

For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches that Shaped History

Troy Bramston (ed) | Federation Press | 2013



First, the basics. *For the True Believers: Great Labor Speeches that Shaped History* is an anthology of speeches made by leading figures in the Australian Labor Party. The book includes eighty-nine speeches, reproduced in whole or in part. The speeches are organised in seven parts: Reconciling Australia; Reform, Progress and the Future; the Campaign Trail; History, Tradition and Ideology; War and Conflict; Australia and the World; and Victory, Defeat, Love and Loss. The earliest speech in the anthology is one made in the NSW Legislative Assembly by George Ryan on 16 July 1891 ('to make and unmake social conditions'), when a Labor electoral league had – for the first time – gained seats in an Australian parliament. The most recent are speeches by Julia Gillard, made in 2009 and 2011.

Within that span, the speeches have a diverse subject matter. One little gem which Mr Bramston has retrieved from the NSW

ALP's archives is a speech by Premier Joe Cahill at the Sydney Town Hall on 15 June 1957. In that speech, at a NSW ALP Annual Conference, Mr Cahill – a man who had never seen an opera, a ballet or a symphony – spoke forcefully against a resolution opposed to the building of the Sydney Opera House and the 'homes before opera' cry then resounding.

There are speeches that call for change, action or steadfastness in response to most of the great issues that have faced the nation.

The challenges posed by free trade or protectionism, world war, conscription, the White Australia policy, the equality of men and women, reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, native title, Australia's place in the world and her 'great power' alliances, the dissolution of the Communist Party of Australia, the Vietnam War and the 1975 Constitutional crisis, are all addressed in the course of this anthology. There are speeches relevant to Labor's great schism of the 1950s, the Split.

Mr Bramston, the editor of the collection, is an opinion writer for *The Australian* newspaper and was the principal speechwriter in 2007 for Kevin Rudd. Mr Bramston introduces each speech with a short explanation he provides of the context of the speech. These short explanations are usually informative and, on occasion, rather evocative. Gough Whitlam's speech at Wattie Creek on 16 August 1975 is introduced with:

At Wattie Creek, as the sun radiated its warmth from above, Prime

Minister Gough Whitlam and Gurindji Chief Vincent Lingiari stood together on the red earth under a clear blue sky. Whitlam bent down and scooped up a handful of dirt and then poured it into Lingiari's hand, symbolising the transfer of that land into traditional ownership.

Sometimes the editor contrasts the immediate reception or contemporary assessment of the particular speech with its subsequent, different reception or assessment.

There is a foreword by leading ALP speechwriter Graham Freudenberg, as well as both a preface and an introduction by Mr Bramston. The theme of these three pieces seems to be that speeches are of particular significance to the ALP as a political party with a 'continuing quest for practical idealism' (Freudenberg) and as a party which agitates for change.

What then might be the relevance of 'political' speeches to members of the Bar Association? Perhaps there is none. Mr Bramston quotes from an interview with Bob Hawke conducted for this book. Mr Hawke said that speeches in parliament did not matter because the decisions had already been made in the government party room. Mr Hawke contrasted the charade (his word) of parliament with his previous experience as an advocate in industrial tribunals: 'in my experience as an advocate, I was used to a situation where the outcome depended on the quality of your argument.' Nonetheless, looking at some of the 'political'

speeches collected in this work, it is hard not to appreciate some fine examples of the art of persuasion and to see how the skilful use of phrase, rhythm and style, can be employed to change minds.

Three of the speeches in the anthology were, for me, particularly impressive.

There is Gough Whitlam's speech in Melbourne on 9 June 1967 at the Victorian ALP State Conference ('Certainly the impotent are pure'). The speech is a bold, unvarnished attack against members of Mr Whitlam's audience, calling for change in the federal ALP's organisational structure and urging the ALP to be a party of national government and legislative change rather than ideological purity. The arguments wielded are wide-ranging. What is striking about the speech is that it is so richly-laden with technique and the devices of the art of persuasion. Among other devices, there is epiphora with tricolon ('The party was not conceived in failure, brought forth by failure or consecrated to failure.') that would be at home in Latin or Classical Greek literature. There is the use of a version of anthyphora or erotoma ('Some think that ... If this view is meant to be complimentary to me, it is a compliment I refuse to accept ...' and 'So let us have none of this nonsense that defeat is in some ways more moral than victory.') that has strong resemblance to the style adopted by Paul, in articulating his arguments in his first century AD epistles to the churches of Greece and Asia Minor.

Next, there are twin speeches by Billy Hughes in the House of Representatives on 27 and 28 May 1909. Mr Bramston describes Hughes' presentation:

Politicians and journalists raced into the chamber to watch Hughes in full flight. Few had heard anything like this before. The face of Hughes was red hot with anger. The veins in his hands were bulging. His mind was calculating the most venomous invective to unleash. His voice was high-pitched, shrill and excitable.

