Politicians we end up being on first-name terms with

Barnaby Joyce is the latest addition to the list, and it’s an intriguing group that Norman Abjorensen examines.

I was listening to the news on the car radio last week and an item mentioned Senator Joyce, which made me think “Joyce who?” Of course, the penny dropped and I realised it was Senator Barnaby Joyce. And I very quickly realised that we know him more readily by his first name – something of a rare accolade in Australian political life.

Clearly, the outspoken Nationals senator from Queensland has crossed a nominative threshold in his first-name recognition. Only a select few have managed to imprint themselves on the national psyche for, admitted, a variety of reasons. What it suggests is that he has made the transition from political figure to public character, and with even a hint of affection, however grudgingly bestowed. (Tim Fischer was just such a case in point.)

Going back a few years, Gough Whitlam was always simply Gough; it was not necessary to add the surname to make him identifiable. Of Whitlam’s ministers, a very distinctive three, and possibly four, were known by their first names alone: Gough, Lionel Murphy and, just possibly, Clyde Cameron. At the state level, in Victoria, the long-serving Henry Bolte was just Henry to friend, foe and the general public (except for a certain federal Labor MP, Ted Peters, who was prone to refer to him as “Sir Bolte”). But Mr Peters had his own quaint way with language: a recurring figure in his public utterance was car-maker “General Holden Motors”.

Over in Queensland, Joh Bjelke-Petersen was universally referred to as Joh, except for the bitter 1987 federal election campaign when opposition leader John Howard’s advisers thought it a tad too cosy, and had Howard refer to him simply as “Petersen”.

Malcolm Fraser very quickly became Malcolm after assuming the Liberal leadership in 1975, and of his ministers there was really only one with whom we were on first-name terms, Andrew Peacock. Interestingly, John Howard, as Fraser’s treasurer, acquired the ironic nickname “Honest John” courtesy of the Labor Party. When he was opposition leader during the 1987 election campaign, Labor started to dub him “Little Johnny”, upon which his office issued a solemn press statement, noting that he was in fact taller than the prime minister, Bob Hawke – who managed to short-circuit the nominative threshold with the universal Hawkie.

For some reason, we never became quite familiar with Paul Keating: he was never simply Paul. However, among those in his entourage we had “Joe” and acknowledging “Tony” – support for “Malcolm”, respecting “Stanley”, the famous “Richo” and his infamous “Right”. Not a first name in sight. I said to him something to the effect that he did not seem at all personally close to any of his colleagues. He looked at me for a moment and said, yes, that’s right, but what makes you say that? They dumped him soon after.

On the contemporary scene, surprisingly few politicians have made it across the nominative threshold. Along with Tim Fischer, mentioned above, Kim Beazley made it, but arguably not so Alexander Downer, Simon Crean or Mark Latham. Peter Costello was never just a Peter and Brendan Nelson never looked like getting there; Malcolm Turnbull was, arguably, on the brink.

Julia Gillard has definitely made it, and the jury is still out on Kevin Rudd (and that, as a brand name, probably disqualifies him). On the other side of the fence, apart from Barnaby Joyce, there is the ubiquitous Wilson and also the other Bishop (not Julie), invariably referred to as “Bronnie”.

One Australian prime minister of long ago simply refused to have his first name even mentioned. When the aristocratic Stanley Melbourne Bruce took office in 1925, his very first act was to have his secretary inform the gentlemen of the press that in all references the prime minister would prefer to be known as Mr S. M. Bruce – and so he was. Not a Stanley, and certainly never a Stan. That rather summed up the chap who ended life as Lord Bruce of Melbourne.

What’s in a name, you might ask. Well, a lot really, if you are trying to sniff the political wind. I first began to take a serious interest in the subject back in 1974 when, having lunch with then Liberal opposition leader, Bill Snedden, I noticed his conversation was peppered with surnames – McMahon, Lynch, Fraser, Gorton, Anthony, etc. Not a first name in sight. I said to him something to the effect that he did not seem at all personally close to any of his colleagues. He looked at me for a moment and said, yes, that’s right, but what makes you say that? They dumped him soon after.

In the recent leadership struggle within the Liberal Party, the nightly television news was peppered with Liberal talking heads pledging support for “Malcolm”, respecting “Joe” and acknowledging “Tony” – all mates together, of course. And who can forget Bill Hayden’s quip about realising his leadership was doomed when the NSW Right began calling him “mate”.

Norman Abjorensen is at the Crawford School of Economics and Government at the Australian National University and is co-author of Australia: The State of Democracy.