

June 9 2011

The Wran speech: the full transcript (as published in Sydney Morning Herald)

The full transcript of John Faulkner's speech

First let me acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects their elders past and present.

Ladies and gentlemen, back in the 1980s when Neville Wran and I were, at least metaphorically, butting heads beneath the stage of the Sydney Town Hall about where the Labor Party was and where it ought to be going, I don't think either of us would have imagined I'd be standing here, nearly thirty years later, able to honestly say I am honoured to give a speech named to honour him.

But, ladies and gentlemen, despite any disagreements back in those days, one thing was never in question – that the Labor Party was both big enough to include our differences – and more important than any one of us.

You all know that the 1970s and 80s in NSW were a time of internal party contests that make today's so-called 'factional brawls' look mild. We were all – Left, Right, unaligned – aware we were fighting over the future of the Labor Party. Fighting over which policies would take priority, which rules would prevail, over what exactly Labor's timeless goal of a better life for working Australians meant in a new and changing world.

At times, those contests were bitter and very public.

Despite that, despite front-page newspaper stories and blazing rows on the floor of State Conference, which Neville Wran himself was not shy about taking part in, Neville became the longest continuously serving NSW Premier up to that time and in 1983 Federal Labor came to power and stayed in government for thirteen years.

Ladies and gentlemen, for the men and women of the Party in those days, we had our disagreements, we had our ideological divisions and at times we had our very bitter personal differences – but we knew the Party came before them all. We fought hard, and if we lost – and being on the Left I often lost, actually I always lost – we set our sights on the next issue. And we set aside our differences in opinion to work together when the Party's interests were threatened or election campaigns rolled around.

The Party was, and was known to be, diverse. But it was not disunited. And none of us were disloyal.

In the NSW Parliamentary caucus, as well as at Conference, debate was robust. Differences of opinion and criticism were the rule, not the exception. No-one doubted that the Party was alive and kicking.

It is perhaps the hazard of asking someone my age to give a speech that you'll hear how much better things were in the good old days. I do not want to give the impression that I would like the Party to return to the days of the 70s and 80s, when a segment of the Party, in the inner-city especially, fell captive to those who used intimidation and violence, when my friend Peter Baldwin was savagely bashed. We cleared that element out of the Party, and the fight to do so is one of the things I'm proudest of.

But there have been some changes to the Party and the Party culture that I think we could stand to re-examine.

When I joined the ALP, it was the political face of a broad social movement. Many of the tensions and disagreements within the Party were precisely the result of the depth and breadth of its appeal as a party that promised reform through government. All of us were deeply and passionately committed to the Labor promise of a “bringing something better to the people ... working for the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand.”

Opinions, however, varied on what should take priority in that struggle, and what policies and legislation would best achieve it. Ending Australia’s involvement in Vietnam, defending unions and unionists in the workplace, fighting apartheid in South Africa, free tertiary education and health care, decriminalising homosexuality, better sewerage for the suburbs, workplace equality for women, preserving Australia’s environmental heritage, modernising Australia’s censorship laws, preventing nuclear proliferation – the list of Labor’s concerns was a long one.

People were attracted to the Labor Party because they wanted to make the world a better place. Their involvement in the Party was often only one facet of their pursuit of that goal. And, while the Party has never welcomed those who seek to make it the servant of another organisation’s agenda – and endured a devastating split for that very reason in the 1950s – the Party I joined accepted that membership was, for many, one aspect of active community engagement.

These days, as Party membership dwindles, ALP strategists talk about ‘reaching out’ to organisations active on particular progressive issues, ‘gaining endorsement’ of our policies.

That idea, with its implications of ‘us’ in Labor and ‘them’ in community organisations, is wrong. The frequency with which it’s raised by hand-wringing apparatchiks makes many wonder if Labor has lost its way.

Progressive, socially aware activists passionate about social and economic reform must never be outsiders to the Labor movement.

Labor cannot thrive as an association of political professionals focused on the machinery of electoral victory and forming, at best, contingent alliances with Australians motivated by and committed to ideals and policies.

