



## PRIME MINISTER

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ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER -  
AT "THE LIGHT ON THE HILL" INAUGURAL DINNER -  
BATHURST - 21 SEPTEMBER 1985

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Here, in the city of his birth one hundred years ago tomorrow, we come together to honour the memory of Joseph Benedict Chifley.

The great themes of Ben Chifley's career, the loves and loyalties of his life, were clear and simple. First and last, there was his love for and faith in Australia and its people. Inseparable from this, was his love for and faith in the Australian Labor movement, as the servant of the Australian people - so much so that he specifically identified the Australian Labor Party as his "real religion".

But throughout his life, and never more than when he was leader of this nation, he always drew strength from his roots here in Bathurst; and when he proudly identified himself as "a child of the pavements, a boy from the bush" he meant Bathurst.

He would never have boasted that he was a citizen of the world, although his abiding faith in the essential goodness of humanity and his service to the cause of humanity would certainly have entitled him to that description. Even as Prime Minister, he would have eschewed the title of first citizen of Australia. But he did allow himself one boast - the boast that he was a citizen of Bathurst, which to him was simply the best place in Australia.

And who, in this room tonight, is going to challenge his opinion?

During his life and since his death, Ben Chifley was often compared with Abraham Lincoln.

The comparisons have seized on the more obvious similarities - humble origins, the lack of formal education, the love of humanity and the love of country, the homespun humour, the laconic wit, the common touch, the simplicity of style, the simple faith in the simple virtues.

But there was also a more profound similarity, which has not been so often noticed.

For all their genuine simplicity, both Lincoln and Chifley possessed, in the best sense, great sophistication, subtlety and complexity of intellect. Chifley of course, made no pretensions to being an intellectual. But he brought to bear, on every task during his great career, perhaps the most powerful intellect of any Australian politician of his age and generation.

He always expressed his regret at his lack of formal education. That was the reason why he made such strong efforts for his own self-education, particularly on financial and economic subjects. It was also partly the reason why he recruited around him, as Treasurer and Prime Minister, some of the best qualified young men in Australia - of whom, in terms of the service they were to give to Australia and to successive Australian Governments, H.C. (Nugget) Coombs may stand as an example. And it is one of the reasons why he did so much to broaden the opportunities for tertiary education in Australia - through such measures as the Commonwealth scholarship scheme, the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme and the establishment of the Australian National University - to ensure that new generations of Australians would have the opportunities that he and most of his generation never had.

Yet none of his peers, none of his contemporaries, none of his opponents, were ever left in any doubt that, with Chifley, they were dealing not only with a strong personality but with a commanding intellect as well.

I mention this aspect only to redress the balance of history as it is often received and perceived.

Full justice will not be done to Chifley if we fail to recognise that, behind all his great qualities of heart, soul and character, lay an extraordinary mind and an extraordinarily powerful intellect.

I have said that I have dwelt upon this point to redress the perceptions of history.

But I also do it to illuminate the text on which I am called to address you tonight - the text which will be the theme of the series of lectures which my address tonight inaugurates.

The theme is "The Light on the Hill".

And that is to be the title by which all the subsequent lectures, endowed by the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party, will be known.

It is a text taken, of course, from one of Chifley's most famous speeches - his address to the annual conference of the New South Wales Branch of the Party at the Sydney Town Hall in June 1949 - six months before our defeat by Menzies on 10 December 1949.

Few who heard him believed that his Government was on the verge of defeat, and none could have conceived that another twenty-three years would elapse before the election of another Labor Government of Australia.

And perhaps of all the 1500 conference delegates in that historic chamber thirty-six years ago, Chifley alone sensed the full extent of the dangers and difficulties ahead for the Party he loved so much and the waste and the loss that was to follow, through disloyalty, disunity, betrayal and, most of all, stupidity, in the long barren years to come.

A very important point I wish to make tonight - and inaugurating these lectures I think it is absolutely essential that I should establish this point at their outset - is this: when Chifley spoke of the light on the hill, he was neither coining nor mouthing a slogan.

Far from being a mere slogan, it was the very distillation of the essence of the beliefs, experiences, ideals and goals of a lifetime.

