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BOB HAWKE WILL ALWAYS BE THE BEACON WHO GUIDES US

In early 1990, I attended a Young Labor dinner at a Lygon St restaurant where the guest speaker was the Prime Minister of Australia, Bob Hawke. It was the first time I had witnessed a sitting prime minister up close in a relatively small setting. I was 22 years old.

Despite being relatively small — particularly in comparison with the imposing Gough Whitlam — the presence Bob brought to the room was colossal. He was laying out the case for Labor's re-election and while he was very much among the faithful, his passion, pitch and clarity of vision about the kind of Australia we ought to aspire to took those in the room from party faithful to Hawke fanatics.

It wasn't just the substance he delivered that night, it was also his humility — he patiently spent another hour while each of us lined up for an individual photo with him. He was everything I hoped he would be.

As a kid, politics became a passion very early on for me, sparked in large part by Bob Hawke as the charismatic leader of the ACTU. In the pantheon of political stars, none shone brighter than Bob. He was not refined like a Menzies or a Fraser, he was never going to be an ABC newsreader. Instead he had the raw straight-talking qualities which seemed the very definition of Australia itself.

His words revealed a fierce intellect. With a Rhodes scholarship under his belt, Hawke was an advocate forever making an argument. He was always on the side of the downtrodden and the vulnerable. Hawke was for the underdog and he taught us that social justice was defined by their emancipation.

Most of all Bob was authentic. Watching the clips of his performances again in recent days, he leaps from the screen. There are no rehearsed lines. There is no political confection. There is only Hawke: unembellished and magnificent.

If there was the slightest inkling to walk a path of public service through politics, Hawke closed the deal. For me, and for so many of my political generation, Hawke was the inspiration which led to our calling.

And even through a parochial lens of a kid from Geelong, a love of Hawke could be explained by his candidature for Corio in the 1963 election.

As a member of parliament, I have come to learn, by speaking to those who knew him well, that Bob was a collaborator and enabler. He appeared to delight in the performance of others. He saw it as a personal achievement to let them fly, an attitude that is rare.

Most importantly he fostered a culture of courageous, honest debate within his cabinet. It was the furnace which tested ideas, including his own. It was the debate that drove his government and the sheer quality of that government has been unmatched since.

As an assistant secretary of the ACTU, I was fortunate in later life to get to know Bob a little. He gave much of his time in retirement to the ACTU. His appearances at evening functions where he would sing the Internationale solo were legendary. I remember him as a warm presence, who despite his untouchable status, was down to earth in conversation and genuinely interested in the person he was talking to. He was funny and easy to be with: a wonderful conversationalist. And at the end of every encounter you couldn't help but pinch yourself that you'd just spent time with Bob Hawke.

His government was smart and pragmatic but founded upon fairness. With Paul Keating at his side, he entered into a prices and incomes accord with the trade union movement which ensured that working people were at the centre of his cause. He then dismantled the decayed compact of Federation which had held back our nation and opened up the economy, unleashing Australia's creative potential.

The result has been 27 years of uninterrupted economic growth — a record in the developed world — underpinned by a foundation of egalitarianism. Bob Hawke is the architect of modern Australia and our greatest peacetime prime minister.

I believe the evolution of fair, civilised societies is achieved through progressive politicians who aim to govern from the centre. From Jefferson to Lincoln to the two Roosevelts, that is the story of America. It is the golden thread of social democracy.

In the context of Australia, that ideal is embodied in Bob Hawke. He is the great man. And for those of us who follow in his footsteps he is the beacon which guides us.

So Bob, on the day of your memorial service, we thank you.

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Authorised by Noah Carroll, ALP, Canberra.