A Party organisation staffed by experienced and competent strategists and managers is necessary to serve the campaign and organisational needs of Labor’s members and supporters, not to substitute for them.

Nor should Party membership be a useful and engaging experience only for those with ambitions to secure preselection.

Some years back, I heard a member of Young Labor explaining a recruitment strategy. “Today’s activists – tomorrow’s leaders.” I don’t blame that individual for being absorbed into a Party culture that treats activism as a temporary phase on the way to the ‘real’ work of entering professional politics, but I utterly reject the implication that our Party is only attractive to those with the life goal of becoming parliamentarians.

As Neville himself said last weekend, the political career path “keeps new practitioners away from the reality of life of those they hope to represent”.

Rather than “today’s activists – tomorrow’s leaders”, I would say that “today’s activists – tomorrow’s activists” better represents the Party I joined and the Party I believe we must be. The Party we must be to represent and help those Australians who most desperately need a Government guided by the principles of making life better for working Australians.

And I think it is now clear, the Party we must be, if Labor is to endure another century.

Activism, community engagement, commitment to ideas, policy debate, are not second-rate substitutes for getting into Parliament. Nor are they routine ritual posturing on the way to pre-selection. Committed members with ideals may complicate the lives of careerist Party managers but they are the life-blood of Labor. And the systematic efforts to marginalise and silence them in recent decades has brought us to where we are today.

Years, decades even, of failing to provide meaningful involvement within the Party for Australians committed to creating change has seen those men and women look to other avenues to bring about reform. A party culture where passionate advocates and enthusiastic community activists are seen as a hindrance to the so-called "real" business of the ALP has seen young voters desert Labor. As Neville Wran said in 2005 "A party that's just managerial, well, that's what the Coalition is. That can't happen to the Labor Party." [1]

But it is happening.

We have lost a generation of activists from Labor and, if we do not face the challenges and opportunities of reform in both structure and culture, we will risk losing a generation of voters as well.

The Party has now become so reliant on focus groups that it listens more to those who don't belong to it than to those who do. This makes membership a sacrifice of activism, not a part of it.

Ladies and gentlemen, engaging in, and influencing debates, on policies and values throughout our community is something very many Australians find richly rewarding – as we can see from the numbers walking away from a political Party that ignores them and straight through the doors of organisations that provide the engagement they seek – organisations such as Get Up.

Once, our test for whether or not our policies met the expectations of the community was Conference. The arguments on Conference floor when they didn't were audible – blocks away.

At Labor's last National Conference, not a single contested measure was put to a vote on the Conference floor.

This is seen by some to be a triumph of Party management. Dissent is contained behind closed doors. All potential embarrassment is avoided.

I see it rather as a symptom of the anaemia that is draining the life from the Australian Labor Party – an apparent aversion to the unpredictability of democracy.

Where once the role of the 'number cruncher' was to make sure the votes were there to win a ballot, now it seems to be making sure there is no ballot. Factional fixes, log-rolling and back-room deals – in those few pre-selections not determined by an intervention – see the candidates who don't get the nod gracefully withdrawing to allow the pre-determined winner to claim unanimous support.

Policy debate is also stifled. Those who believe in a policy not supported by the Party's public voices quietly sit down to avoid 'causing embarrassment'.

Trying to cast internal debate as disunity and revolt may spare us from damaging headlines, but it has also meant that our members feel the only roles for Labor's loyalists are as rubber stamps for decisions already made behind closed doors and as polling-booth fodder on election day. In our

desperation to avoid bad headlines, we have closed off the avenues for debate that are the lifeblood of our Party.

Our changes in policy and direction seem arbitrary and startling. Our own members, our supporters and the broader community are blindsided when hotly contested internal debates become public only after their resolution and when, apparently, there is unanimous agreement.

Even factional meetings, for a time the home of that vigorous debate no longer welcome in broader Party forums, have fallen victim to the same disease.

