

ADDRESS TO THE JENNY MACKLIN FUNDRAISER

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I assume that we're all generally from the same tribe here tonight, so I will talk frankly. If there be infidels among us, let me give them absolute assurance with all of the sincerity of a Brendan Nelson: that I have never voted Labor in my life.

Tonight I want to urge upon you two of my deepest convictions: firstly that on the cusp of the new millennium, Australia has before it the greatest opportunity and promise. Secondly, that the leadership of John Howard has seen us slide into a sewer so squalid that our country is presently steeped in bloody misery and negativity, that if the Labor Party does not emerge to offer peace and positivity, the weasel from Wolstenecraft will squander our best chance to lay the foundation for an inclusive and harmonious future.

Let me take you back to Sunday morning, 3 March 1996. Whilst the family and friends of half the characters here tonight were trying to conceal any loose bits of rope and any sharp objects lest tragedy befall the walking dead, I was myself in Cairns staring out at the endless oblivion of the Pacific Ocean, contemplating my own Harold Holt Bolt.

But let me take you back to that scene on that oh so sunny morning. Then indeed, was the winter of Middle Australia's discontent made glorious summer by that sub-urbane son of the North Shore. The dark clouds that loomed upon the house of Middle Australia, where ordinary Australians had lived in circumstances of tragic marginalisation, with only three cars in the driveway and cold apple pie to eat at night, were, thank God, now in the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

Middle Australia was restored to its righteous place in the national firmament. Those bruised by long years of malice and forlorn neglect, were restored to their rightful place in the reckoning of the government of our tottering state.

I am sure that we all empathised deeply with the predicament of Middle Australia from which they were newly delivered. We had for so long desperately needed government for the Middle and not just the Fringe. Those on the Fringe had had their snouts in the trough for too long, as we cried in our battle hymn "enough is enough", we need government "for all of us".

There are two challenges that I want to tackle here tonight, which I think are psychologically looming in the Australian psyche as we head towards 2000, the Sydney Games and the Centenary of Federation in 2001.

The first concerns our bread and butter and future. The gnawing and terrifying subterranean question in the bowels of Australian anxiety centres on our uncertainties about the future of our society and economy. A future that is now upon us. Let me articulate this looming anxiety in tabloid terms: are we as a country headed towards being the black, white and variously coloured trash of a globalised world? What will rational economics provide for the future of our children? Is rationalism good or bad? Why is it good?

The second looming nausea concerns our history, our identity, reconciliation and peace between old and new Australians. There is an existing and there will be a growing visceral anxiety in Australia, that might be expressed in tabloid terms as follows: are we going to have an almighty fight between black and white Australians at a time when we would feel so much better if we were to cement the foundations for peace?

These two issues are absolutely critical in my view. They represent the core malaise that deeply troubles Australians, even those who remain optimistic - because they have not been answered, and are not likely to be answered by a Howard Government taking us into the millennium.

Let me first talk about the questions that rationalism and globalisation have brought to the fore.

This Monday John Howard will deliver the Menzies Lecture to the University of London. Apparently, this speech will set out his thoughts on what Australians have come to know as the Hanson Phenomenon: the rise of populist political movements with extreme views in western societies undergoing turbulent changes.

A lecture on this subject from a man with hands as bloody as his, is more than disingenuous, it speaks of astounding audacity and ruthless calculation. It is like Dracula bemoaning the Red Cross.

Nevertheless, such extremist movements articulate widespread anxiety, paranoia and uncertainty in countries that have generally enjoyed stable living standards, but are now caught in the maelstrom of globalisation where economic skies seem to be perpetually overcast, despite the promises and hopes that sunshine is just over the horizon. In Australia, as in other western countries, unemployment and job insecurity seem to be the only certainties in the lives of ordinary citizens.

Hanson-style populism works by turning anxiety and uncertainty into resentment and scapegoating whilst also offering the nostalgic promise of returning the country to the economic and social arrangements that prevailed in the Australia of yesteryear.

The rise and political success of Pauline Hanson is not novel. The Holocaust was the consequence of the same phenomenon in a disaffected Germany.

Nor is John Howard's analysis novel. The effects in the 1990s of the new global economic order that took hold in the 1980s, have long been observed. The story is best captured in the title to Paul Kelly's seminal political and economic history of Australia under Hawke and Keating: The End of Certainty.

