



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
INAUGURAL MAURICE BLACKBURN MEMORIAL LECTURE
COBURG - 28 MARCH 1987**

Ladies and gentlemen, friends.

On 31 March, 1944 - forty three years ago, almost to the day - Maurice McCrae Blackburn died.

With Blackburn's death, at the age of 63, the Labor movement lost one of its most articulate and tireless advocates, and the people of Australia lost one of their most dedicated representatives.

Maurice Blackburn was "one of the great servants of the people of the Commonwealth of Australia".

That was the judgement of the then Prime Minister, John Curtin, when he moved the Parliamentary condolence motion after Blackburn's death.

It is too easy, with the passage of time and the constant rush of pressing problems, to let the achievements of our predecessors slip from mind.

But we must I believe resist that easy amnesia - not in order to indulge in nostalgia, which can often be self-deceiving, but to rescue from the past its hard-won lessons and to reappraise and reapply them, where we can, to the problems we face today.

That is why I am happy to be here today to deliver this inaugural address in memory of Maurice Blackburn.

Blackburn's political career spanned some of the most turbulent times this nation has ever experienced.

It was in 1914 - the first year of the First World War - that Blackburn was first elected to the Victorian Parliament. When he died, after more than two decades as a member of the Victorian and Federal Parliaments, the Second World War was within a year of its conclusion.

These war and depression years were years which challenged the nation's economic and military security and which moulded the Party's deepest philosophical underpinnings.

That Maurice Blackburn left his stamp on the way the nation and the Party responded to these crisis years is I think a striking lesson about the influence one man can have on his times.

Labor people in this part of Melbourne can be particularly proud of Blackburn since it was this region that he represented throughout his Parliamentary career.

After his death his widow Doris, who was in her own right a formidable and early advocate of women's rights and aboriginal advancement, was herself elected to the seat of Bourke which her husband had represented.

She was only the second woman elected to the House of Representatives and of course it was as a result of her legacy that this lecture series could be established.

Maurice Blackburn's greatest contribution to Australian politics of his day was his intellectual contribution. He was not the kind of Party member who blindly followed or mutely acquiesced.

He was in fact twice expelled from the Labor Party over matters of principle and after the second of these expulsions, when he was sitting as an Independent Labor member of Parliament, he further alienated himself from the Labor Government over Curtin's plans to introduce conscription for military service in the South West Pacific.

Curtin himself had been prosecuted for his anti-conscription stance during World War I. It is a measure of the greatness of his war-time leadership that he came to regard Australia's more serious military position in 1943 as obliging him to support the introduction of conscription.

Maurice Blackburn, however, refused to change tack and when it came to a vote he stood quite alone in opposing the proposal.

Hence when Curtin came to move the condolence motion I have already quoted, he perhaps ruefully acknowledged of Blackburn that "however unpopular he might become, however discomfoting his attitude might be to his colleagues, the divine monitor within him impelled him to stand for what in his soul he believed."

But it would be wrong to imagine that this "divine monitor" forced Blackburn to spend his life in barren and solitary isolation from the mainstream of the Party and the nation.

Indeed, in 1921 Blackburn demonstrated for all time that his sense of principle was capable of being very well attuned to the mainstream of the Party's and the nation's opinion.

I refer of course to Blackburn's crucial intervention in the debate at the 1921 Federal Conference about how the party should express its Objective.

At that Conference, the delegates had before them a proposal to express the Objective with these now familiar words: "the socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange."

The debate about the Socialist Objective became one of the great debates of our Party's history.

Supporters of the Objective believed the Party needed an unambiguous statement of its goal to prevent it straying from a straight and narrow path.

Opponents saw the word "socialisation" as too vague and likely to deter more voters than it would attract.

Blackburn was prominent among those opponents, and as he always did, he summed up his position with clarity and conciseness - including with this aphorism: "The Objective" he said, "must be so clearly worded that he who runs will read. But the (proposed) Objective is such that he who reads will run."

Although the Objective was voted into the platform, Blackburn refused to give up the fight. Later in the conference he returned to the issue and successfully moved the motion that has gone into history as the Blackburn Declaration.

It is worth quoting in full:

"This Conference declares:

- "a) that the Australian Labor Party proposes collective ownership for the purpose of preventing exploitation, and to whatever extent may be necessary for that purpose;
- b) that wherever private ownership is a means of exploitation it is opposed by the Party; but
- c) that the Party does not seek to abolish private ownership even of any of the instruments of production where such instrument is utilised by its owner in a socially useful manner and without exploitation."

The fact that the Declaration, as outspoken as it is by today's standards, was seen at the time as a moderating influence in the Party, underlines just how different was the party, and indeed the nation, in 1921.