These two speeches involved a denunciation of Alfred Deakin who had withdrawn support from Fisher's Labor government and created a new Fusion Party, thus sweeping Deakin into the premiership for the third and final time. Hughes' language was searing and pitiless:

... I heard from this side of the House some mention of Judas. I do not agree with that; it is not fair – to Judas, for whom there is this to be said, that he did not gag the man whom he betrayed, nor did he fail to hang himself afterwards.

To realise this noble ideal he has assassinated governments, abandoned friends to the wolves, deserted principles and deceived the people ... He will lead any party – he will follow none! He is faithful to only one thing – himself.

This speech by Hughes, the former tinker, union leader and barrister, was made at a time when the standing orders in the House of Representatives prohibited the reading of prepared speeches. It is a speech memorable for its delivery, in its use of satire and hyperbole and it is as coruscating as any

of the famous speeches of Cicero against Catiline or Verres, or Charles James Fox against George III. Reflecting on it, a question arises. How important is the truth or accuracy of a speech's content in persuading the listener? Was Hughes' attack on Deakin so effective in damaging Deakin's credibility (as it was widely-acknowledged to have been) because there was, at very least, some truth in Hughes' brutal words?

The third speech I want to highlight is a speech by Paul Keating to the Dail Eireann, the Irish Parliament, in Dublin on 20 September 1993. Towards the beginning of the speech, Keating says:

It would not surprise me if you are thinking – here we go again, he is going to tell us about our Irish past or our literary tradition; he is bound to quote Yeats at us; tell us about 1798 again or give us his views on our character. I would dearly like to spare you this and I will.

The contrast between this speech and the speech of Julia Gillard to the US Congress on 9 March 2011 is marked:

I firmly believe you are the same people who amazed me when I was a small girl by landing on the moon. On that great day I believed Americans could do anything. I believe that still. You can do anything today.

Having introduced his speech by telling his Irish audience what he was not going to do, Keating then proceeds to deliver a speech which is effortless in its prose and inspiring in its sentiment. The speech celebrates much

of what is the best of Australia. Keating depicts the great promise of Australia and the opportunity and liberty which Australia has delivered. Keating celebrates the 'lesson of the emigrant' while at the same time informing his audience that the great casualty of immigration was Aboriginal Australia: 'the destruction of this extraordinary ancient culture, and the brutality and injustice inflicted on the first Australians can never really be set right.' The speech simply is a thing of beauty.

There are many other memorable

speeches in the anthology. Western Australian Senator Dorothy Tagney's speech to the Senate on 24 September 1943, with its optimism for, and vision of, post-war Australia, the power and logic of 'Doc' Evatt's 'No man should be deprived of civil rights' speech against the bill to dissolve the Communist Party, Keating's splendid eulogy to the Unknown Australian Soldier at the Australian War Memorial on 11 November 1993 and several famous speeches by John Curtin and Ben Chifley, are among the highlights.

It is hard not to notice too, in our age of individualism, how the early speeches by leading Labor figures appealed so frequently to collectivism, and the values of community and the social.

The book is most likely to be enjoyed by those with an interest in the techniques of persuasion, Australian history or the Australian Labor Party.

Reviewed by MR Tyson

The Whitlam Legacy

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The second book which I have been asked to review is *The Whitlam Legacy*. It features thirty-eight essays about Mr Whitlam and his government. Among other things, there are essays about the Whitlam government's political style, its relationship with key

institutions, and its achievements in discrete areas of public policy. There are other chapters which look at the legacy of the Whitlam government. Gerard Henderson, Bob Carr, Frank Brennan, Susan Ryan, Peter van Onselen and Malcolm Mackerras are just some of the contributors. Mr Whitlam has written a foreword to the volume.

There has been so much written about the Whitlam prime-ministership and Mr Whitlam himself that I am not entirely convinced about the need for this book. However, I did enjoy reading Michael Kirby's chapter 'Gough Whitlam: In His Father's Shadow' which surveys the legal career of Gough Whitlam's father, Fred Whitlam, a distinguished lawyer and dedicated public servant. Fred Whitlam, *inter alia*, served as Commonwealth

crown solicitor for 12 years from December 1936. Michael Sexton, then an adviser to the Attorney-General Kep Enderby, has contributed an intriguing chapter: 'The Dismissal'; which starts from about 8.00am on 11 November 1975 and then describes from Mr Sexton's perspective, how the events of that momentous day unfolded.

This book will be most appreciated by those unfamiliar with the Whitlam years or those who have an interest in revisiting that time. It is a volume which is fairly comprehensive in its coverage of its topic and does offer some fresh perspectives.

Reviewed by MR Tyson