Prior to the last election Gary Grey, and his Liberal counterpart, Andrew Robb, were keenly aware of how economic and social insecurity had led to volatile electorates worldwide. Their focus groups told them of the growing volatility in Australia. Indeed perceptive Labor commentators like Lindsay Tanner and Mark Latham understood its root causes and wrote and spoke about them at length.

John Howard was sensitive to the undercurrent of Australian Hansonism, long before Pauline emerged from her shop to give the phenomenon a focus and a name. Unlike his Labor opponents, John Howard had a plan to deal with it, and it was not a nice plan.

If both sides of politics had tapped Hansonesque feelings in the community and understood how widespread it was, it was the Coalition that had a political program to deal with it. Andrew Robb knew that people afflicted with Hansonitis required the following prescriptions: firstly, they need to be acknowledged and understood, secondly, they needed something to kick, thirdly they needed the promise of relaxation and comfort.

The first tack was therefore to tell the disaffected that John Howard "understands" how they feel. For those who said the politicians were not listening to them, those who felt that "political correctness" had shut down their viewpoints, John Howard promised freedom.

Of course, who in Australia did not feel some discomfort with some of the sillier preoccupations of those espousing political correctness? Too many of us on the left had taken sensitivity and decency in language and public discourse to the extremities of anti-intellectualism and unreality - leaving "political correctness" ripe for ridicule.

It provided fertile ground for John Howard to build a unity ticket with those who yearned for the more robust and larrikin language of Australia before those of us in the so-called cafe society, black skivvy brigade took over. It also allowed those for whom sensitivity and decency is anathema, to emerge from the various swamps around the countryside to spew forth their bile about blacks, immigrants, feminism,

do-gooders and bludgers. And of course, after the election, they had prime ministerial imprimatur to do so in the name of free speech.

There are of course grave dangers with leaders who tell the people that they understand how they feel and why they feel the way they do - who then fail to go on and lead with their own views and who abstain from correcting mistaken views that are not conducive to a harmonious society.

This is not to say that our leaders should hector those who have contrary views, but rather they should always urge understanding and respect between the members and groups of our society.

The problem with John Howard is that he is constantly saying that he "understands", no matter how vile and uninformed (and ultimately damaging to our social fabric) the views of certain quarters might be. Indeed he frequently protests that it is his government that decided to cut immigration because it exacerbates unemployment (when most of the commentators say that it does not), that it is his government that has taken the stick to the Aboriginal Industry and the Black Armband, Guilt Industry crowd. How is this approach contributing to greater understanding of what he himself describes as "the greatest blot in the country's history"?

There are obviously political reasons why John Howard wants those with ignorant and uninformed views, who have been galvanised by Hansonism, to feel that he is basically in the same camp.

The second tack counselled by Robb and taken by Howard was to give frustrated and disaffected people something to kick. Pauline Hanson of course explicitly offers up Aborigines and Asians for kicking. Through his government's approach to ATSIC, Hindmarsh, native title, the stolen generations and reconciliation - John Howard has played to this same deep, psychological need in a frighteningly substantial section of the Australian community, to kick blacks.

This is not to say that he is absolutely wrong on many of these issues and that people within his government are not committed to a better policy and better outcomes for Aborigines - it is to say that

the sum total of the strategy is negative. It therefore gives succour to the haters and allows them to know that John Howard is basically in the same camp.

Witness the hapless John Herron who affirms his government's recognition of the plight of Aboriginal people whilst presiding over a severe budget cut. No doubt the Minister's murderous budget knife was dull and blunt until it was whetted on the stone hard hearts of the Expenditure Review Committee to revel in the entrails of indigenous disadvantage.

Of course, race is the perennial favourite for scapegoat politics. It will be interesting to see how the Prime Minister treats the fact that the uncertainties of globalisation have in fact made race a divisive and critical issue to western societies. Pauline Hanson, David Duke and Jean Marie Le Pen all focus on race. Does John Howard really understand the true evil and obsession of racism?

Being a white Australian with little opportunity to know the meaning of racism and how searing it is to the soul, I suspect that Howard has an analytical understanding of it, but he does not know how obsessive the hatred of racists can be and obsessive the offence can be to the hated. Not many Aborigines and Asians in Australia have escaped racism, and they know what a blow to human dignity and fraternity it can be.

Whilst victims of racism have great fortitude and strive hard not to allow racism to get them down, John Howard needs to understand that racism is the central malaise afflicting Aboriginal Australia. Underneath the seething anger, the gritty pride and the emerging strength and hope amongst Aboriginal people - there is still a basic and corrosive fear of rejection and hatred from the wider Australian society.

