

# LABOR MUST KEEP FAITH

Majority support for Labor will require embracing people of faith and abandoning identity politics, writes Labor stalwart **Michael Easson**.

The Tree of Knowledge, Barcardine, Queensland, beneath which the ALP was formed (in better days).

Photo: Floyd Bromley

The history of the ALP at the national level is one long lesson in humility. More often defeated than victorious, glorious in government but only in retrospect. The 13-year golden era of Hawke and Keating between 1983 and 1996 created Medicare and universal, compulsory superannuation; broke the back of inflation; set the economy up for a quarter century of continuous economic growth; and changed Australia for the better. At the same time as those governments fought to earn credibility and support, enthusiasm waxed and waned within the wider labour movement.

The battles of the 1980s onwards are different from what we face today, but several constant threads remain. The margin of electoral victory in Australia is usually close and landslides are few. Labor only ever wins by creating a coalition of voters, not just believers: *voters*—people who decide at an election to give Labor a majority in the House of Representatives.

Maximising Labor support means building the widest coalition of voters possible. That requires garnering a majority from an electorate of conservative disposition. In every winning combination are voters who are traditional, conservative in some things, interested in Labor reforms, but far from rusted-on radicals. To see someone insisting the labour movement carry a conservative tinge may be surprising to some, but regardless Labor ignores this reality at its peril.

## THE BURKEAN TRADITION

There is scope in the Labor tradition to admit the insights of Edmund Burke (too narrowly acknowledged as the founder of modern conservatism), whose critique of the French Revolution is justifiably famous. In a recent essay on 'Burke and Australian Labor', I argued Australian Labor is non-revolutionary, reformist; a party that historically respects its history and traditions, and sees progress in an evolutionary sense. All Burkean virtues.

## Labor's appeal has long extended to faith communities.

The historical record shows Labor's appeal has long extended to faith communities. As historian and teacher John Bolton observes in *Protestantism and Social Reform in New South Wales 1890-1910* (Melbourne University Press, 1972):

A Protestant radicalism went into the making of the Labor Party. It was not just that some radicals were Protestants—they had a Protestant sensitivity to conscience and to brotherhood. Bible reading had been part of their political education, and a people healed of divisions and true to the moral law was what they hoped for from reform.

The American theologian, Gary Dorrien, points out that in the UK: "Christian socialism and socialism were ethical, pragmatic, liberal, non-Marxist, culturally British, not very ideological, and thus exceptional." Similar observations can be made about Australia. The Bible and *Unto This Last* (1860)—the treatise on labour's place in political economy by English art critic, social commentator and reformer John Ruskin (1819-1900)—were more influential than Marx in the early formation of Australian Labor. Lay preacher and co-founder of the Australian Workers' Union, William Spence, saw unity in the temporal and spiritual worlds: "The New Unionism is simply the teachings of that greatest of all social reformers, Him of Nazareth, whom all must revere."

Early Labor Prime Ministers Andrew Fisher and Scullin were steeped



in Presbyterianism and Catholicism respectively, and drew inspiration from heaven and about what to do on earth. Curtin, an agnostic, frequently deployed religious language. Most prominently, Chifley's "Light on the Hill" was an allusion to a new Jerusalem. In contemporary decades, several of Labor's most prominent agnostics, Whitlam and Hawke, knew their Bible and often couched their rhetoric in Christian-inspired terms.