Ladies and gentlemen, the principles of caucus unity and consistency with the party platform have historically meant that the decisions of the party, once debated and resolved, are abided by. They have not meant, and ought not to mean, an absence of debate or the appearance of an absence of debate. Labor needs to get better at explaining what solidarity and unity really mean – both to the general public and to those within the Party who have come to interpret it as acquiescence.

Loyalty means staying true to Labor's principles, not to a media management strategy or to political spin.

In a healthy democracy, all voices are heard.

In a healthy political party, all voices are heard.

Labor has long known that unity is strength. But debate is not disunity.

Debate is diversity. And if unity is Labor's strength, diversity is Labor's wealth.

The broad church of the ALP has always been a testing and proving ground for our ideas and policies. Our greatest politicians were trained and sometimes humbled in branch and league debates, on conference floor, in lounge rooms and back yards. Our members questioned and they argued, and in those discussions sometimes minds were changed and sometimes policies were. Now, we commission focus groups to find out not just what people think of what we say, but all too often, what we should be saying at all.

There is nothing wrong with using polling and focus groups to test advertising strategies, explore misunderstandings of, or misapprehensions about, our policies, or to focus and sharpen what we say about what we believe.

There is, however, something deeply wrong when we use polling to determine our Party's policies, and even our values.

Labor must never forget that you do not earn the right to lead by perfecting the art of following.

In the past, our culture of vibrant debate strengthened our party and it strengthened our policies. It has provided opportunities for generations of activists to work for change within a party of government and not from the sidelines of the political process. It has been an enriching and rewarding experience for those who participate. Stifling that debate in the name of expediency, urgency or unity stifles the very aspects of our party we most need to draw on to face the emerging challenges of 21st-century democracy.

In recent decades, the Labor Party has met the challenges of a media focus on national and state level campaigning with an increasing corporatisation of our campaign and party organisation.

It is essential now that the ALP recognises that the political climate that gave rise to these strategies has changed.

Recent political campaigns overseas and the success of third-party organisations in Australia have shown that we are in an age of internet democracy: self-organising, intolerant of top-down management, expecting interactivity and immediacy.

Authenticity has, I believe, come to be valued more by the citizens of our democracy than the appearance of harmony. And, from a purely practical standpoint, with the increased interactivity of communications, there are more and more opportunities for pre-planned communication strategies to be exposed, and their hollowness revealed. Staying 'on message' is no longer enough. Our Party and those who represent it must engage intelligently with 'the message'.

Party discipline is essential when it comes to legislative votes, but was never intended to be used to block parliamentarians from talking to their constituents about their decisions and their opinions. If they are trusted enough by the Party to be chosen as parliamentary representatives, they ought to be trusted enough to speak aloud in public without a pre-scripted song-sheet of lines of the day.

Labor must engage with the challenges of the new media and with the shift in community expectations it has brought. It is no longer feasible – from a purely practical standpoint – to control and manage centrally all public engagement by all Labor's public figures. In the 21st century, no organisation can successfully do so, and attempts to try simply ensure that the inevitable failure becomes a bigger, and more negative, news story than the mere existence of a variety of opinions would ever merit. What should be a positive for the ALP – the fact that we are made up of men and women who are both passionate about positive reform, and practical about the need to work together to achieve it – becomes a negative by our own decision to pretend our entire membership shares one idea, and one only, on any given issue of the day.

The problem is compounded by the uncoupling of the ALP's factions from policy positions or ideals. As Neville said on the weekend, the factions are now more focused on "internal power rather than policy development".

I have said so often before, and I say again now, there is nothing wrong with people who have the same goals working together to achieve them. Factions are older than political parties – they were found in the Roman Senate and at the court of Queen Elizabeth the First. However, when factions become mutual support associations divorced from ideas and devoted purely to securing promotion, they are toxic.

I have been as much a part of the ALP's factional system as anybody. I am, unlike Neville Wran, a product of the ALP's factions. And I have, at times, put the short-term benefit of the stability that good factional management can provide before the long-term benefits of vibrant diversity within the Party.

But I sincerely hope I have never been guilty of putting factional interests ahead of Labor's interests.