John Howard has not, over the course of his first year in government, shown that he understands how the diminishment of racism - as inescapable as it always will be for societies - has to be the first item on the agenda for reform so far as Aboriginal people and their affairs are concerned, no matter who is in power.

The third tack taken by the conservatives was to offer a "positive" promise: that Australians could look forward to social and economic security under John Howard. For those of us strung out on caffeine in the socialist dives of West End, Glebe and Fitzroy, how foolish we were to think that John Howard's vision for a relaxed and comfortable future was too tragically mundane for Australia. And how we mocked his hope.

It was of course, probably the smartest line uttered through the whole campaign - it was the line more Australians wanted to hear than we cared to acknowledge.

The evocation of an earlier Australia where social stability was the norm, and Australia was Lucky and White, offered psychological security for people for whom the changes that had happened over the past decade and a half had, in their perception, only increased their alienation.

But of course there is no relaxation and comfort under Howard. Though we are assured that Bruce is still in charge of the RSL and we might yet be able hold the Yellow Hordes at bay, the Prime Minister is a self-confessed "economic radical" and "social conservative".

In his lecture to the Reshaping Australian Institutions series at the Australian National University on June 27 last year, Howard candidly and succinctly described himself as an economic radical and a social conservative. He explained:

Now many would see that as some kind of irreconcilable tension. I don't think it is...I think that, given the character of the globalisation and given the inevitable forces for change that globalisation has unleashed inside Australia, I think...the more sort of change and ferment that economic globalisation and economic liberalism unleash, the more meaning there is for social stability and social constancy...otherwise all is change, all is ferment and all is unease, in a sense you need the one to act as stabiliser against the other...

I think that really beckons us to look at the social stabilisers even more closely because they act as some kind of comfort and bulwark against the impact of change introduced by the economic forces and in that way I think you can happily marry social conservatism and economic liberalism...

This philosophy is cynical and deceptive at its core. I say this because harsh and dramatic economic changes can be pursued contemporaneously with a hand on the heart sincerity about how - even as our economic circumstances turn upside down and jobs are lost and the rich get much richer and the poor poorer - nevertheless the Queen will still reign supreme and there'll be lots of apple pie and so on.

The marriage of economic radicalism and social conservatism was pursued by Reagan and Thatcher with devastating success. It seems the story of the 1980s is the story of how radically new and ever-increasing ways were introduced in which wealth could be accumulated and distributed upwards in great volumes and at a great rate of knots. At the same time our social principles have become stunted with conservatism and indeed the very notions of welfare and social justice have been beating an intellectual retreat.

My wariness about social conservatism comes from my utter amazement at witnessing people who have the greatest difficulty accepting even mild changes to social and cultural arrangements in society, whilst at the same time being at the leading edge of technological know-how - people who are leaders in the generation and promulgation of ideas where it concerns wealth creation. You have arch monarchists championing the information superhighway.

I am always left with a sense that such people want to have their cake and eat it too: they want new ways to make money, but they want to hold onto the old ideas about keeping their wealth free from social obligation and responsibility.

To propose comfort is of course no bad thing, but we need to be honest. It seems to me that to propose the comfort of social conservatism in the face of radical economics is a false comfort. So the black

fellas and the immigrants are now copping it in the throat from the government. Don't we need more substantial comfort?

The uncertainties that Hanson has tapped in too many Australians are real. The questions to which she has given voice - as misguided and misinformed as those who ask them might be - are real questions.

Some of the questions about the sustainability of immigration, about the future of Australian industry and jobs, and about ongoing Aboriginal disadvantage despite funding - are questions that both reasonable and unreasonable Australians are asking. For example on Aborigines: the people who are asking "why should one more red cent of my tax dollar go towards blacks so the government can give them free cars?" and those asking "why are Aboriginal people still grossly disadvantaged when we have not minded our taxes being allocated to overcome their disadvantage?", share a similar question. One is meanspirited and the other is concerned - and both need to be answered.

It is not only Hansonites who have grave misgivings about whether the bipartisan political acceptance of economic rationalism is right for the country. Neither the Howard Government nor are those on the Hungry Side of Politics offering many convincing answers to the questions Pauline Hanson has brought to the surface. The challenge of national leadership is not merely to analyse the reasons why "the mob" have these questions, but we must find honest answers to them.

