



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' HERITAGE CENTRE
BARCALDINE, 4 MAY 1991**

Over the past few weeks, I have had the honour, as National Leader of the Australian Labor Party, to speak on several occasions through Australia to mark the centenary of this great Party of ours.

No Party, no Movement, no Australian institution as important, as diverse, as enduring as ours, could owe its origins to a single event in a single State at a single point in time.

Our Party sprang up, almost simultaneously, in different places across this vast continent in 1891.

So no single place can claim to be the birthplace of the Australian Labor Party.

But if there is a single event and a single place that brings together all the themes, the spirit, and the meaning of the events which, together, led to the creation of the ALP, it is here - in the central west of Queensland, here in Barcaldine.

The event itself, the event we commemorate and celebrate today, can be briefly described.

For sixteen weeks, from March to June 1891, 5,000 shearers were encamped here - as were several thousand others in camps at Longreach, Charleville and other camps in Western Queensland. It was one of the greatest shows of solidarity in Australian industrial history.

They were all members of the Shearers' Union, the forerunner of the Australian Workers' Union. They were striking for a simple cause, a fundamental principle - the right to organise, the right to exist as a union.

That was the cause; that was the principle at stake.

Now, the Queensland colonial government of the time - a so-called liberal government led by Sir Samuel Griffith - determined to break the Shearers' Union once and for all, and to bring the full power of the state to bear, in order to do so.

So, 300 armed police and a detachment of the Moreton Bay Regiment were despatched from Brisbane to arrest the union leaders and clear out the camps.

The threat of a bloodbath was real. It was that grim prospect which inspired Henry Lawson's famous lines:

They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle.

But with tremendous self-discipline - and just as important, with the support and solidarity of the people of Barcaldine, not least the women of Barcaldine - the shearers refused to be provoked.

Here, where we stand, they were rounded up and many were left manacled in the open for several days. Twelve of the union leaders were taken by train to Rockhampton, charged with conspiracy and sentenced to three years imprisonment.

On 20 June 1891, its resources exhausted, the Shearers' Union declared the strike at an end.

But it was not the end.

It was a new beginning.

Just as the Unions in New South Wales redoubled their efforts to form a political Labor Party after the collapse of the Great Strike of 1890, so the organised workers of Queensland learnt that strike action was not enough, that solidarity was not enough, if all the powers of the state were left, uncontested, unchallenged, in the hands of labour's adversaries.

This was the lesson learnt here - here in Barcaldine, under the Tree of Knowledge, as they called it.

And in all of the 100 years of our party's history so far, for all the tremendous changes we have undergone, there has never been a more important decision than the decision the unionists of Queensland made as a result of what happened here.

It was a simple decision based upon simple facts. They recognised that the only way to protect their rights, to advance their cause, to get better working conditions, to raise living standards for themselves and their families, was through action in Parliament - not through the weapon of the strike but through the challenge of the ballot box.

And that meant first, getting enough members into Parliament to wring concessions from the established conservative parties - the Tories then and the Tories today - and second, to win a majority in Parliament and form Labor Governments in our right.

The representatives of the men who fought and lost the struggle here in June took a leading part, with their fellow unionists from all over Queensland, in the work of forming the People's Parliamentary Association in Brisbane in July 1891.

And thus arose, from the ashes of defeat, the Queensland Branch of the great Australian Labor Party.

The lessons we can draw from this splendid story are as valid and relevant today, as ever.

First, there is the lesson of that fundamental commitment to Parliament.

And let this never be forgotten:

Australia today is one of the world's great Parliamentary democracies. The commitment and determination of the Australian Labor Party has helped to make it so.

And no one understands this better than the people of Queensland.

In this State, for more than 30 years, the people of Queensland saw their parliamentary democracy distorted and virtually stolen from them.

It is only because of the perseverance and renewed strength of the Labor Party, under the leadership of Wayne Goss, that true parliamentary democracy has been at last restored to Queensland.

The second enduring lesson learned from 1891 concerns the vital link between industrial Labor and political Labor.

The strength of one remains the strength of the other.

It is true that all Labor Governments have an overriding responsibility to the people as a whole. We can never succeed if we are merely a sectional party or a sectional government.

Yet it is equally true that cooperation and a common sense of purpose, between the union movement and Labor Governments, remain crucial to the success of both.

And I am deeply proud of the fact that, 100 years after the unions created the Labor Party, that constructive cooperation has never been closer than it is today.

And the third lesson of 1891 lies in the very fact of the defeat itself. It is a lesson for our adversaries as much as for ourselves.

This party, this movement, could never have survived for a century unless we had learnt the hard lessons of adversity.

In January 1970 - my first year as President of the ACTU - there was not a single Labor Government anywhere in Australia.

Our only significant centre of power for most of that year was the Brisbane City Council.

Now, we are back there again, and above all, we have this great Labor Government in Queensland.

The Labor men and women of Queensland know what it is to go through difficult times. Our opponents, and the self appointed pundits and doomsayers, have to learn this about the Australian Labor Party: we know how to fight, and we know how to fight back.

We learnt that 100 years ago, in struggles like the one we commemorate here today, from men and women whose courage we celebrate today, and whose inspiration we honour.

Now, the Labor pioneers of Barcaldine are part of our heritage.

Not just the workers' heritage. Not just the heritage of the Labor Party. They are a proud part of the heritage of Australia and the Australian people.

And it is in that spirit, that I declare open Stage One of the Australian Workers' Heritage Centre. I congratulate most heartily the Tree of Knowledge Development Committee, its supporters, donors and patrons on their work and their vision. On behalf of the people of Queensland and the people of Australia, I dedicate this Centre to the honoured memory of the Labor men and women of 1891, and to the great cause they have handed down to us, the cause which we have the privilege of advancing into the next century.

* * * * *