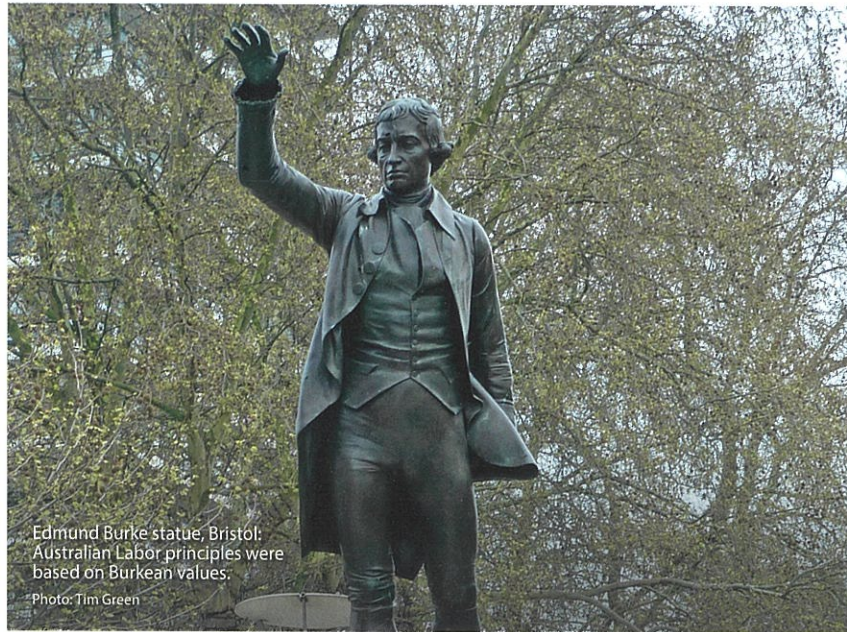
## A CONSTANT TENSION

There is a constant tension between the party as a generator of ideas, and radical reforms, and keeping the flame alight in the hearts of those who (once were and) should be sympathetic to Labor. Nearly 60 years ago the British Labour politician and intellectual Anthony Crosland in *The Conservative Enemy* regretted that the traditional Labour Right "still lacks a truly radical appeal and often

seems insular, class-oriented, conservative and middle aged". He saw that the traditional left were more conservative in a pernicious way: "clinging to outdated semi-Marxist analysis of society in terms of ownership." He was reflecting on the UK, but his points applied here too.

There needs to be the distinction drawn between conservatism in policy formulation, and the pitch to traditional voters who have always formed an important part of Labor's base. But even here too much can be made of the contrast. There is sense in policy renovation and ingenuity and contemporaneously understanding and respecting history; regeneration with a perspective of the best of a tradition is the art of good Labor politics.

As for potential elements of a broad Labor coalition, many Christians believe they are forgotten by our political class and sense they lack political agency, providing fertile ground for conservatives. But Labor also can see such



Edmund Burke statue, Bristol:  
Australian Labor principles were  
based on Burkean values.

Photo: Tim Green

people as part of a potential coalition. This core idea undergirds this essay's argument.

American political commentator George F. Will suggests in *The Conservative Sensibility* (Hachette Books, 2019): "A sensibility is more than an attitude but less than an agenda, less than a pragmatic response to the challenge of comprehensively reforming society in general." And goes on to ascribe some vague ideas as to what this might mean:

The conservative sensibility...is a perpetually unfolding response to real situations that require statesmanship—the application of general principles to untidy realities...The conservative sensibility is relevant to all times and places, but it is lived and revealed locally, in the conversation of a specific polity...revealed in practices.

The idea of a sensibility that is cautious, careful, considerate, cooperative, is reminiscent of what it means to be Labor in Australia. For more than a century, the conservative temperament, much to the chagrin of socialists, has mostly dominated Labor's behaviour and actions, of what *being* Labor entails.

## In Australia, hardly anyone wants to stay working class.

In the UK, there is the recent debate about 'Blue Labour v New Labour', a respectful nod to George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* critique of out-of-touch, doctrinaire socialists who are repulsive to many workers. This is an interesting debate in the UK, but there are too many qualifications to make in saying

how applicable this would be to Australia. Besides, in Australia, hardly anyone wants to stay working class. Interestingly, one of the Australian polity's greatest successes is in forming and sustaining what is arguably the largest, most stable middle class in any Western liberal democratic society.

In the Labor coalition, there needs to be space for conservatives on economic, political, and social issues. All parties are coalitions; every person is a mix of thinking, feelings, outlooks, with cultural, religious, and tribal affiliations. Few people are one-dimensional; most of us are multitudes. Many of us are liberal on social matters, conservatives on fiscal issues, and mixed economy social democrats on others – and combinations betwixt and between.

People of faith, particularly Christians, believe life is sacred, that no man is an island (we belong to and are sustained by a community), and live by the golden rule: in the language of the Jerusalem Bible's Matthew 25:40, "...in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." How we treat others is indicative of our moral worth. How a people treat disadvantage is indicative of any moral assessment of society and its agents, including government.

The main point to make here is that this religious outlook is completely compatible with Labor and social democratic ideals. Showing people of faith that the ALP is not a hostile, anti-religious secular, disdainful force means recovering an understanding of where we came from, our history, the best of our tradition, and to win.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES

But any serious observer of the party admits a series of issues and real problems with this summary. The party faces ideological, attitudinal, and stylistic challenges in winning over support, and calming suspicion.

Admittedly, Australian Labor is now overwhelmingly secular; but so too is Australia. Sometimes leaders of deep



religious faith emerge—more frequently in politics than in the wider society. Think of the evangelical Anglicanism and schooling in Catholic social teaching of Rudd; the muscular Catholicism of Abbott; the quiet, subdued religious outlook of Catholic convert Turnbull; the Pentecostal sympathies of Scott Morrison. Of Opposition Labor leaders, in recent memory there was the Anglo-Catholic Beazley and the Presbyterian Crean, and the atheism of Latham and Gillard. The latter said Methodism was an important, continuing influence. Gillard respected difference and faith, which is why she wrestled so long with various moral issues and the appropriate Labor stance. Latham was less constrained, unsubtle, sometimes contemptuous of the religious, but he never argued for abolishing the conscience vote. (Interestingly, in his current manifestation as a Pauline Hanson NSW State MP, he is championing religious freedom protections. Latham has an eye to appealing to voters, particularly in western Sydney.)