Tonight I want to talk about how, through the economic, political and social changes that we have seen for more than a decade now, we as a people might be able to maintain some core values in relation to how Australians will care for each other.

It is now a matter of history that Australia underwent a period of radical economic restructuring from the time of the election of the Hawke Labor Government in 1983. The opening up of the country's economy to the world, deregulation, the crusade against protection and the gospel of competition have been the catchphrases of an economic policy that has had dramatic social effects. The structural changes

to the economy that were introduced under that much-scorned banner "economic rationalism", were fundamental and painful.

I confess that I have swallowed the line that these changes were necessary. Australia could no longer rely upon the farm and the quarry to sustain the lifestyles to which it had become accustomed.

There is however, a growing concern that disparities between groups in Australia have widened considerably. Certainly the experience of rationalism in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s resulted in a gaping gulf between the nation sleeping in their sheets and the nation sleeping in the streets.

It seems to me however that even those of us not enamoured with economics and more concerned with social and cultural issues, may nevertheless support the objective of a competitive and strong Australian economy.

It also seems to me that, given the enormous changes that economics is bringing to families, communities and societies, that there is a corresponding need for progressive social policies. We need to keep searching for new ways in which we can ensure that wealth and opportunity is fairly distributed in our society. We need to be ever mindful to pursue policies that are not going to lead to long term and extreme disparity of income and opportunity. As members of a society, we have an obligation to make the necessary adjustments and corrections in our social policy to mitigate the heavy hand of rational economics. Otherwise we end up in that appalling conservative dead end, believing along with Margaret Thatcher in that self-serving conclusion that there is no such thing as society.

As we approach the end of the century, extreme social policy prescriptions that are at odds with rational economics, clearly has few subscribers. My own feeling is that the harsher face of economic reform must be tempered with progressive and honest social policies. Not shallow deceptions about how as long as we have a Leave it to Beaver style Middle Australia, then all will be well with you while I run off laughing to the bank.

The challenge for Labor is to provide to the people of Australia a blueprint for a commitment to build public good upon the bottom line.

As a citizen, anxious to keep and to develop a more inclusive Australia, I could not in all honesty tell you here tonight why and how Labor will strive to avoid surrendering our common weal to economic theories that turn out to be ideologies that were designed to part us from the few things that we all have a purchase on, not the least of which is government and a true citizen's democracy.

Let me now turn to the other looming issue of reconciliation.

There are four issues in my view that we need to settle in order to achieve reconciliation.

The first is our need to come to terms with our history. And that is no untroubling business. But we have made incredible progress ever since the late Professor Bill Stanner pointed out to Australians, in that fantastic Boyer Lecture Series in 1968, that the country had suffered for over 150 years from the Great Australian Silence about the true history of the frontier, and the story of Aboriginal people in Australian history.

Ever since then, we have had an explosion in the historiography, and Aboriginal oral history has illuminated the dark truths, of that history. And it seems to me that in recent years there have been many white Australians who have been able to come to terms with how we need to deal with the past. Redfern Park in December 1992 is a beacon.

It seems to me that the immature inability to accept the truths of the past, to be unable to face the truth without feeling that one is being forced to wear hairshirts and to writhe around in some guilty, self-flagellation routine, has begun to fade. But it has recently resurfaced in the person of John Howard.

It is a troubling business coming to terms with our history, both for Aboriginal people and for non-Aboriginal people. For our Aboriginal people, it is a troubling business because there is the imperative to never allow this country to forget the truths of the past, but to be able as a community to rise above its demoralising legacy and to reach for the future. I am not sure that we have reached the stage as a nation where we are able to deal with our history in this way, and it is indeed a challenge for us.

But it is also a challenge for non-Aboriginal Australia, a challenge to understand that in the same way as they urge pride in Gallipoli and Kokoda and in many of these tragic aspects of the national past, in the same way as we are able to urge contemporary pride in those past events, can we as community and a nation also acknowledge the shameful aspects of our past.

The second issue we need to come to terms with is obviously land rights. And it is fundamental. It has been the centrepiece of our grievance ever since the British Crown laid its presumptuous claim over this continent.

When I started in the land rights business - I sound like Gareth when I say that - much later in the day that it was, I always thought I was going to make the next contribution in the incremental progress towards getting something for my mob in Cape York Peninsula. There was no destination in sight. We were merely the next generation following on from a struggle that had commenced so many years ago, a struggle that had commenced so many years ago, a struggle that had achieved progress millimetre by millimetre, a struggle that had suffered frequent setbacks, but nevertheless, continuing. This was what was called the struggle.

