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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT BOOK LAUNCHING OF
T. J. RYAN - A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY
BY
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AT BRISBANE, 3 OCTOBER 1975

OVER THE YEARS, THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY HAS NOT ENJOYED A VERY GOOD PRESS. BY CONTRAST, WE HAVE BEEN GENERALLY WELL-TREATED BY HISTORY AND THE HISTORIANS. IT IS SOME CONSOLATION TO KNOW THAT HISTORY WILL RENDER A FAVOURABLE VERDICT. THE DIFFICULTY IS TO WAIT AROUND LONG ENOUGH FOR THE JUDGEMENT TO BE HANDED DOWN. IF POSTERITY HAD THE VOTE, LABOR WOULD NEVER BE OUT OF OFFICE. AS IT IS WE HAVE THE PARADOX THAT WHILE AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL HISTORY TENDS VERY LARGELY TO BE WRITTEN IN TERMS OF THE HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY, THE PARTY AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL HAS HELD OFFICE ONLY 18 YEARS OF THE 74 YEARS OF FEDERATION.

THE ARRIVAL OF DENIS MURPHY'S BOOK 'LIFE OF T.J. RYAN' FIFTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, DOES POINT TO THE RATHER LEISURELY PACE AT WHICH OUR ACADEMIC HISTORIANS PRODUCE THEIR ASSESSMENTS. THE GAPS ARE ENORMOUS. THERE IS STILL NO DEFINITIVE WORK ON PARKES, GRIFFITH, BARTON, FISHER, LYONS, AND ABOVE ALL, CURTIN. THE LAST WORD HAS NOT BEEN SAID ABOUT HUGHES, BRUCE, OR CHIFLEY. AS FAR AS I AM AWARE, NO-ONE HAS YET UNDERTAKEN THE FORMIDABLE TASK OF ASSESSING THE MENZIES ERA. THE JOURNALISTS HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE PROMPT.

IN MORE THAN ONE SENSE, ALAN REID DID GORTON AND I SHOULD GIVE A PLUG FOR LAURIE OAKES' BOOK ON WHITLAM WHICH INEXPLICABLY HAS BEEN REMAINDERED AT 35 CENTS.

THERE IS OF COURSE A POIGNANCY ABOUT THE STORY OF T.J. RYAN. HE DIED AT FORTY-FIVE IN THE PRIME OF LIFE, AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POWERS, WITH EVERY PROSPECT OF EVEN GREATER ACHIEVEMENTS AHEAD OF HIM. THERE WAS EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE THAT HE WOULD SHORTLY BECOME THE LEADER OF THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY AND PRIME MINISTER. DEATH WROTE A GREAT QUESTION MARK ON HIS CAREER.

T.J. RYAN WAS SUPERBLY EQUIPPED BY TEMPERAMENT AND TRAINING FOR THE ROLE HE PLAYED AND FOR THE LARGER ROLE TO WHICH HE ASPIRED. THE STATUE IN THE EXECUTIVE GARDENS REPRESENTS HIM AS A KING'S COUNSEL. HE WAS IN FACT THE ONLY LAWYER TO HEAD THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT THIS CENTURY. THERE IS A DOUBLE FIRST THERE - THE ONLY LAWYER PREMIER AND THE ONLY QUEENSLAND PREMIER OF THIS CENTURY TO HAVE A STATUE - SO FAR. IN FACT JACK PIZZEY - ALSO VERY TRAGICALLY CUT OFF AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS CAREER - IS THE ONLY OTHER QUEENSLAND PREMIER THIS CENTURY TO HAVE OBTAINED A DEGREE. RYAN'S LEGAL TRAINING WAS OBVIOUSLY OF VERY GREAT IMPORTANCE TO HIM IN THE TWO GREAT CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL BATTLES OF HIS CAREER - AGAINST THE PRETENSIONS OF THE UPPER HOUSE, THE HAPPILY DEFUNCT LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL, AND AGAINST HUGHES.