Factional management can serve Labor's interests, as the elevation of Neville Wran to the leadership of the NSW Parliamentary Party shows. Factional leaders set aside narrow interests and co-operated in making sure the man who would become such a successful Premier had the chance to lead the Party to victory.

The membership of the Party branches in his electorate of Bass Hill co-operated because they were consulted. They were treated seriously. They knew what was at stake.

I can think of nothing more telling of the state of the Party today than the fact that, in Neville's own assessment and the assessment of others, he could never get preselected in today's Labor Party because of the role and influence of the factions, and the way that influence is exercised.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Australian Labor Party has recently returned some of the worst election results in its history. And we have a long history.

No Labor loyalist should be in denial over the magnitude and significance of our loss in New South Wales, and no serious and genuine analysis can fail to conclude that the massive repudiation of Labor at polling booths right across our state reinforces in the starkest possible terms the message that the party has problems, and those problems must be addressed and overcome if the ALP is to endure for another century. These problems are not confined to New South Wales, and given our Federal structure the problems of state branches have a fundamental and unavoidable impact on the ALP at a National level.

We have, at a State and a Federal level, looked at our dropping support – and more often than not, we have blamed the Leader. And, in NSW, more often than not, we have changed the Leader. It is time for the Party to realise that there is more amiss here than any one individual can be asked to shoulder the blame for. It is time for us to realise that we have significant problems as an organisation and we must resolve them.

To do so, we must draw on the strongest and best traditions of our past: our passion for social and economic justice, for fairness; our history as champions of democratic processes within our party as well as in the wider political arena; and our commitment to reform.

Labor has, for 120 years, been a party whose belief in the benefit of reform is applied to ourselves as well as to our nation's government.

Each generation of Labor members, activists, politicians, supporters, has needed to come to terms with the same question: mapping a course through a future unimagined by our party's founders while keeping our party's enduring values as the compass that guides us.

Now we are engaged in resolving this question once again.

The party's 2010 National Review has made several key recommendations, including expanding direct democracy within the party, providing more venues for debate and more avenues for activism, and giving more, rather than fewer, people a voice in the selection of our members of parliament.

In my opinion, and I believe in the opinion of many other members and supporters of our Labor Party, whatever specific changes are adopted, they must be guided by five key principles:

Labor must be a Party of values and ideas;

We must have a growing, not a declining Party;

Labor must return real power to its members;

We must engage and involve our supporters in the community; and

Labor must have a culture of inclusion and innovation, not exclusion and unbridled factionalism.

Ladies and gentlemen, Labor has always been a Party of values and ideas. They may not always be fashionable and they may not always be popular, but they are the core of what we are, and they

must be the touchstone against which we judge all our policies and all our strategies in Government or in Opposition.

As Neville Wran has said, “The Labor Party has survived as the oldest political party in the country because it stands for a principle. I had the experience of the campaigns during the Vietnam war. People didn’t like us then. But we stood for something, and we won. Even though we were beaten from time to time, we emerged with dignity and integrity.”

This is not to advocate a blind commitment to utter ideological purity at the expense of all else. As Gough Whitlam said, “certainly the impotent are pure”. Labor is a party of parliamentary reform and not a pressure group, and we can only pursue our goals of a better, fairer Australia with the support of the Australian community.

However, we must remember at all times that they are the goals for which we seek support, and not be side-tracked into seeking popularity for the sake of popularity. Our task is to argue for our ideas and values, and not for our personal interests.

The Party belongs to those who belong to it and support it, and not merely to those who represent it and are employed by it.

As Neville Wran said in the speech in which he announced his intention to retire from politics: “... without the Party – the leaders, the politicians, the officials – are nothing. ... No individual, however powerful, however talented, however gifted or plain lucky, can claim to have given more to the Party than he has received from it.”

Those of us who occupy Parliamentary or organisational positions within the Party are entrusted with the responsibility for strategic and political decisions by those to whom we must be accountable: the members and supporters of Labor. Changes to our rules and structures must reflect that.

The shocking decline in Party membership is the consequence of the declining role of Labor members in their own Party. We need to return real power to the membership.

