

LABOR VALUES

Introduction to Chapter 1 of Draft National Platform by Gareth Evans, Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer, ALP National Conference, Hobart, 19 January 1998

One of the most extraordinary and marvellous things about this Labor Party and movement of ours throughout our long history has been our capacity to renew ourselves.

We started out as essentially a rural-based workingman's party in the early decades; became a mainstream industrial labour party in the 1930s and 40s and 50s; and became in turn a more self consciously broad-based social democratic party in the 1960s and 70s.

We fundamentally renewed and remade ourselves by 1972 after the loss in 1966, just as after the devastating losses in 1975 and 1977 we remade ourselves all over again under Hawke and Keating.

- And now, in facing up to the trauma of major defeat in 1996, we are in the business of renewing ourselves all over again.

With each of those transitions and transformations there were, of course, those to be heard in the movement lamenting the passing of a golden age. If you stay around long enough in this movement things tend to turn full circle:

- For quite a few of our comrades now the Whitlam years have become the really iconic golden age, but I have to say I can recall more than one or two of them at the time lambasting Whitlam for his unholy middle class backsliding from true articles of socialist faith!

The important point to make about all these transitions and transformations and renewals, and all the substance and rhetoric that has gone with them, is that certain things have remained constant throughout: the basic core values and priorities that make us the party we are, and which have remained essentially unchanged throughout our history.

Each time major transitions have been made there have been those, particularly in recent decades, who wanted to call us "New Labor". I think a better description each time has simply been "True Labor" - because what has united us as a party and a movement has always been more constant, and significant, than what has divided us, or changed over time.

The new Chapter 1 of the Platform attempts to distil, as succinctly as possible, what has been so significant, and constant, in the Labor tradition.

The drafting exercise was one in which many people had a hand, because it came up not through a single Committee but through the Parliamentary Leaders, the Convenors of all the National Committees, and the National Executive, with a great many people having their two pennorth - along the way, with almost as many different ideas being offered as there were people contributing.

The draft as you see it is in three parts. First we identify our central values; secondly our priority objectives; and thirdly, what perhaps above all else, makes us distinctively different from the other side of politics - our believe in the central role of government.

We have had a major debate about Labor values at least once before in recent memory, in 1981, when the objectives language of what is now the party Constitution was re-written, and much of the language here is drawn from that document.

We identify the values that matter most for us as being fairness, compassion, individual freedoms, labour rights, responsibility, democracy and - the theme that Kim Beazley so properly emphasised this morning - community.

There's no need for me to repeat or explain the language in which we describe these values now: hopefully it speaks clearly for itself.

- I know the temptation for delegates to leave their mark somewhere in the Platform, come what may - I know because I've been guilty of it in the past - but hopefully we can resist now the temptation to fiddle too much with this particular language.

The next part, on Priority Objectives goes to the heart of the message that we in this latest transition are trying to project - what matters for us is to provide security; to create opportunity; and not to resist change, but to manage it in ways that ensure security and opportunity.

Under the Hawke and Keating Governments, the Australian economy, and Australian society, was fundamentally transformed, and became equipped as it had never been before to meet the challenges of a globalising economy, a fluid new international environment, and a growing, highly educated population keen to lead rich and full lives. Not every one of our agendas was completed, and there were many ups and downs along the way, but the major changes that had to be made to prepare us for the realities of life in the 21st Century were accomplished.

Rather than resisting forces of change as so many earlier Conservative governments had done, including those of Menzies and Fraser, and storing up in the process major economic and social problems for the future, the Hawke and Keating Governments were, if anything, constantly ahead of the cutting edge: certainly they were on the pace as much, if not more, than any other government in the world wrestling with similar problems.

The downside of all this, I think we are now all acutely aware, was that the government almost certainly got ahead of the wider community. Change transformed the lives of Australians, but it also destabilised them. Maybe, people felt, change did have to happen, but why did it have to

happen so *fast*. There *was* an end to certainty. Jobs were no longer for life or secure. New technologies demanded a life of constant learning and relearning. The rise of service industries at the expense of the smokestacks may have created a more fluid and flexible workplace, but one affecting working hours and family responsibilities. Agribusiness pressures and the closure of family farms put many rural communities under stress.

Globalisation opened up many parts of the world to Australia, but opened Australia to many parts of the world in a way that quite a few people have inevitably found stressful.

Aggravating the problem was that there were perceived winners and losers from the change process - certainly those for whom it was more obviously and immediately beneficial. Upper income groups by and large did well in Australia - as they have been doing in every advanced industrialised country taking a similar path - enjoying high quality access not only to continuing substantial incomes, but to information technology and communications services; to leisure amenities, entertaining and travel; and indeed to the political system.

But this experience seemed a world away from that of many others. For lower income groups it was a different story: wage incomes grew slowly, and even with an array of new government social wage payments which in fact did make lower income earners better off, both absolutely and relatively, they found it difficult to think of themselves as better off. And they could never match the access of the upper income groups to information technology, to leisure services, to the political system - or even to some aspects of consumer society, for instance as local shops within walking distance for the aged, or the non-car owning poor, became ever less viable.

The Labor Party is the party which can, as can no other, manage necessary change - but at the same time promote the necessary sense of that every person needs. The years of our greatest success have been when those two themes have operated credibly in tandem. Our failures have come when there has been a lack of confidence that we have the balance right.

Our early return to office will depend to a great extent on our capacity to get right and accepted once again, in the tumultuous world of the late 1990s and beyond, the right message. And this message is that we are not only the best architects and accelerators of necessary change, but also its best moderators - the best at providing the personal security that needs to go with change. This is the message that we are seeking to convey in those four short paragraphs - 12 to 16 - of Draft Chapter 1.

The last part of this Chapter is on a perhaps more familiar theme - our belief in the critical role that government must play in achieving our objectives and priorities. I can't spell it out better than paragraph 17 now does:

What makes Labor Governments distinctive is our belief in the critical role of government:

- We believe that strong and active government leadership, with an efficient public sector operating in partnership with a thriving private sector, best manages change

to provide security and opportunity for all Australians.

- We believe that government is not an impediment, but rather a crucial force in building and realising the full potential of individuals, the economy and our whole society.

Or again, from paragraph 19

Labor sees government as a guardian of the common good, not only in achieving social justice but in securing many public goods which are simply unlikely to be delivered as effectively, if at all, by the private sector and a free market.

Whenever a party talks about its roots, and looks back to what has guided it and motivated it in the past, there are always those who will caricature you as caught in some kind of time-warp - "back to the future".

But the whole point of this opening chapter is to look forward to the future, and to lay down the markers by which we will address the future, with all its innumerable challenges.

There is, I hope, a sense of vision rather than nostalgia which comes through this whole Chapter, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the last clause [clause 20] which puts that vision in an international context (and the international context is one which we've simply no choice but to get right in the globalised world of the 21st Century):

- Labor has a distinctive vision of how Australia should present itself in the wider international community. We should be, and be seen to be:

- a modern, innovative, socially and economically advanced, united multicultural society;

- willing to take a confident and independent position in advancing our national interests, and doing so energetically and creatively;

- willing to pursue wider good international citizenship objectives; and

- willing to pursue those interests and objectives by working in cooperation with others.

On all the recently available evidence, it's only the Labor Party in Australia today that has a vision anything like this

- and certainly only the Labor Party that could deliver it.