THE HEART OF DENIS MURPHY'S BOOK IS THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN RYAN AND HUGHES OVER CONSCRIPTION. THERE IS TRAGEDY, COMEDY, REAL DRAMA AND MERE MELODRAMA. FORTUNATELY IN THESE DAYS OF REASON AND LIGHT, AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS AND QUEENSLAND PREMIERS ARE ABLE TO BASE THEIR RELATIONS ON A SPIRIT OF CO-OPERATION AND MUTUAL RESPECT. RYAN TRANSFERRED TO FEDERAL POLITICS FOR THE SPECIFIC PURPOSE OF DEFEATING HUGHES IN THE NATIONAL ARENA. IN THE EVENT, IT WAS NOT RYAN WHO DID FOR HUGHES. HE WAS DESTROYED BY HIS OWN COLLEAGUES, THUS ESTABLISHING THE GREAT CONSERVATIVE TRADITION, OF WHICH IN THEIR TURN LATHAM, MENZIES, GORTON AND SNEDDEN WERE ALL VICTIMS, WITH LYONS AND HOLT SAVED FROM A SIMILAR FATE BY DEATH.

THERE IS ONE ASPECT OF RYAN'S CONDUCT IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CONSCRIPTION WHICH MERITS MENTION. THE DEFECTION OF HUGHES AND EVERY STATE LABOR LEADER EXCEPT RYAN DEALT A VERY HEAVY BLOW TO THE CONFIDENCE OF THE PARTY NOT ONLY IN THEIR LEADERS BUT IN THE VERY PRINCIPLE OF LEADERSHIP ITSELF. THE PARLIAMENTARY WING AND PARLIAMENTARY LEADERSHIP BECAME HEAVILY SUSPECT. THERE WAS A STRONG ATTEMPT TO TAKE THE ELECTION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY LEADERSHIP AWAY FROM THE PARLIAMENTARIANS AND PLACE IT IN THE HANDS OF THE MACHINE. THIS DID IN FACT SUCCEED IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AND LANG OWED HIS POSITION TO THE CENTRAL EXECUTIVE, NOT THE NEW SOUTH WALES CAUCUS.

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT RYAN BY HIS STATURE AND HIS FIRM LOYALTY TO THE PRINCIPLE OF PARLIAMENTARY INDEPENDENCE MADE THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTION IN PREVENTING THIS OCCURRING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL. THE PARTY'S CONFIDENCE IN ITS LEADERSHIP WAS NOT REALLY RESTORED UNTIL CURTIN BUT RYAN MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE PRESERVED THE PRINCIPLE INTACT. SO CURTIN AND ALL HIS SUCCESSORS OWE THIS DEBT TO RYAN.

DENIS MURPHY'S BOOK DOCUMENTS A NOTABLE FEATURE OF AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL LIFE - THE AMAZING CONSISTENCY, THE STERILITY, THE SHEER LACK OF IMAGINATION IN THE INVECTIVE USED AGAINST THE LABOR PARTY. HERE ARE SOME DESCRIPTIONS OF RYAN AND HIS GOVERNMENT:

"...TYRANNY...TREACHERY...TREASON...
MOB RULE...COMMUNIST...BOLSHEVIK...
DISLOYAL TO THE CROWN...A CONTEMPTIBLE CONSPIRACY...
REPREHENSIBLE...A THREAT TO THE AUSTRALIAN WAY
OF LIFE..."

AND OF COURSE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT INSURANCE OFFICE WAS "...A VIOLENT REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST ATTEMPT TO DESTROY FREEDOM OF ENTERPRISE AND THE RIGHTS OF FREE CHOICE...". IT IS ALL SO DEPRESSINGLY FAMILIAR.

BEFORE RYAN'S LEADERSHIP THE PARTY'S STRENGTH IN QUEENSLAND WAS BASED IN THE OUTBACK AND THE CENTRAL AND NORTHERN PROVINCIAL TOWNS. HIS POLITICAL ACHIEVEMENT WAS TO FORGE A NEW BASE IN BRISBANE. THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE CAPITAL AND THE GREAT PROVINCIAL CITIES LAID THE FOUNDATIONS FOR LABOR'S ASCENDANCY IN QUEENSLAND WHICH LASTED ALMOST UNBROKEN FOR NEARLY HALF A CENTURY. TO RESTORE THAT ALLIANCE IS STILL THE KEY TO POLITICAL SUCCESS FOR THE PARTY IN QUEENSLAND.

I CONGRATULATE DENIS ON HIS PAINSTAKING WORK, HIS PATIENT RESEARCH, HIS VERY READABLE RE-CREATION OF A TURBULENT BUT VERY FRUITFUL PERIOD IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF QUEENSLAND AND OF AUSTRALIA. IN THIS RECORD OF A GREAT CAREER UNTIMELY CUT OFF, HE HAS MADE A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO OUR HISTORY, OUR POLITICS - OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THAT HISTORY AND THOSE POLITICS.

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