You cannot appreciate multiculturalism fully unless you respect religious diversity.

Bill Shorten's Jesuit education was important to his political evolution, even as he migrated to Anglicanism. Yet under this right-wing Labor leader, the conscience vote—for MPs and members on life, faith, and morals—was in jeopardy. At the 2015 National ALP Conference, in the rush to conform to constantly changing social

attitudes and the mood of “give me identity politics or give me death”, Labor adopted a hard-line position on same-sex marriage, intolerant of the 20 per cent of traditional supporters with more conservative views. The resolution foreshadowed that the right to a conscience vote would be “rescinded upon the commencement of the 46th parliament”. What once might have been considered mainstream among Labor supporters was excised. The party resolved that there would be a sunset clause on conscience on this issue. There was resentment at then Prime Minister Abbott's refusal to offer a conscience vote and parliamentary debate to his MPs. I am glad, following the plebiscite in 2016, that this debate is over, never to be revisited.

In 2019, under Anthony Albanese, a liberal, non-practising Catholic, Labor swung back to emphasising the importance of the conscience vote. This is very important to evangelicals, church-going Catholics, and other faiths who suspect Labor is hostile to their beliefs. Perhaps ‘Albo’ realised that the way things were going, there would be no place in the party for his beloved mother, who brought him up to believe in the Church, Labor, and the Rabbitohs. Andrew West, the host of *The Religion & Ethics Report* on the ABC's Radio National, perceptively writes on the fractured relationship between Labor and religious voters, not just Christians. In ‘How Religious Voters Lost Faith in Labor: Lessons from the 2019 Federal Election’, he asks: “How, then, should Labor begin its dialogue with faith communities?” and answers:

At very least, with sincerity, accepting the right of religious Australians to maintain their values, no matter how unfashionable they may seem to the cultural left that influences modern Labor. They must not present conservative Christians with false moral choices. They must not confuse conservative Christians with political conservatives. Above all, they must not make



The Whitlam family, 1954, after a christening service for their daughter Catherine.  
Photo: National Archives of Australia

faith communities choose between Labor and the God they worship.

The attitudinal problem is this: the higher the level of education, the lower religious observance and, usually, the greater the intellectual snobbishness towards and about those who practice. This is reflected in the put downs too often heard: that people who seek spiritual understanding and meaning through faith are stupid and/or otherwise contemptible. The problem with modern identity politics is its impoverishment of imagination. Sometimes, choices need to be made, whether to be broadly inclusive or narrow and exclusive in focus.

Generally, it would help if all Labor MPs and candidates were curious about and respected their fellow Australians. The best are. In visiting and getting to know the interesting, historic, Assyrian Christian communities in Australia, for example, it is not just a matter of enjoying dolma, grape leaves, Assyrian maza, burek, and their

popular garnishes. What they believe in is also fascinating.

You cannot appreciate multiculturalism fully unless you respect religious diversity. Religion is central to most cultures, particularly interestingly with the ‘enduring nations’, the Greeks and Jewish people. It is interesting, in this context, that the drafter of multicultural policies in the Australian Department of Immigration in the early 1970s during the Whitlam administration, James ‘Jim’ Houston, was religiously inspired. (He later became an Anglican minister in the Melbourne Archdiocese.)

Of related interest, Stuart Piggin and Robert D. Linder in their impressively researched book, *Attending to the National Soul: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1914-2014* (Monash University Publishing, 2019), argue that existing and new churches in the evangelical and Pentecostal traditions have obligations to take social justice seriously:



To survive and thrive in a secular context, local churches must be Jesus-centred, Bible-based, and imaginatively led. For denominations as a whole, two more ingredients must be added: social concern and ministries to people of non-English speaking backgrounds in this most multicultural of nations.

If Labor cannot grasp opportunity in the phrase 'social concern', then heaven help us.