In recent times I have come to the resolve that in fact the momentum has built up, the principles have now been established for us to finally settle the question of land grievance. Mabo and Wik have provided the principles and the opportunities for us to finally put paid to this question - if and only if, there is fidelity. If there is fidelity on the part of white Australia to these principles.

I believe that we can settle the land rights question in soon time. There is no need 30 years hence for white and black Australians to be still revisiting the question and still arguing over the question of Aboriginal land rights.

I do not think that there is any better formula for justice and there is not a more moral compromise than that which was proposed by the High Court in Mabo and Wik. But there can be no retreat. There can be absolutely no infidelity to those principles if we are going to take full advantage of that peace proposal.

The third aspect of our reconciliation challenge centres on the question of self-determination. Self-determination has been, at least since the 1970s, the express policy of Australian governments, but we have never in these three decades given that right any meaning or definition. It is a definition that we must now attempt to find agreement on. It is going to be up to white and black Australians to sit down and negotiate - indeed to treat with each other - in relation to the meaning of indigenous self-determination in this country.

The fourth issue for our reconciliation challenge is overcoming disadvantage and the achievement of social justice for indigenous Australians, whom all Australians know, suffer on every scale, egregious marginalisation and disadvantage.

In relation to the first three things, history, land rights and self-determination, I believe that we can settle them in the immediate term. The question of disadvantage and the achievement of substantive equality for indigenous Australians is going to be, we must not mistake ourselves, a long-term undertaking. It will take generations for a deficit reduction strategy on Aboriginal life expectancy to yield results.

I urge everyone concerned with how we might proceed from here, to read Sir William Deane's "Signposts from Daguragu", the Inaugural Vincent Lingiari Lecture delivered last year. It is one of the most elegant pieces of writing about our reconciliation challenge. And the two things I take most keenly

from Sir William's excellent prescription are: firstly we must acknowledge the progress we have made. We have made great progress. Secondly, we must recognise that when we decide and resolve upon reconciliation, there will be many things that will be left undone, but which should be the subject of a binding commitment between us to resolve in time.

Patently, Australia does not have the leadership to allow us to seize the reconciliation opportunity that lies before us in 2001. Aboriginal Australians, as fearful and anxious as they may be in the present climes - are holding out the hand of peace. The question of whether we will get there really is one for white Australians.

The Australian Labor Party has a great opportunity to offer to Australians the only prospect for peace in 2001. The only prospect that Sydney in 2000 will indeed be a national celebration and not an international travesty.

Australians who I know, want peace, both black and white want to settle these questions. We now have the means to do so. Even those irascible Australians who don't much care for black fellows - they do not want this grievance to be inherited by their children. And why should they? When we can settle it in soon time?

Let me conclude by saying that there is today a glaring need for a clear articulation of our social commitment to each other - black and white, indeed all Australians together. Make no mistake, the fair go is receding and will disappear into our national consciousness like an old relic, if we do not as Australians affirm what it will mean for us in the twenty first century.

We have the best opportunity of any country on the planet to deal with the great dilemmas of economy and social responsibility. We can be the ones who not only provide a safety net for the disadvantaged but we can continually find ways to provide ladders out of the net. To seize that opportunity and for us to work to make that opportunity a reality we need to urge goodwill and empathy.

We need to press the positive buttons in our fellow Australians, not the buttons that say that they are right to fear and to suspect and to begrudge, that they are right to care only for themselves, that they are right to expect exclusive attention, that they are the righteous of Middle Australia.

I have a much more optimistic view of the capacity for graciousness and generosity of Middle Australians who desire for those on the fringes to become part of the nation.

There will be those in the party who will argue that Labor needs to hightail it away from black fellas. They will cite the easy political conclusion that Labor's best prospects will lie in repudiating the importance of the opportunity of reconciliation and a positive belief in Australia and Australians, that is Paul Keating's most fundamental legacy. Those who sing the Swansong of infidelity are wrong.

The destiny of the Australian Labor Party can only lie in positivity. Its fortunes can only be realised by belief in the people of Australia, and by relentlessly pressing the positive buttons that lie like pearls, encrusted by frustration, en-slaved by false promises that salvation lies in hate and a yearning for the past, but nevertheless shining at its core. At our next opportunity - not at the opportunity after the next, but at our next opportunity - let us with all vigour decline, to allow these pearls to be cast unto swine.