthright, frank and direct. I think that's how I am and that's how people expect you to perform your tasks. And we have a rule around the office -- no fluff. I hate ribbon-cutting. I'm not interested in climbing the greasy pole."

LOAD-DATE: February 18, 2005

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

JOURNAL-CODE: DTM