Nor is "the light on the hill" a statement of narrow ideology. It is, in its full context, a most practical and precise statement of what the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Labor movement is all about - five splendid words which sum up not only the meaning of Chifley's lifetime of service to Australia, but sum up the nature, meaning and purpose of this great political and industrial movement - the Australian Labor Party.

So let me put the words in their full context.

And, as you hear them, I ask you to put the words of Ben Chifley thirty-six years ago in the context of Australia's present and Australia's future.

It is a long quotation - but I know the men and women of Bathurst will, of all Australians, be most willing to hear again and to understand the words and meaning of their greatest fellow citizen.

And what Ben Chifley said to the annual conference of the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party on 12 June 1949, was this:

"I have had the privilege of leading the Labor Party for nearly four years. It is a man-killing job and would be impossible if it were not for the help of my colleagues and members of the movement. No Labor Minister or leader ever has an easy job. The urgency that rests behind the Labor movement, pushing it on to do things, to create new conditions, to reorganise the economy of the country, always means that the people who work within the Labor movement, people who lead, can never have an easy job. The job of the evangelist is never easy. But the strength of the movement cannot come from us. We make plans and pass legislation to help and direct the economy of the country. But the job of getting the things the people of the country want comes from the roots of the labor movement - the people who support it because they believe in a movement that has been built up to bring better conditions to the people. I try to think of the Labor movement, not as putting an extra sixpence in somebody's pocket, or making somebody Prime Minister or Premier, but as a movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people. We have a great objective - the light on the hill - which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand. It it were not for that, the Labor movement would not be worth fighting for. If the movement can make someone more comfortable, give to some father or mother a greater feeling of security for their children, a feeling that if a depression comes there will be work, that the Government is striving its hardest to do its best, then the Labor movement will be completely justified."

Those, my friends, are the principles which Ben Chifley applied throughout his career of service to the Labor movement and to Australia.

I suggest they are principles as relevant to our Party and the conduct of the affairs of our nation, now, as they were thirty-six years ago.

Implicit in everything that Chifley said - not just in the "light on the hill" speech - but whenever he spoke about his vision for Australia - was the one fundamental objective of building an Australia dedicated to fairness, justice and genuine equality of opportunity for all; where each Australian had an inalienable entitlement to dignity and security and where all would share fairly and fully in the abundance and opportunities that Australia could offer.

And that remains the objective we strive for today.

I said before that the objective set by the light on the hill was not an ideology, but a practical program; and that will have become very clear to you as you listened to the full quotation.

Its practical application, throughout his years as Curtin's second-in-command during the war and as Prime Minister from 1945 to 1949, transformed Australian society.

In the years between 1942 and 1949 Australian society and the Australian economy were fundamentally re-shaped.

The Governments of Curtin and Chifley accepted the Federal Government's overriding responsibility for the management of the Australian economy, set the goal of full employment, established the uniform tax system, vastly expanded the manufacturing and heavy industry base, transformed the social security system, established the post-war immigration scheme, reformed the banking system, accepted, for the first time, a share of Commonwealth responsibility for education, health, housing, power and transport - in short, established the framework of modern Australia.

It is a measure of the strength of those achievements that they were not reversed or altered in any fundamental way during nearly a quarter of a century of conservative rule which followed.

The prosperity Australia enjoyed during most of those years was built on the foundations which the Chifley Government had laid.

Australia's tragedy is that successive conservative governments from Menzies to McMahon wasted the Chifley legacy.

They failed to make the further changes necessary to enable Australian industry to meet more adequately the challenges of a highly competitive world.

During those years, conservative governments assumed, and encouraged the public to assume, that with our abundance of resources, growth would come naturally, without real effort, and that the world would readily buy our surplus production. And the result was that opportunities were squandered to place our national growth and the maintenance of our standards on an even firmer footing than Chifley had established in the post-war reconstruction years.

Chifley committed his Government firmly to economic growth. He saw that the vigorous development of Australian resources and industries was, as his biographer, the late Professor Crisp wrote "the crucial source for any substantial advance in material or cultural wellbeing".

And as Crisp puts it:

"the power of his leadership lay not least in the degree to which his own intense convictions about national development prevailed upon all his colleagues to subordinate much current political advantage to measures which could bear fruit only years ahead."

