

RHETORIC, IMAGINATION, POWER

Remarks at the launch of *Paul Keating: The Big-Picture Leader*

by Troy Bramston (Scribe, 2016)

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‘Whoever knows and uses everything by which the advantage of a State is secured and developed, is the man to be deemed the helmsman of the State, and the originator of national policy.’¹

So said Cicero.

Rhetoric. Imagination. Power.

Vision is their sum. Only when three are present can one speak of vision. All else is empty. It is idle to lament the dearth of vision in leaders lacking these.

Power alone cannot deliver vision: too numerous are those possessing power and no skerrick of vision.

Imagination without power is impotence: our bathtub vistas may well be grand, but can we take Austerlitz?

¹ Cicero, *De Oratore*, Bk I, xlvi.

Rhetoric without imagination is mere cosmetic linguistics and verbal pyrotechnique, absent power of moral argument.

No Australian politician brought these three together like the subject of this biography.

Rhetoric. Imagination. Power.

Let me briefly touch each in turn.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric fell into decline with the rise of reason over the course of the past half millennia in the west. Its classical importance waned and today we harbour some suspicion something that was an art of wisdom is merely a tool of manipulation. But rhetoric, properly comprehended, is a noble art, not just of language, but of thought, dialogue, argument and invention. It is not merely a cosmetic art of persuasion but an architecture to guide how people think, reason and develop claims to truth.²

The erstwhile leader might best seek counsel, not from the pollster or focus group, but from this country's most astute teacher of rhetoric as the architectonic of thought, Tony Golsby-Smith³. Golsby-Smith's great intellectual breakthrough was his rediscovery of Aristotle's Second Road: the alternative to the First Road of knowledge based on analytics and reason, to a Second Road of dialogue, conversation, intuition and the wisdom of crowds.

² Golsby-Smith, T. (2001). *Pursuing the Art of Strategic Conversations: An Investigation of the role of the liberal arts of rhetoric and poetry in the business world*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Western Sydney, Sydney, Australia.

³ See www.secondroad.com.au

In crudest neuroscience, the First Road preferences the brain's left hemisphere and the Second preferences the right. In Iian McGilchrist's crucial book, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*⁴ the Master is the right hemisphere. Keating had the strongest powers of reason, but his right brain's capacity for imagination and creativity was Master.

When it came to speech-making it was not his set pieces that were most important. Yes, Redfern and the Unknown Soldier were salutary. But it was his extemporaneous speech that showed his greatest power. In my view, peerless off the cuff.

He combined his own signature turn-on-a-dime verve and panache, with the rollicking, vituperative fuck patois of Wran ... the larrikin, Australian argot of Daley ... Whitlam's aristocratic aplomb and highest dudgeon ... and the moral seriousness of Beazley the Elder.

Recall the '91 challenge. That interregnum between the gauntlet of the first vote, and the second, was one of the most exhilarating in our modern political history. Not just because we loved the drama, but because the question of whether the country's greatest Treasurer would succeed one of its greatest Prime Ministers, was truly momentous and portentous for the Commonwealth.

From my university-days bedsit, this was the greatest show on earth. The challenger's rhetoric was vital. The biographer recounts that sparkling interview with Oakes on *Sunday* on the eve of the first vote, when Keating said:

⁴ McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the western world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

‘I can provide better government in terms of direction, strategy, *esprit de corps*, enthusiasm and, dare I say it, where necessary, a touch of excitement.’⁵

Who could resist a case so put? *Where* does one enlist? These words enjoined *me* to the cause, let alone an uncertain caucus caught between nostalgia and the future.

Samuel Johnson once observed “[e]very man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier ...”, and I am ever reminded of him silencing *his* biographer’s goading with:

“No, Sir; were Socrates and Charles the Twelfth of Sweden both present in any company, and Socrates to say, ‘Follow me, and hear a lecture on philosophy;’ and Charles, laying his hand on his sword, to say, ‘Follow me, and dethrone the Czar;’ a man would be ashamed to follow Socrates.”

It was high past time for philosophy: all of the Treasurer’s both notorious and hitherto untried powers were now set upon dethroning the Czar. And the sword he wielded was whetted on the stony shores of Kirribili.

He came for Hawke from the front. I asked the biographer whether he could recount one incident of treachery on his subject’s part. With such a long and violent back story, my question stonkered him. Vicious, yes. Vengeful, yes. Merciless, yes. But treacherous, no. This surprised me, for even great statesmen must needs admit opportunism and low art. Indeed, Hawke welshing Kirribili was treachery, and who would gainsay his greatness?

5 Bramston, T. (2016). *Paul Keating: The big-picture leader*. Australia: Scribe Publications, 2016, see pp. 374.

Singular is the politician for whom the charge of treachery can not be sustained. Indeed his lion's courage and visceral partisanship gave him a fierce loyalty that was probably his greatest vulnerability. He refused to throw Carmen under the bus. He held on to Richardson too long. As long as he drew breath for the fight, retreat was not his ken. Whatever one thinks of the besieged head of the Human Rights Commission, Keating would never abandon Triggs – or indeed Assange – to suffer alone.

