

Australia needs another true visionary like Paul Keating



Paul Keating with children at Sydney's Redfern Park on December 10, 1992, on the occasion of his historic speech.

- *The Australian*
- 23 December 2017
- By Noel Pearson

This month marked a quarter-century since prime minister Paul Keating spoke at Redfern Park, admitting the truth of the history of when people who lived in this country more than 600 centuries collided with those people who came from Britain and Europe. This wrought what former High Court judges William Deane and Mary Gaudron described in the Mabo case in 1992 as “a national legacy of unutterable shame”.

The country tried to elide this legacy.

Antipodean versions of manifest destiny and the white man's burden were attempted. A long period of avoidance, which WEH Stanner called “the Great Australian Silence”, lasted 150 years. All of this came under the general rubric of terra nullius.

It fell to a Labor prime minister to speak the truth that his predecessors did not, more than 90 years after the founding of the commonwealth. Not Edmund Barton or Alfred Deakin; not Ben Chifley or John Curtin; not Robert Menzies or Gough

Whitlam; not Malcolm Fraser or Bob Hawke. Keating recognised his words at Redfern were the words the nation needed.

In the same sense American historian Garry Wills wrote Abraham Lincoln's modest speech at Gettysburg were "words that made a nation", so Redfern was the first instalment in ours. No foundation other than the truth would suffice.

I want to consider the place that justice and reconciliation with the original Australians held in Keating's vision for the country. Reconciliation was cornerstone to his prime ministerial program.

Keating had undertaken with Hawke and that stupendous reform cabinet the structural changes to the Australian economy that broke the back of inflation, giving us from the third quarter of 1991 27 years of uninterrupted growth to this day, and his reform vision started with reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, staking our prosperity and security within and not from Asia, and completing our independence as a republic.

When Peter Nicholson of this newspaper illustrated that seminal cartoon depicting the March 1996 departure of the visionary painter of "the big picture" and the arrival of "Australia's top miniaturist", it was a hilarious yet serious prescience of the change that would overcome the country.

Talk of vision was passe for the first decade and its absence wistfully lamented for the second. It is in the nature of the conservative to abjure vision. For the followers of Edmund Burke's evolutionary change and caution, John Howard's anti-vision was to be expected. Conservatives have a vision of the optimal society but it is by definition retrospective, looking through the rear-view mirror at the receding past rather than the rushing torrent of the imminent future in the front windscreen.

The problem with this conservatism is not with the premium it places on social institutions, traditions, ritual and heritage but with the fact the economy changes radically and inexorably.

These changes are revolutionary, not evolutionary, and have radical impacts and implications on the social and cultural institutions conservatives are anxious to preserve.

The existing structures of a society will be ill-adapted to the changing economy and the pace of change wrought by technological innovation. Without structural reforms that adapt and respond to changes in the economy, countries find their existing arrangements ill-equipped for the future. This is what the Hawke and Keating governments did: they undertook the structural reforms to set Australia up for the future.

We have been living two decades of the future these Labor governments bequeathed us. In our cups, we know we have never been more prosperous than these past two decades and more of growth. The man who held the vision that yielded these reforms was Keating.

Following 1996, Labor walked away from its own reform legacy and only tentatively returned to it following the Howard ascendancy, but by so doing allowed Howard to take the credit and the ground from it.

From John Button to Ralph Willis the Hawke cabinet reads like the greatest West Indian teams opened by Gordon Greenidge and Desmond Haynes, with Hawke as Clive Lloyd and Keating playing Vivian Richards with no headgear, smashing the bowling with nonchalant style and punishing gusto.

Australia needs another reform government. The next reform era.

We have had consistently competent managers of the commonwealth from both sides of politics. We can debate the details endlessly, but Australian governments since 1996 have provided more or less good stewardship of the economy and capable administration. The growth trajectory since 1991 testifies to this, and while instances of incompetence and error mark the ups and downs, management is not our problem.

It is reform rather than management that has gone missing. We use the word reform in our policy discourse too loosely, and a bright line should be drawn between reform and management. Most policies referred to as reform are merely normal evolutionary administrative policies, within the existing structures and paradigms. Just because policies are new does not make them reform.

When I say reform I mean reform to systems, structures and institutions. I don't mean a tax break here or a policy initiative there — adjustments within the same operating system. Reform means changing the operating system itself. Paradigm shifts are involved in true reform.

In my 2014 eulogy for Whitlam I said his government was “the textbook case of reform trumping management”. Many Australians tell me these words explained the Whitlam government's colossal achievement for them because it separated out the undeniable breadth and depth of reform from its chaotic management.

Howard was first and foremost a cultural reformer (according to his conservative lights) rather than an economic one. He was an economic steward, and his GST was certainly courageous and implemented adeptly, but it was not a structural reform to the economy like that long list effected by Hawke and Keating.

There is no nay-saying Howard's stewardship of the economy but the truth is this was management, not reform.

He and the nation pocketed the gains yielded by the structural reforms of his predecessors, the foundation of which was breaking the yoke of inflation that bedevilled the country for so long. William Wordsworth once wished John Milton still lived for “England hath need of thee”. Well may we ask: Where is the next reform government to take up the mantle of Hawke and Keating? Australia hath need of thee.

We need reforms that set Australia up for the future. It cannot just be about managing the present — as important as that is — but reform by definition must imagine the future for our country and our people.

It was a line I heard obliquely in an obscure interview Keating gave, a nostrum that struck me with its moral clarity, and I wondered via Google whether it was a borrowing — it is in fact a Keating original: “The reward for public life is public progress.” Keating's entire *raison d'être* was public progress. Erstwhile reforming

governments vying to take up the mantle of Hawke and Keating will need a vision for the future they seek. In his recent address to the annual dinner of the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia, Keating said: “If you can’t imagine it, you sure as hell are never going to see it.”

I think it incontrovertible that vision is the sum of rhetoric, the capacity to develop and enjoin citizens in a narrative about the journey that lies ahead: imagination and power. These were Keating’s gifts, which enabled him to imagine the future, to take his colleagues and the country forward with a story, and organise the power necessary to make that future come to pass.

We can sniff and snort all we like about vision, but the prophet of old was surely right when he said “without vision, the people perish”. The prosperity we now enjoy is the fruit of vision. Keating’s vision still pertains today.

The business of reconciliation must be finished: can we imagine a future where victimisation and victimhood are history; where shame, denial and guilt are transcended by truth, open hearts and justice?

Can we imagine a future where Australia finds its security within Asia rather than from it? With the rise of China and the roiling implications for our foreign policy today, this is still a most fundamental question for us. How can we seek our future security from the place in which we seek our future prosperity?

Can we imagine an Australia that recognises and honours this country’s indigenous heritage, affirms its British institutions and history, and celebrates our commitment to multicultural diversity within unity — a shift from unity in diversity — and what this will mean for our sense of independence and our role in the world?

Redfern Park needs to be understood within this vision.

Noel Pearson is policy director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.