At the same time that he sought to establish the conditions for economic growth he maintained simultaneously the fight against inflation.

That was a daunting task in the post-war world - a task made doubly difficult in Australia by constitutional limitations.

But he was determined to follow policies to achieve economic growth while holding inflation down.

He told the Parliament during the Budget debate in September 1945:

"I have always stressed the disastrous results which can overtake the people of any country, particularly the workers, if the government is unable to control inflationary movements. If those movements gather impetus, they affect the worker in receipt of the basic wage and margins above it, and are absolutely cruel to that section of the community which is receiving a fixed income."

And that message remains very relevant for us, the Labor movement and the Labor Government, today. That is why our Government is so firmly committed to sustain growth without renewed high inflation.

Chifley saw clearly, as we do today, that sustained growth without inflation was the very basis and condition for achieving the legitimate aspirations the Australian people have for themselves and their families - for improved living standards, for secure employment, for decent housing and for greater security and greater dignity, in retirement and sickness or incapacity for whatever reason. He saw, as we do today, that it is growth which would enable us, as a nation, to improve the lot of those who depended upon social security payments for their entitlement to share in the prosperity of their country.

Throughout my own Prime Ministership I have emphasised my conviction that, fundamental as our commitment to growth is, a society which dedicated itself, narrowly and exclusively, to a single goal of economic growth, would sow the seeds of its ultimate disintegration; and that while growth should be pursued for the benefits it produces for the direct participants in the process by which that productive growth is achieved, it must justify itself and be inspired by the recognition that growth is the basis for ensuring that those of our fellow Australians who are not its direct beneficiaries receive from a compassionate society the opportunity to share equitably in the fruits of growth.

And in making these three parallel commitments - the commitment to growth, the commitment to fighting inflation, the commitment to social justice and equity - I believe we place ourselves firmly and faithfully in the Chifley tradition.

I said before that the major achievements of the Chifley Government had transformed the Australian society and the Australian economy; and that the foundations then laid were so strong that they substantially resisted reversal under twenty-three years of conservative rule.

The conservatives were obliged to maintain the major programs and indeed expand some of the most important of them. They completed the Snowy Mountains project which they had so bitterly derided in Opposition. They accepted and expanded the role of the Commonwealth in education, especially tertiary education. They continued and expanded the immigration program. They realised they could not vacate the fields of housing and transport.

But even more fundamental, they accepted the permanence of the five great pillars of economic management which Chifley had built

- the recognition of the primary role and responsibility of the national government for economic policy;
- the central banking system;
- the strong arbitration system with central wage fixation;
- a strong public sector (including the efficient public enterprises)
- and the recognition of the interdependence of the private and public sectors for the achievement of growth, and the creation of jobs.

However incompetent and crass they may have been from time to time in the application of these principles,

successive conservative governments always recognised that these principles were the imperatives of economic management in modern mixed economies and in advanced industrial societies like Australia.

Apart from aberrations like the brief flirtation with the so-called New Federalism, happily never consummated, and the abandonment of effective central wage fixation - with the horrendous results still fresh in our memories - even the Fraser Government basically supported and applied those five principles.

Yet now, for the first time for four decades, in a way and on a scale none of their predecessors would ever have contemplated, much less proclaimed, the diminished figures who now claim to wear the mantle of Menzies propose to take the axe to the very foundations of the five pillars of our economy.

They propose to do this in the name of economic rationalism.

That is as great a misnomer, as great an abuse of the word "rational", as their misappropriation of the noble word "liberal" to their cause of conservative reaction.

What is rational about destroying the Prices and Incomes Accord, which has underpinned the recovery and will continue to be the instrument for sustained non-inflationary growth for years to come?



What is rational about weakening the industrial system and abandoning central wage fixation?

What in the name of reason, is the justification for breaking up and selling off the great and efficient national assets, like the Commonwealth Bank, Telecom, TAA, Qantas?

The fact is that this recipe for disaster represents the height of irrationality.

And it is irrationality of the most dangerous kind, because it is based on a blind and mindless commitment to a narrow, dogmatic and discredited ideology - a reactionary example of the very kind of ideological self-imprisonment which Chifley never ceased to warn the Labor Party against.