I think he stood by my mob too long for his own good. His opponents sought to cast us as a black albatross around his electoral throat⁶, but his advocacy for reconciliation and Mabo never wavered. Because it was the right thing for the nation.

Coleridge defined prose as – words in their best order – and poetry – the best words in their best order. My definition is that rhetoric is poetic argument in prose form. It shares with poetry a basic awe of words and language, and employs them to make argument in prose. Words are to be hammered and shaped on the anvils, they must be played in the mouth and the throat, they can be stretched and bent, spun, curved, turned and occasionally, reinvented. And the phrases they form, and the images they conjure, must pay homage to their great power and possibility – and cliché, formulae, cant and jargon must be abjured. There is for me one rule: never underestimate the intelligence of the audience, and the willingness of people from all walks of life to learn and appreciate words well used. We all seek edification, so why should we have low expectations of our fellow citizens?

In the employ of politics rhetoric is often a reverse process ... of hammering ploughshares into swords ... in the sweltering hot forge of political combat.

⁶ Noel Pearson, *Up from the Mission*, Black Inc, 2011, see pp.61-67

This one was all about putting his enemies' baleful ideas to the sword, which of necessity meant putting the person to their demise. Who really wished for Hewson to die an early death in our country's political service, except that his corpse was necessary to put paid to his ideas?

Imagination

Ideas are the ballast of political leadership. When they are thin and tepid, conventional borrowings of the policy wonks, you end up with 'Cash for Clunkers', a board for 'Social Inclusion', 'Pink Batts' and so on.

Keating's distinction was his imagination, from whence flowed his creativity. He remains in his 70s one of the most fecund policy brains in the country. His insights are sharper and ideas keener than the dross served up by those who came after.

The great killer of imagination is transactional politics masquerading as leadership in government. Sure industrial skill in making deals are part of a useful toolbox, but it cannot be the main. Leadership cannot be an endless series of transactions: instead they must serve higher purpose and higher strategy. Pursuit of higher vision.

This creativity is to be found down the Second Road. It is not just a product of the analytics and rationalism of the First. It is a product of empathy, intuition, memory and imagination.

It is nurtured by human art, religion, philosophy, music, poetry and fictional writing. It is indisputable that Keating's great fund of creativity was not just a function of his capacious intelligence, but sprung from the deep wells of a carefully curated love of human artistry.

Which is why the wonks fed on a stringent diet of non-fiction policy will never emulate Keating's policy imagination. There is more to gain from John Milton and Franz Liszt than the latest wonkery.

Power

The benchmark for power biography is Robert Caro's eventually five-part opus on Lyndon Baines Johnson⁷. Troy Bramston chose the only subject born in these Antipodes large enough, and has produced a compelling biographical synthesis worthy of Caro. Both journalists, Caro and Bramston seek to come to grips with power, its purpose, its accumulation, its deployment, its triumph and ultimately, its loss.

Caro is on my mind because there are two American presidents with whom Prime Minister Keating is best compared: LBJ and William Jefferson Clinton. These are to my mind the most prodigious political talents of the twentieth century presidents. There were greater presidents, but none with their sheer capacity.

LBJ was the wiliest and most persuasive: Keating shared his 'grab you by the lapels' ability to cajole, persuade, charm and strike the fear of God. He thought ten moves ahead, and while attending the transactions always had a long game in play. The Texan lacked style and charisma, but no one mastered the Senate

⁷ Caro, R. A. (1988). *The path to power: The years of Lyndon Johnson*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983, c1982-.

Caro, R. A. (2003). *Means of ascent: The years of Lyndon Johnson*, volume 2. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Caro, R. A. (2002). *Master of the senate: The years of Lyndon Johnson, Vol.3: The years of Lyndon Johnson Culture*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Caro, R. A. (2013). *The passage of power: The years of Lyndon Johnson*, volume 4. New York: Vintage books,

like the 36th president. And he saw the presidency as the power to do something otherwise ‘what the hell is the presidency for?’⁸ if not for Civil Rights.

For Johnson no political knot could not be untied. It required two things. First, one must find the solution. The solutions exist, the difficulty for us mortals is we don’t have the ability to work it out. This is where LBJ smoking and prowling the verandahs of his Texas ranch-house, and Keating ruminating in his music room, grappled with Gordian challenges and found their solution⁹. The second requirement is to have the skill and capability to execute the solution: to bring it to fruition. Us mortals can sometimes theorize the way through, but can we make reality?

My second comparison is to Clinton. For me Clinton’s intellectual breadth, charisma and power of speech best compares with Keating. The 42nd president’s policy production whilst prodigious, was mostly small-bore and domestic – lacking the architectonics of the Australian. Keating never wasted his public service, and made more with his place in history than Clinton.

My argument is Keating was the amalgam of the best of these two great Democratic presidents. LBJ’s capacity for close quarters compulsion, playing the long game and resolving the irresolvable, combined with The Big Dog’s¹⁰ charisma, intellectual depth and sheer poetry of speech.