In the wake of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, no one could tell for certain how far the revolutionary spirit would spread or how many ancient regimes would topple.

In the Labor Party, some of the most deeply held convictions were for White Australia and blatant protectionism.

So the simple nostrums of that day should not be seen as having an automatic relevance to today's Party or to today's issues.

But the test of the Objective should surely be whether it was relevant to the problems which faced the Australia of the 1920s. That certainly appears to have been Blackburn's test.

For the duty of each generation of Labor Party members is to endeavour as best it can to make the Party relevant and responsive to the challenges of its day.

The Labor Party has been successful where it has learned that lesson - where it has learned to identify and to articulate principles of operation which are relevant and responsive to contemporary tasks.

Look at our history. Each of our post war Labor governments has had a unique challenge and each has solved it in ways which were relevant to its times. The Curtin Labor Government had to guide the nation through the crisis of war. Chifley had to build the edifice of peace-time Australia. Whitlam had to solve the legacy of more than two decades of conservative neglect.

And today we face a task which is a unique challenge of our time.

It is to carry out the most sweeping reform in our history of our national economic institutions and attitudes.

.. We must cope with the collapse in our commodity prices and the consequent fall in our national income now amounting to more than \$6 billion. .. We need to learn to compete on world markets with new exports. .. We must face the imperative of making our economy more flexible through the removal of unnecessary regulation. .. We must retain the international competitiveness we have won through freeing the dollar and we must exercise restraint in wages. .. And we must fully understand and accept that the world does not owe us a living.

This task of economic reconstruction has been dodged and fudged by decades of irresponsible conservative governments.

Had we in the Labor Party followed those conservative governments and proven ourselves unable to develop relevant and workable answers to our economic problems, we would have failed both our supporters and the whole nation.

But this has to be clearly understood. Meeting the stringent demands of economic management is not a policy which in some way contradicts our Labor philosophy.

Indeed in these difficult times it is the only path available to us which leads to the traditional Labor goals of helping the underprivileged and supporting the less well-off.

Like previous Labor governments, we are committed not only to relevance in responding to our particular tasks, but also to compassion and redistribution in doing so.

So as I said recently at Bathurst in a speech to celebrate our fourth anniversary of government - don't let us have any of this nonsense that we are not a real Labor Government.

Don't judge us by whether we have blindly adhered to the standards of the past or uncritically observed the shibboleths of the past.

Judge us by our ability to take our inherited principles - those we inherited from a great line of predecessors like Maurice Blackburn - and breathe new life into them, applying them anew to the task we face today.

We have, through the Accord, forged anew the traditional links between the industrial and political elements of the Labor movement.

We have, to the maximum extent possible in the economic circumstances, worked to help the poor and protect the battlers of the Australian community.

In fact we have made something of a virtue of the need to limit government spending. Restraint has forced us to scrutinise our priorities so we can direct what resources we do have to those who need them most.

This has meant, for example, applying an assets test to pensions to disqualify millionaires from drawing on the public purse. As a result we have been able to increase pensions for those who need them, by more than 6 per cent in real terms, compared with a paltry 1.5 per cent in the entire seven years our conservative predecessors spent in office.

It has meant reforming the tax system to disqualify the wealthy from ripping off the system through tax-free capital gains and fringe benefits.

As a result we have been able to cut income tax rates, lift the tax free threshold for those at the bottom of the income scale, and, from 1 July this year introduce a series of measures to alleviate poverty traps for pensioners and beneficiaries.

It has meant exempting low income families and individuals from the Medicare levy. We have ensured that needy students are not hurt by the tertiary education administration charge.

Now this may sound less bloodstirring than the battle cry of the Socialist Objective. But it is in the 1980s proof of our commitment to, and our success in achieving, effective and measured redistribution.

For us, it is action rather than words which achieves real improvement in the lot of the traditional constituency of our Party.

Let me briefly outline some other examples where we have put our traditional Labor commitment into action.

In the knowledge that the best route to the abolition of poverty is through employment, we have created three quarters of a million new jobs in our four years in office.

In the knowledge that workers who have exercised restraint in wage claims have a right to expect restraint in prices, we have boosted the Government's efforts to put the lid on unfair price rises.

In the knowledge that in many Australian families both parents need to and want to work, we have created a network of child care centres around the nation.

In the knowledge that school children must gain an education if they are to find worthwhile work in the future, we have moved to ensure that more children stay at school longer.

When the conservatives came to power, only 36 per cent of children were staying on to Year 12. This year, more than 50 per cent of them will be staying on.