Directing resources into recruitment and community organising to rebuild our grassroots is essential, but it will be fruitless if Party membership remains meaningless.

Labor’s members must have a say in candidate selection, Party policy and the direction of the Party. We must restore real membership rights for members and deliver new rights as well. This includes the direct election by Labor’s membership of at least some of the Delegates to the National Conference, members of the National Executive, and of Party Officers. Democratic rights must exist at a state and territory level as well.

Democracy and debate leads to better decision making. We are whole-hearted believers in this idea when it comes to the broader political arena, and we must enshrine those principles in the way our Party works as well. New ideas, disagreements, and discussion are not the enemy of the ALP, they are our strongest weapons in the long and continuing struggle to bring a better life to millions of Australians.

Anything that is the enemy of democracy and debate in the ALP is the enemy of good decision-making, too.

Labor must have a culture of inclusion. We need new forums, not factionally dominated, for discussion and debate, forums that reflect the tremendous changes that have taken place in the way Australians live, work, and organise since the branch structure was developed in the 1890s.

Our structures must reflect the ways Australians of today engage with politics and community – not the way their great-grandparents did. Attendance of the local branch is no longer a key indicator of an individual's commitment or contribution. Party engagement must not be, as it is now, an arid plain of tedium across which we require people to trek to prove their devotion before declaring them 'worthy' of having a say.

This culture of inclusion must also take in our many millions of supporters. Without them, Labor has no future. But they have no way to be involved with, or support, Labor outside of an election. We must include them in the development of our Party and encourage their more active involvement in the Party. We should broaden our policy processes to allow more voices to be heard, and we should include supporters in candidate selection in local areas.

I know this is a contentious issue for many who fear that without the requirement of not only membership but Branch attendance to qualify for a pre-selection vote, our membership will plummet and our branches will close.

I say to those people that if we are a Party that is only worth belonging to and participating in for the chance to vote in those increasingly-rare pre-selections not determined by a fix or an intervention, then we deserve to lose those members and see those branches close.

And I say to those who resist the opening up of our structures to more participation and more democracy because they see their control over managed and pre-negotiated outcomes slipping away – do not act like the ship's captain steering for an iceberg, refusing to turn over the wheel to a more competent navigator in determination to remain captain, even if only of a lifeboat.

The resistance to reform by some within the ALP has made me very pessimistic, ladies and gentlemen, about the possibility of achieving meaningful change in our Party's structure and organisation. As is the case in any institution, those with the power to effect or to prevent change are always those most advantaged by the existing structures. I had believed, and I still hope, that the stark reality of our circumstances would break through the very human disinclination to surrender power and influence.

But, ladies and gentlemen, it seems that the most difficult part of the reform process will not be structural. It will be cultural.

And no structural reform will have effect without a commitment to cultural and attitudinal reform within the Party. Many of the ALP's structures and rules create barriers to participation, but even if we had the most open of organisational structures we would also need the commitment and desire to use them properly. Participation in the Party must be made meaningful once more. Members and supporters must be heard as well as permitted to speak. Party officials must stop regarding conviction as weakness and values as inconvenient.

Ladies and gentlemen, neither structural nor cultural reform will be an easy process. Too many of too few powerbrokers, have too much invested in the perpetuation of the current system, in which their own personal success is barely affected by Labor's electoral success. Too many have too much to lose in an open, democratic Party where they could no longer count on the delivery of jobs and promotions.

But ladies and gentlemen, there is also too much at stake for too many Australians.

The Australian Labor Party was formed because working men and women in Australia needed a voice in Parliament. They needed a government that would understand their needs, and that would use the resources of the state in the interests of all the community, not merely the few.

The need for such a Party still exists, and it will still exist even if Labor should fail the test of reform.

We must live up to our responsibilities to those people who depend on us, who depend on our Party, to represent them.

The task before us is hard.

But, ladies and gentlemen, the choice should be easy.

[1] Weekend Aus 21/5/225

[2] Fin Review Dec 2002

[3] Fin review Dec 2002