⁸ Clinton, W.J. (2012, May 2) Seat of Power [Review of the book *The Passage of Power*, by R.Carol]. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/books/review/the-passage-of-power-robert-caros-new-lbj-book.html>

⁹ Caro, R. A. (2002). *Master of the senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson Vol.3: The years of Lyndon Johnson Culture*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
See Chapter 22 ‘Masterstrokes’, pp. 519-541. At p.532 Caro writes: “So tangled and twisted together were all these strands that they composed a knot that might have been thought to be as beyond untying as the one Gordius wove together in Phrygia.”

¹⁰ The appellation is Maureen Dowd’s:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/opinion/05dowd.html>

No great good can be achieved in public life without power. I have learned from my own bitter experience of pursuing reform in this country's greatest backwater of misery and wretchedness, the truth of Machiavelli's centuries-old counsel when he said:

It should be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry than initiating changes in a state's constitution. The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who would prosper under the new.¹¹

And has this not been the story of these 20 years since the '96 election? Those who prospered by the reforms secured by this 24th prime minister were nowhere to be seen when he undertook his innovations, gave him no succour in the strife, and celebrate their gains with nary a nod to him at whose bloody hands they came.

Worse, the Labor Party's most diabolical stupidity was its decision to repudiate the Keating legacy of reform, and to adjust its mindset back to an old frame. They ended up disowning their own achievement, and handed to their opponents credit for the growth and opportunity of the new century. It took Howard's 11 year tenure to come to an end before Labor started invoking that legacy. But even today it may be embraced but its masterful model is still found wanting in its current permutation.

¹¹ Machiavelli, N. (1988). *Machiavelli: The Prince*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

As for erstwhile leaders hatching vain empires of reform from outside of the structures of power – like *me* – we learn late from Machiavelli a consequent truth:

Hence it is that all armed prophets have conquered, and the unarmed ones have been destroyed.¹²

And thus our most promising reforms are wrecked by ignorant ministers and malign bureaucrats, be they Labor or its opponents. Provincial apparatchiks with power and no imagination. Aided and abetted by the media, not the least the country's miserable, racist national broadcaster: a spittoon's worth of perverse people willing the wretched to fail. They need black children to remain alienated from mothers' bosoms, incarcerated in legions, leading short lives of grief and tribulation – because if it were not so, against whom could they direct their soft bigotry of low expectations? About whom could they report of misery and bleeding tragedy? Between *Quadrant's* hard bigotry of prejudice from the right and the ABC's soft bigotry of low expectations on the left, lies the common ground of mutual racism. The Scylla and Charibdes of the black burden in this country.

I have learned one thing. Keating was a prophet. And he came out of the desert fully armed.

It follows my comparison with Johnson and Clinton that if the Americans count at least a half dozen in their highest pantheon – and were it up to me the case for LBJ would be vigorous indeed – here we have our one leader of world class, whose prime ministership made compelling case, but in the larger sweep of his Hamiltonian treasurer-ship, the case becomes irrefutable.

¹² Machiavelli, N. (1988). *Machiavelli: The Prince*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Love

Rhetoric. Imagination. Power.

And the greatest of these is love.

Of the country. And of the people. Of its ancient peoples and those who so newly called this great land their home.

There were three defining moments of our long history on this continent:

Firstly, the crossing of the First Australians over the Torres Strait land bridge to this continent, more than 50,000 years ago. This is the story of the world's oldest civilization established in this country.

Secondly, the arrival of the First Fleet, which brought the heritage of Britain to these shores for worse and for better. This is the story of our British inheritance.

Thirdly, the abolition of the White Australia Policy by the 1970s. This is the story of Australia's multicultural triumph.

Our nation is in three parts: our Indigenous heritage, etched into the land and seascapes of the country, for all Australians to discover and cherish. There is our treasured British inheritance: the institutions and system of government inherited from Britain. And our multicultural achievement: the richness of cultures from around the world whose gifts we all share.

I believe a future national agenda for indigenous affairs must focus on three aspirations.

First it must focus on *recognition*. We must appropriately reform the constitutional rule book of our nation so that it treats indigenous peoples more fairly, and ensures them a voice in laws and policies made by the parliamentary majority about our distinct rights.

Second it must focus on *empowerment*: there must be structural reform to enable a relationship of mutual rights and responsibilities with government, and to enable indigenous peoples to take empowered responsibility in our affairs.

Third it must foster *cultural embrace*. For the ancient indigenous heritage of this land is the rightful inheritance of all Australians. It should be known and enjoyed by all. Indigenous Australian cultures and languages should be officially embraced as Australian cultures and languages. The vision of Barangaroo developed by the subject of this biography can be the country's greatest *cultural amplifier*, a gift to the nation and a promise to our future. But we can't pith helmet this vision. The Indigenous must play a 21st century role in this vision: we have to do as well if not better than the New Zealanders.

We do this and we will create a more complete Commonwealth.