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COMMEMORATION FOR BOB HAWKE

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Thank you Mr Speaker.

Can I acknowledge the beautiful words which have been spoken so far by the Leader of the Opposition, by the Deputy Prime Minister and by the Prime Minister.

And perhaps Prime Minister can I also say thank you for your comments at Bob Hawke's memorial two weeks ago. That was a great gathering of the Labor family led by the Leader of the Opposition and it wouldn't have been the easiest speech to make but it really mattered to us that the Prime Minister of Australia was there to acknowledge Bob Hawke on that day and you did it with dignity and grace and we thank you.

Bob Hawke led an amazing life, a magnificent painting on the canvas of Australia.

As a young boy growing up in the 70's my heroes like many were in the world of sport, Lillee, Tommo, Sam Newman at Geelong, the Nankervis brothers but with an unusual perhaps an early, some might say an unhealthy early interest in politics for me Bob Hawke actually occupied the same space in my imagination.

A presence on our screen that sparkled with energy. A playful smile. A fierce power of speech which was a weapon in the service of the downtrodden and the most vulnerable.

He was a larger than life figure, heroic and perhaps in that youthful image there was just the smallest example of the way in which the nation related to Bob Hawke because from the very first day that Bob walked into the public eye, oozing with charisma, serious intelligence he began a lifelong love affair with the Australian public, the likes of which we have never since seen again.

I absolutely remember as a 15 year old on that fateful day in February of 1983 being glued to the TV as Prime Minister Fraser went to Government House while at the very same time Bob Hawke became the Leader of the Labor Party.

It felt like such a portentous moment, as though we were on the dawn of a new age which just a few short weeks later was realised when Bob Hawke was elected the twenty third Prime Minister of Australia.

And so as I came into adulthood and a more serious political consciousness, Bob Hawke was the main actor on the stage and what a star he was.

He embraced his union roots but he reached out to the whole of Australia famously speaking on the night of his election to those who didn't vote for him. He grabbed the idealism of the Whitlam era but with pragmatism and smarts he implemented it. Understanding the power of government, in truth understanding the power of that side of this chamber because it's that side that changes lives.

And in the process he led the most significant government in peacetime government that this country has ever seen.

He opened up the economy, he floated the dollar, he reduced tariffs, he greatly increased our productivity, he turned us into a trading nation and in the process laid the foundations for 28 years of uninterrupted economic growth.

He embraced immigration; there would not have been a milk bar owner in the 1980s of Greek or Italian or Eastern European heritage who did not see Bob Hawke as an absolute hero because he made them feel welcome. He made them feel that this was their country too as it most certainly is.

He dramatically increased school participation rates, broadened our university base and in the process made us a smarter country.

He played his part in the reconciliation of Australia with its First Peoples.

He significantly changed the status of women in our society.

He left us an incredible environmental legacy; the Franklin river, Kakadu, the Daintree, Antarctica. He had Australia take its place in international affairs as a confident nation. Playing his part in ending apartheid. As an example, he played his part in seeing Australia and know who we were as a nation and what we were on about in the world.

George Megalogenis in his really wonderful book, 'Australia's Second Chance' said this about the compact of Federation. "...that was a stunning act of self-harm... a political defence mechanism that united Labor and capital. By extending the principle of racial purity to industry protection. Australia's political class," George said, "was born thinking small."

Bob often remarked that since European settlement the most significant step in our nation's history had been that wave of immigration in the immediate aftermath of the World War II, that combined with his government in partnership with Paul Keating, tore down the moribund compact of Federation.

And, in its place he built a superstructure for our nation today.

For more than any other person who has graced this chamber or this Parliament, Bob Hawke is the architect of modern Australia.

And so for a young person enthused with government and politics and the power that it had in changing people's lives for the better.

Everybody that sits behind me now can articulate their ideas and their philosophies which led them to becoming a member of the Australian Labor Party and a member of this place. It is the same for me too but in addition there is a deep and profound sense that I agreed with Bob.

I followed Bob because for people of my generation, Bob Hawke was the inspiration which led us to a life of public service in the Australian Labor movement.

But I actually see Bob as the Australian embodiment of an even grander tradition because we stand here in the deep belief that the evolution of civilised society principally occurs through the operation of progressive politics implemented from the centre. That is Jefferson, it's Lincoln, it is the two Roosevelts and the story of American.

But in a contemporary Australian sense it is Bob Hawke who is that part of the golden thread of human development, the custodians of which in this country today is the Australian Labor Party.

In the year 2000 I become an Assistant Secretary of the ACTU. Bob, in his retirement gave a lot of time to the ACTU. He used to note that of all the organisations and places he worked it was the one where he had spent most of his time. And so as a result I got to know Bob just a little.

And I really remember the first substantive meeting that I had with Bob; we sat together at a lunch at the ACTU congress in Wollongong in that same year. I was nervous, star struck actually, about spending some time with Bob but I needn't have been because Bob put us all at ease straight away.

He was charming, engaging and interesting and interested- actually- in a really generous way un us and the people around me and before long, we were hanging on his every word and we were in the palm of his hand.

I remember ringing my dad straight after. I was really excited because and I felt like I'd been given this precious gift; an hour with Bob. And in the ensuing years I got that gift a few more times.

There was pain in Bob's life.

As Paul Keating remarked at Bob's memorial this is a brutal business that we are all engaged in and mostly we all get carted out.

But there was not a hint of bitterness in Bob Hawke. He was excited to be alive.

And it struck me, at the end of the day he was a man who was just really delighted to be Bob Hawke.

And so I have to say, Australia without Bob Hawke feels a little less bright.

It feels a little less colourful.

And it feels a little less interesting.

And yet, modern Australia is a vastly better place for having been touched by the existence of Bob Hawke.

So I want to give my condolence to Blanche and all the Hawke family and to thank them for allowing their man to become our great man.

He was Labor through and through. He was from us.

But ultimately he was much bigger than us. He was a part of the entire Australian polity. And at the end of the day he is owned by every Australian.

And, in his passing in the words of Edward Stanton, spoken about another past hero, Bob, Now (He) Belongs to the Ages.'