## RESPECT, PLEASE

If anti-Catholicism is the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals—as American poet and history professor Peter Viereck once remarked—evangelical and Pentecostal dispositions are regarded with even more hostility. If we define certain religious temperaments as weird or wacky, it is unlikely that truly, deep, warm bonds of affection can be established. Those Australians of Islamic faith enrich our culture and do much good. If Muslim voters, however, are unscrupulously regarded merely as recruitment opportunities for whipping up anti-Israel sentiment in the ALP, their valuable place in our society is disrespected. Only one thing is worse than intolerance: condescension. Give me respect, please. *Alleluia.*

Labor has its problems not only with evangelicals. There has been a long 70-year seepage of the Labor vote among Catholics. As historian Patrick O'Farrell wrote in *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia. A History* (Nelson, 1977), during the Church divisions during and after the ALP Split in the mid-1950s:

The Sydney opinion was that the DLP with its strong Catholic complexion verged on being a church party, representing a stupid and deleterious isolation of the Catholic body from the rest of the Australian community. The Melbourne view was that the ALP was past redemption ... The ALP

must be opposed from outside, until it came to its senses.

A consequence, however, of the Split was rising anti-Catholic sectarianism in sections of the party. Before the NSW government fell in 1965, under pain of expulsion and further Federal intervention, the NSW Labor administration was ordered by the left-dominated ALP national executive to cease providing matching funds for the Menzies Government's funding for 'science blocks' at non-government schools, and any other form of state aid. Though small in numbers, the DLP waged an effective campaign in the NSW Catholic community to narrowly tip the balance and the Askin Liberal government was elected with a majority of one seat. Only under Whitlam's leadership of the ALP did the party support state aid to needy non-government schools. One consequence of the 1965 NSW state election defeat was the NSW Right saw that the party nationally had to change—Labor had to appeal beyond its working-class base to the middle class.

In NSW, in the late '50s and '60s, the left campaigned against the Paulian Society, a Catholic lay organisation in NSW, as they correctly saw them as a potential recruitment and formation organisation of Catholics in the ALP. The left falsely claimed that the grouping was inspired by anti-communist activist Bob Santamaria (1915-1998). Evidently, for reasons I have not researched, the matter having been decided before my time, the Paulian Society was wound up. The Society of the Legion of Mary, the St Vincent de Paul Society, and others, were once rich recruitment fields. As Paul Keating can attest, his family and supporters actively mined this source of membership for the party, for winning pre-selection for Blaxland in 1969. This was not sinister. People with a practical interest in social justice can see that the Australian Labor Party is compatible with their beliefs.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

Perhaps religious ideals and sympathy never subdued the land, but it held a place

in Australia. Without Christian idealism, life would have been different, more brutal, savage, and uncaring. Some of Australia's greatest reforms and institutions were inspired by the Gospel teachings. One of those institutions was the Labor Party itself. Law professor Chris Wallace's recent book (*How to Win an Election*, NewSouth Publishing, 2020) on Labor's campaigning problems argues:

Successful leaders need to be able to do both [theatre and substance], ideally in a way that enables voters to say yes when asking themselves the question: 'Do I like this person and, more importantly, would they like me?'

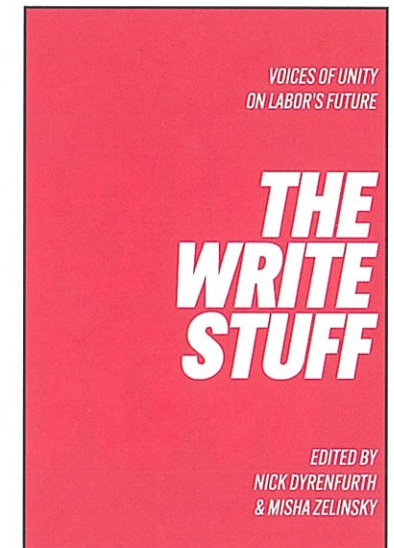
This is Politics 101. Faithful and Labor should not be an oxymoron. Understanding this is important because welcoming people of faith reconnects us with a swathe of the population that we risk losing if Labor is seen as dominated by a metropolitan elite. Also true is that accepting people of faith avoids alienating those who are broadly centre-left, but politically homeless because of cultural/faith issues.

Embracing people of faith returns Labor to a position of respectful tolerance in accepting that reasonable minds and generous hearts may differ on major questions. Diversity of viewpoint is not always well countenanced on either side of politics, but that hypocrisy is more damning on our side because of our insistence of 'diversity' as a core value. Is it? Previous generations took the party and the country into better days socially, culturally, and economically. There are many reasons to regret the transformation of the party by identity politics and exclusionary diversity. The present danger is that secular dogmatism is recapitulated in dogmatic identity politics, where the nuances and coalitions mentioned here will not be tolerated.

Refusing to tent our presence in vast territories of the Australian population, including faith communities, makes it harder

to win. If winning is merely nice-to-have rather than essential, then such attitudes ensure that the Australian Labor Party merely deserves to be a party of occasional success. And in the purity of a liberal and intolerant agenda, we shall reap our reward.

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