As far as the welfare of the people of Australia is concerned, there is only one saving grace about this lurch to the reactionary right by the so-called new leadership of the Opposition.

And not for the first time I quote some words of Ben Chifley which are as true and relevant today as when he used them. As he said:

"the Opposition parties today wear a veneer of unity, but it's always hard to know whom to answer, because there is such a diversity of opinion amongst their numbers".

But as the people of Australia come to realise the extent of the economic and social vandalism proposed by our opponents - and indeed as part of the process of promoting that awareness - it will be necessary for us - Ben Chifley's heirs and successors - to keep fresh and green the memory, the example and the experience of this great Australian.

My friends,

I have the honour to announce tonight an important decision by the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party which will help significantly in ensuring that Ben Chifley's life and work is remembered and is honoured in this State and throughout this nation.

The Branch proposes to establish the Chifley Foundation. The Foundation will have a range of mutually consistent objectives to benefit the Australian Labor Party itself, the broader Labor movement, and above all, the Australian community as a whole.

Its objectives will range from the creation of a Labor Centre through to educational, historical and cultural initiatives.

The Foundation will also be used as the vehicle for the Party to acquire its own building in Sydney and to establish the Labor Centre.

To finance the Foundation's establishment and growth, donations will be sought not only from the Labor movement, but from the wider Australian community.

I have been delighted and honoured to accept the invitation from the New South Wales Branch to act as one of the two patrons of the Foundation. The other patron will be the Premier of New South Wales and National President of the Party, Neville Wran.

Further, the New South Wales Branch has decided to offer annual prizes set at \$1,500, \$1,000 and \$500 for excellence in scholarship by undergraduate students writing on the history of the Australian Labor Party. These prizes are to be named "The Chifley Prizes".

My friends,

I congratulate the New South Wales Branch on these initiatives. Nothing could be more appropriate than that this Branch should act in this way to honour the memory of Ben Chifley.

Ben Chifley did more than anybody else to save this Branch from self-destruction in the desperate years of the 1930s.

Sometimes it almost seemed he was fighting single-handedly to preserve New South Wales Labor as a force in Federal politics.

But his courage, perseverance and patience was ultimately rewarded by a Party, reunited and reinvigorated in 1940, and the election in 1941 of the McKell Labor Government which formed the great war-time partnership with the Curtin and Chifley Governments.

My friends,

Ben Chifley's great achievement was based on two impregnable rocks - his faith and confidence in the Australian Labor Party, and his faith and confidence in the people of Australia.

And may I conclude with another brief quotation - not, this time, from Ben Chifley, but from the 1984 policy speech I had the honour to deliver on behalf of the Australian Labor Party, because I believe it expresses faithfully, for a new age and a new generation, his philosophy and his creed for Australia.

I said then:

"It is on the basis of confidence in ourselves that we now have an unparalleled opportunity to build an even better, fairer Australia.

"Never then was it so important that we should unite to resist and reject those in our midst, whatever their motives, whatever side or interest they purport to represent, who would seek to undermine the very fabric and foundation of our new national self-confidence and national self-respect.

"And at the heart of national self-respect lies respect for each other and for the rights of all.

"And that has been the principle behind the great truth that the Australian community has come increasingly to realise since March 1983 - the truth that the legitimate aspirations of each group can best be achieved, not by fighting each other, not by contrived conflict, not by setting group against group, Australians against Australians, but by working together, recognising and respecting each other's rights, reasonable expectations and fair aspirations.

"That is the fundamental principle on which we can now work together to build an Australia dedicated to fairness, justice and genuine equality of opportunity for all: so that we can truly say as we approach the third century of this modern nation, that we are building together a nation in which there are no second-class Australians.

"A nation where each of us, irrespective of background, origin, faith, age or sex, will have undiminished title to the proud name of Australian;

"An inalienable entitlement for all to fairness, justice, tolerance, dignity and security;

"A nation in which all can share fairly in the abundance and all the opportunities offered by this great country of ours, in the great years now within our grasp."

My friends,

In 1985, that is our light on the hill. It burns as brightly as when our beloved Ben Chifley pointed, nearly forty years ago, to his light on the hill. May it always burn for us, and beckon us forward to an even brighter future for all Australians.

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