

**AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY
GALA FEDERATION DINNER
P J Keating
Melbourne
8 May 2001**

The Federal Parliamentary Labor Party celebrated the Centenary of Federation with an address by the then leader, Kim Beazley, followed by a gala dinner addressed by the three former Labor Prime Ministers: Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. Paul Keating's speech was the last, delivered extemporaneously.

A political party reaching a century is something to celebrate. Political parties mostly go out of business: the British Liberal Party went out of business; the DLP went out of business. The Democrats might go out of business for their support of the GST.

The other thing we celebrate is the usefulness of the Labor Party to the country after 100 years of its existence. Its great pluralism. Kim today gave us the quote from Lenin about Labor parties being bourgeois—we should wear that quote like a badge of honour; that our creed survived and his didn't. Because we did represent, and always have represented, the working class. When I grew up about 30 per cent of the community were Catholics but about 50 to 60 per cent of the working class were Catholics. So, there was never any way we were going to be Marxist–Leninist.

We were and are a pluralist party; we've given a home to all sorts of people—Fabians, Marxists, single-taxers; all sorts of characters. I suppose our boast is we can absorb any culture, and we have.

I do think that one of the great reforms of the 1980s was the reform of the Labor Party itself. While Gough saved the party in the late 1960s and 1970s, it still nurtured the old culture of protection, of preference; it didn't understand what the word competition meant; it didn't know what a new economic structure could or ought be. But it does now. It has changed Australia forever and for the better. And whatever the Liberals say, whatever they might throw at us, the notion that we can't be trusted to run the economy is finished—forever!

A party with depth and ballast means that whenever the wind blows or bad political times arrive, the party has its depth to hold itself together. This is what the other parties in this county do not have. The Labor Party is a party of conviction—the Liberal Party is a party of convenience. And the others have come and gone quickly. But we have that great ballast of belief and it is the Caucus which from time to time articulates and says what that belief might be.

We are steeped in our history and we're proud of it. The Liberals loathe our history. But the paradox is, obsessed with our history as we are, we are still the party which divines the future. We employ that history to shape the future. And well might that be

the case. Because, among other things, we are more alone now than we've ever been: no imperial navy to steam to our defence, no imperial preference to guarantee our trade, no unearned weight of size. The message after a century of Federation is that we have to think anew.

You know, when we put our Federation together, there were no Washingtons around, no soldier statesmen, no people like Jefferson talking about blood being the fertiliser of democracy. Our Federation was put together by lawyers and businessmen—mostly old forelock tuggers—people who set us up as a British satellite. They were little nationalists. Safe little nationalists.

But they did make us a nation. And at its core it was decent. Fair and reasonable wages, the Deakin and Higgins legacy—a fair go for all.

Nevertheless, apart from free trade between the States and a limited defence and currency function, the Commonwealth had no remit for a national economy, no economic tools, no uniform taxation, a corporations power that a conservative court had pushed to one side, a deadly second chamber—the Senate—and kingly powers for the intended British representative, the Governor-General. It was all a massive compromise. And, along with the strategic guarantees from the old country, it gave Australia a British century—and ANZAC and all that came as part of it. Yet in the year 2000 we had a Prime Minister campaigning to keep the monarchy and actually prevailing in the exercise.

Menzies said in 1935, 'The fact is, Australia contemplates no future at all outside the British Empire'. And he talked about it lasting 500 years. You might remember the quote. In fact, it lasted only ten years after he made the remark. It died in 1945 at Potsdam when Churchill remarked to Eden, 'we've been relegated to the status of a minor power.'

What Menzies had in his head was not a racist concept, but a racial concept of Australia. And in the twenty-first century the same cringing, the same emotional cowardice, is pushing the Liberals towards America. The Liberals, given half a chance, will turn their back on our geography: their credo 'security from Asia', rather than ours, 'security in Asia'.

The coming election may well decide whether we have an Australian century in this, the twenty-first century, or an American century, as America rejects multilateralism and with it, a multi-polar world trying on an introspective view of its interests and soaking up its allies into its greater self. The conservatives—you can bet on this—will forelock tug their way to Washington, and our future as an independent country, as a republic, in Asia, in our neighbourhood, will be lost to us.

I think the lesson of the Federation should be that the lesson is over. Australia must have a new idea of itself. We have to strike out in a new direction, in a new way, armed with our self-regard, with our own confidence, fully appreciating our uniqueness. Only down this road will we find fulfilment. All other roads lead us into the shadow of great powers and perhaps, ultimately, our displacement. If not in actuality, certainly in prerogative.

Kim's speech at lunch gave me great hope. It contained a focused indignation at Howard and what he has done and, importantly, what he has failed to do. It also possessed a lightly honed and appropriate righteousness, without which Labor loses the current within its conduits. It was altogether reassuring. For Australia's sake I hope we can consign Howard to the scrapheap of history: to that pile of people who never really believed in us, who had no abiding faith in all we have created here and who would deny us our destiny.

I should conclude by saying how much I have enjoyed this centenary celebration of the Labor Party; the fact that we made the 100 years. We exist because we mean what we do. The others go round like a revolving door. That's the way it has always been.

I conclude by wishing Kim and the party well in this election. I hope that election will bode well for the new century. But a century of our own and not someone else's.