

MOVING ON

Address by Gareth Evans at Launch of Keith Scott's biography, National Press Club, Canberra, 28 September 1999

Over 21 years of political life, and even longer of public life, I have had my fair share of character analyses - but it's a new, and disconcerting, experience to have all my defects lovingly and elaborately explored over 414 pages.

Even though it's not the reverential work of hagiography that I – like all biography subjects, whatever they say! - would ideally have preferred, I'm very grateful

- to Keith Scott for having had sufficient interest and confidence in his subject to spend three years of his life writing it,
- to John Iremonger of Allen & Unwin for having had the confidence, or recklessness, to publish it, and
- to Kim Beazley, my Parliamentary colleague and friend for 19 years, my Ministerial colleague for 13 years, and my Leader for nearly 4, for launching it with his usual grace, good humour, substance, and generosity.

Keith Scott has done a quite extraordinary job, with his library research and 132 interviews

- in unearthing details of my ancestry (including discovering Grandfather George of Yea, who seems to have been even more of an obsessive compulsive than me)
- in conveying (I think even to the satisfaction of my mum – who is a formidable figure in these matters) the flavour and quality of my childhood growing up in a trammie's cottage in Hawthorn

- in rounding up for comment just about every kid I ever kicked a footy with, or who bashed me up (and there were plenty of those, because I always picked or provoked more fights than I could win), and every teacher who found me bright or charming or insufferable or all three
- in tracking me through the splendid excesses of the 60s (social, intellectual, political – and in the case of Oxford, linguistic), and my time teaching and at the Bar in the 70s
- in reminding me of the halcyon days of the Victorian ALP, when the legacy of the Split was alive and well, all the tribes were fiercely ideological and the apparatchiks mobilized their numbers through the union rank and file rather than ethnic warlords
- and in meticulously analysing the occasional triumphs as well as multiple stuff ups that characterized my 21 years as, now, Labor's longest serving Parliamentarian, and in particular my 13 tumultuous years as one of Labor's two longest serving ever Cabinet Ministers.

It's all very fluently and interestingly written – even for someone not quite as interested in its subject matter as me – and, in the overall balance of its judgment, is *almost* favourable enough towards me to justify not purchasing and pulping every copy before it sees the light of day at UNESCO in Paris next week: although it's a close run thing!

Although my life in politics has had its ups and downs, and some of the downs have been spectacular, I have had no real personal regrets about my life in politics. It's been tough on my family – who are here today, supportive as always – and a lot of the time its been tough on me.

But we choose this life because of the rewards it offers - not financial, but psychic. For some it's the buzz of being here, part of the action or close to the action – the drama and showbusiness of politics. For others of us – and I'd certainly put myself in this category – the only real buzz is a sense of having achieved, or helped to achieve, something worthwhile: something that makes a real difference to the quality of people's lives, or countries' capacities to live with themselves and each other without deadly conflict.

From time to time in my political life I have been lucky enough to have had a sense of

doing something useful – with Cambodia and the passage of the Mabo legislation perhaps the main highlights in this respect. But there's always a sense of transience about politics – when what you achieve can so often be undone by a change of government or just the course of events.

I have to say, in this respect, that I frankly did not foresee the extent to which the foreign policy achievements of the Hawke and Keating Governments, in which I played a part, along with a number of others (including especially Kim Beazley, who was a treat to work with as Defence Minister), would so quickly and comprehensively fall apart with the emergence of the "Howard Doctrine" – by Robert Gordon Menzies out of John Foster Dulles

- instead of emphasising our commitment to the region of which we are part, we are now emphasising what makes us different: our "special place" as "a European, Western civilization"
- instead of emphasising the universal values to which we want everyone to subscribe, we now talk incessantly of "Australian values"
- instead of emphasising the healthy independence characterising our friendship with the United States, we go out of the way to paint ourselves as an acolyte

One of the hardest things to manage in the conduct of any country's foreign policy is the balance between realism and idealism. In Australia's Asian environment, playing to the gallery won't keep you out of trouble: most of the time you can expect to be booed for your idealism by your foreign audience, and for your realism by the domestic one. The Prime Minister is currently saying he doesn't mind now being booed by his regional audience – we have in the recent past, he says, been too embracing of our neighbours, and its time to put a bit of idealistic distance between us and them.