And in the knowledge that many Australians still have difficulty finding adequate accommodation, we have expanded our spending on public housing by 42 per cent in real terms; and we have helped nearly one-quarter of a million low income families buy their first home; and we have increased the number of youth and women's refugees.

In the knowledge that when the poor get sick they have least resources to afford necessary health care, we have introduced medicare and introduced a scheme to limit the pharmaceutical bills of the chronically ill.

Most fundamentally of all, we have pursued Labor goals through our reconstruction of the economy.

We have sought to increase productivity, remove inefficient regulation, create a more competitive and diverse manufacturing base, foster an economy capable of exploring the horizons of high technology production.

Economic reconstruction is not a notion plucked out of some economics textbook.

It is the only solution to the challenge we face; it is the only genuine means of securing higher living standards and increased employment for all Australians.

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Let me explain this economic reconstruction in this way.

I said earlier that the sixty-six years since the 1921 Conference had seen enormous change in the Labor Party and in Australia as a whole.

It is hard not to accept that the next 66 years will see even greater change and even more shifts in the assumptions and attitudes which shape our lives.

If in those next six decades Australia is unable to restructure the economy, the prosperity of what used to be called the Lucky Country will be irretrievably gone.

Let me just read you the list of Australia's top ten exports today. They are: coal, wheat, wool, iron ore and concentrates, alumina, beef and veal, crude petroleum oils, refined petroleum products, aluminium, and gold.

All of these exports are based on agriculture or mining. All but two of them are unprocessed primary products. Most of them are susceptible to the dramatic slumps in world prices which we have seen recently in the commodity markets.

In 66 years time, the Australian Prime Minister, whoever he or she is, must not be leading a country so heavily dependent as we are today on what we can dig up or grow or shear off the sheep's back.

Australia's great farms and mines will doubtless continue to be major export earners. But they must not be our sole export earners.

We must make sure that manufactured goods and service goods and knowledge intensive industries play a much greater part in earning our national income, and that we find and exploit new overseas markets for them.

So this task of economic reconstruction lies before us as the first and principal task which my Government is pledged to fulfill - not just in the lead-up to the next election but as the country enters the 1990s and beyond.

There are three other elements to our Labor strategy which will guide Australia into the future.

The first of these is this: we will continue to manage the economy with fairness and compassion. Where sacrifices are necessary, they will be shared fairly; where gains are made, their benefits will be passed on, with fairness, to the whole community.

The second element is this: we will continue to manage the economy, and manage the task of reconstruction, with strength and stability.

We will continue to co-operate with the union movement and with business to ensure economic stability; we will continue to support Australia's established and relevant system of centralised wage fixing which the conservatives are pledged to demolish; we will continue to protect the mainstream of Australian society from the wreckers of the New Right.

The final element of our strategy for the 1990s is this : we will continue to ensure that today's policies not only achieve goals for today but are so geared as to protect the interests of future generations of Australians.

That is why we must continue to protect our unique environmental heritage. That is why we must continue to seek the best educational and employment opportunities for our children. That is why we must continue to create a multicultural society in which all Australians have equality of opportunity. That is why we must continue to seek real peace and effective disarmament without which all our hopes and plans can founder.

These then are our aspirations : reconstruction of the economy, fairness in the protection of living standards, stability in Government, and care for the future of our nation.

I draw the contrast with the opposition parties. They have not of late covered themselves with glory in the area of informing the Australian electorate about their policies.

But the reckless and reactionary nature of the policies they have revealed shows us at least this much : they not only cannot provide the answers to Australia's plight, they do not even understand the problem.

So, sure, we would love to have been able to do more, and to achieve our goals more rapidly.

But I'm proud of what we have in fact done, in the difficult circumstances imposed on us by the collapse in our export prices and the consequent fall in our national income.

Moreover I'm totally certain that our record stands in the starkest possible contrast to the conservative forces, with their spurious promises and disunited leadership and single-minded determination to restore the privileges for the well-off few in place of the shared benefits we are delivering to the whole Australian community.

Ladies and gentlemen.

We have many tasks still ahead of us. Many challenges lie ahead.

After Maurice Blackburn's death, John Curtin described him, justly, as "a man of strong character and of great independence of mind, direct and fair in the expression of his views and forceful in the advocacy of those things which he considered to be right and just regardless of whether or not they were popular."

While the Labor Party continues to attract to its ranks men and women of Maurice Blackburn's calibre, we will remain strong and capable of meeting those challenges and solving those problems.

But we must not lock ourselves into the past, nor should we don the straitjacket of rigid ideology.

That course may produce great internal debates and memorable phrases.

It does not always produce answers which the Party or the nation needs.
