

Paul Keating: a visionary of power



Noel Pearson with Paul Keating yesterday. Picture: Hollie Adams

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Rhetoric, imagination and power: no Australian politician brought these three together like Paul Keating.

Let me briefly touch each in turn. Keating has the strongest powers of reason, but his right brain's capacity for imagination and creative rhetoric was his 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 developed his own signature turn-on-a-dime verve and panache, combined with the rollicking, vituperative patois of Neville Wran, the larrikin, Australian argot of Fred Daly, Gough Whitlam's aristocratic aplomb and highest dudgeon and the moral seriousness of Kim Beazley the Elder.

Recall the 1991 Keating challenge of Bob Hawke for the prime ministership. 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. During that sparkling interview with Laurie Oakes on *Sunday* on the eve of the first vote, Keating said: "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."

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.

All of the treasurer's both notorious and hitherto untried powers were now set upon dethroning the tsar. And the sword he wielded was whetted on the stony shores of Kirribilli.

He came for Hawke from the front. I asked Keating's biographer Troy Bramston whether he could recount one incident of treachery on his subject's part. With such a long and violent backstory, 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 (the Kirribilli agreement) was treachery, and who would gainsay his greatness?

Singular is the politician for whom the charge of treachery cannot 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 Lawrence under the bus. He held on to Graham 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 Gillian Triggs — or indeed Julian 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 throat, 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, poetry as the best words in their best order. My definition is that rhetoric is poetic argument in prose form. 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?

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, 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 government leadership. Sure industrial skill in making deals is part of a useful toolbox, but it cannot be the main. Leadership cannot be an endless series of transactions: instead it must serve higher purpose and higher strategy. Pursuit of higher vision.

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 nonfiction policy will never emulate Keating’s policy imagination. There is more to gain from John Milton and Franz Liszt than the latest wonkery.

I now turn to power. The benchmark for power biography is Robert Caro’s five-part opus on Lyndon Baines Johnson. 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 20th 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 10 moves ahead, and while attending the transactions always had a long game in play. He lacked style and charisma, but no one mastered the Senate like the 36th president. And he saw the presidency as the power to do something otherwise (“what the hell is the presidency for?”) in response to civil rights.

For Johnson no political knot could not be untied. It required two things. Firstly 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 verandas of his Texas ranch-house, and Keating ruminating in his music room, grappled with Gordian challenges and found their solution. The second requirement is to have the skill and capability to execute the solution: to bring it to fruition. Us mortals can sometimes theorise 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 that best compares with Keating. The 42nd president too much wasted his place in history and his policy production while 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 therefore that 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's charisma, intellectual depth and sheer poetry of speech.

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.”

And has this not been the story of these 20 years since the 1996 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 diabolic 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 John Howard's 11-year tenure to come to an end before Labor started invoking that legacy. But even today that legacy may be embraced but its masterful model is still found wanting in its current permutation.

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.”

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 blacks 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 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 here we have our one leader of world class, whose prime ministership made compelling case, but in the larger sweep of his Hamiltonian treasurership, the case becomes irrefutable.

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: First, the crossing of the First Australians over the Torres Strait land bridge

to this continent, 50,000 or so years ago. This is the story of the world's oldest civilisation established in this country.

Second, 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.

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

Our nation in these three parts: our indigenous heritage, etched into the landscapes and seascapes of the country, for all Australians to discover and cherish. There is our treasured British inheritance: the institutions and legal system 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 Sydney's Barangaroo developed by Keating 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 indigenes 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.

This is an edited extract of a speech by Noel Pearson at yesterday's launch of Paul Keating: The Big-Picture Leader by Troy Bramston.