



PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
LAUNCHING THE CENTENARY HISTORY OF THE
AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY
"THE LIGHT ON THE HILL"
COLLINGWOOD, 21 JUNE 1991**

Friends

It's not surprising that in this Centenary Year, we are hearing a great deal about Labor traditions.

So I might begin by pointing out that the publication of this history itself celebrates one of the most remarkable, and one of the very oldest of all Labor traditions - the Labor Party's deep sense of history, and of its place in Australian history.

It has been said truly that the Labor Party was born with a sense of history.

And I give you a remarkable proof of that.

In 1892 - within a year of the Party's official foundation - two of the founding members, Thomas Roydhouse and Robert Taperell - wrote a book and published it in Sydney. They called it The Labor Party in New South Wales - A History of its Foundation and Legislative Career.

That was just a year after the election of the first Labor members - the 35 who formed the world's first parliamentary Labor Party, exactly one hundred years ago this month.

Roydhouse and Taperell record the very difficult decisions the Party had to make, not only in working out its role within the established parliamentary system, but about the rules governing the relationship between the parliamentary party, the party membership - the rank and file outside - and the union movement which had brought the political party into being. And really, within that first year, they had established the essential structures which were to make the Party unique, and which were so essential to its survival for the next decade - and indeed for the next century.

But the point I want to make, in the context of this occasion today, is this:

What other political party - not just in Australia, but anywhere - within a year of its formation, has had the confidence in its future, the certainty about its destiny, to publish an account of its origins - and call it 'history'?

So Doctor McMullin joins a select band, and his book takes its place in a long tradition.

And the important thing is this:

With us of the Australian Labor Party, our sense of history is a deep source of strength for our future. From our pride in our past, we draw confidence for the future.

The great thing about understanding our history is that it enables us to put the pre-occupations of the present into perspective.

And the discerning reader of Ross McMullin's pages will come to realise that events which may seem novel, unprecedented, even unintelligible in the day-to-day hurly-burly of politics, are in fact part of an ongoing story - a volatile, turbulent story certainly - but destined to become just a part of the great rolling stream of Australian history.

In a recent book, The Lessons of History, a leading British historian Sir Michael Howard, writes:

The past is infinitely various, an inexhaustible storehouse of events from which we can prove anything, or its contrary.

But Howard also writes:

Without history we are groping in total darkness.

We of the Labor Party not only have a history but are strong enough to have it recorded, in critical and sometimes even in unflattering terms.

And we are strong enough to learn its lessons, not least from our mistakes and even our follies.

In this, as in so much else, I invite the contrast with the other forces, the anti-labor forces, in Australian political history.

Now I don't go quite as far as to say that our opponents are like the mule - without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity.

I simply say: where is the evidence that they understand or ever learn the lessons of their own history?

My friends, I believe our great and beloved historian Manning Clark has best identified the purpose of the writing of Australian history. It is, he said, to try to explain who we are and how we came to be who we are.

That, of course, is primarily a task for Australians ourselves.

But it is often instructive to get the outside view.

And from the very early years, the Australian Labor Party drew the interest of writers from overseas - Albert Metin's Socialism Without Doctrine in 1901 for example.

In the light of the epic events now occurring in Eastern Europe - and in the light of some of the comments critics of the Labor Party make today - it is worth noting what one noted commentator had to say in 1914.

I refer to none other than Lenin himself.

And he wrote in 1914:

The leaders of the Australian Labor Party are trade union officials, an element which is everywhere most moderate and capital serving. The liberals in Europe and in Russia who try to teach the people the needlessness of class war by the example of Australia only deceive themselves and others.

Three quarters of a century on, at this time of Labor's Centenary, in the week in which the citizens of Leningrad have voted to rename their city St Petersburg, I am perfectly prepared to let Lenin's criticism stand or fall by the judgement of history.

But the truth is, my friends, that Lenin's critique did discern the two key elements in the nature, character and purpose of the Australian Labor Party - the two mainstays of Labor continuity and Labor's cause:

- the solidarity of political and industrial Labor;
and
- the commitment to parliamentary democracy.

Lenin condemned them. We celebrate them.

Friends,

It has been for me, now for more than thirty years, a privilege beyond words to represent, in whatever way I have been able to do, those two great strands which bind the Labor cause together.

No Australian has ever owed more to this great Movement, this unique Australian institution, than I do.

If I have been able to achieve anything in public life, it is because of those two commitments - the double commitment our founders made one hundred years ago - the commitment to advance the cause of the working men and women of Australia through the means of parliamentary democracy. That is the banner they unfurled one hundred years ago. That is the banner we hold high today, under which we will take Australia into the 21st century.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I congratulate all involved in this publication.

I have no doubt that Ross McMullin found his most daunting challenge in trying to produce some order from the sheer mass of material available. To marshal into a coherent, readable whole what is practically seven accounts, spanning a continent as well as a century, is a splendid feat of organisation.

I congratulate the publishers Oxford Press on this very handsome volume.

I congratulate the Federal Executive for commissioning the work and the Federal Secretariat for supporting it, while as Ross acknowledges, always respecting his complete independence. As I have written for the dustjacket:

This important and provocative book presents the tremendous and turbulent history of the Australian Labor Party warts and all. Its publication itself demonstrates the strength of a Party and a Movement courageous enough to commission an untrammelled account of its failures and faults, as well as its immense achievements.

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