But the intelligent course is not to opt for either realism or idealism, or some caricatured version of either, but to steer a balanced course between both. This is exactly what we tried to do through the 1980s and 1990s and the Howard Government should think much harder before tearing it all up. As key guiding principles, it could do a lot worse than go back to these, for a start:

- Always be conscious that Australia, while not an Asian country, is a country of this region – that the Asia Pacific, or more narrowly the East Asian, region is where we live, must survive strategically and economically, and find a place and role if we are to develop our full potential as a nation.
- Always be conscious that Australia can never lead internationally through our own military or economic might, or that of our old friends, but only through the power of persuasion.
- Always give preeminence to Australia's national interests, but define those interests broadly, as including not only security and economic concerns, but our interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen (which includes promoting universal human rights values).
- Always be prepared to be creative, pushing the policy envelope out as far as it will reach, on human rights or anything else worth pursuing, but be conscious of the limits of what is achievable - and stop short of anything that is actually counterproductive.
- Always explain frankly what is or seems to be possible, and don't create expectations internationally or domestically that you are not likely to be able to satisfy.
- And always, but always, be deeply reluctant to advise or embrace courses of action which involve the shedding of other people's blood.

Maybe my occasional sense of disappointment about what I have actually achieved in Australian politics is a product of having too high a set of self-expectations about what is achievable. And maybe that, in turn, is just something written for me in the stars. *The Australian Magazine's* Mystic Medusa had this to say a couple of weeks ago about me and my fellow Virgos:

No-one on earth has self-expectations so ghastly and grandiose as a Virgo.
Not even Aries on a bender... You obviously don't need [a new moon] to be

prodded into a fresh start. You people are renowned for your daily renewal of resolve. There is already quite enough judgement and character tweaking in your life. One suggestion: Be a little kinder to yourself.

Well maybe it is time to be a little kinder to myself. I am not sure that leaving Australian politics after 21 years really qualifies as that, but that is what I am proposing to do. It's no surprise to anyone that I have felt for some time that its time to move on, but why right now?

The immediate answer is that I have to make that decision this week if there is to be a chance that the by-election for Holt will be held on Referendum Day, November 6. And I think it is in everybody's interest – including in particular my constituents who would have to turn out for it, and the taxpayers who would have to pay for it – if the by-election can be held on that day, and a separate by-election avoided.

The actual *need* for a by-election in Holt will of course only immediately arise if in fact I win the post of Director General of UNESCO for which I have been campaigning– with, I must add, the gracious and generous support of the Howard Government to whom I have been rather ungenerous today.

I continue to believe – reinforced now by my campaign experience through fifty countries across four continents in the last three months – that I have a reasonable chance of winning, but in the nature of these international contests, no-one can possibly be sure. I won't know until mid-October about UNESCO, but the decision to resign has to be made now if any possibility of a separate by-election is to be avoided. It's not an easy call, but one I think I should make in favour of resigning now.

My constituents in Holt, who prevailed upon me to stay on after the last election, have been wonderfully supportive, wishing me every success for UNESCO although it has meant being away from the electorate for weeks at a time. I don't want to create any more inconvenience or uncertainty for them, and I hope and believe they will accept the judgment I have made. It has been a real privilege to serve them, just as it was to serve in the Senate for so long.

Political life can be thoroughly miserable, but it can also be exhilarating as no other. Keith Scott's book has certainly captured very effectively both the exhilaration and the misery of *this* man's political lifetime. Not all political subjects have been served so well – even by their hagiographers.

While I do rather wish he had left out a couple of the Pryor cartoons, and about 25 pages of wildly exaggerated anecdotes reinforcing wildly inaccurate character stereotypes, I am grateful to him for the compliment he has paid me in writing it, and the skill he has

displayed in writing it so well.