

# ALR

## MARGINS

### Politics Fights Back

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, the monster of party politics has been sighted again. First, the Liberals successfully claimed back the political high ground with *Fightback!* Before you knew it Hewson was kissing babies and appearing suave on telly, the Labor Party looking utterly exhausted and embarrassed. *Fightback!* and the Goods and Services Tax looked like the new Accord: a gleaming policy machine without parallel from what used to be called the Left of politics. But then there arrived the new tablet: this one called *One Nation*.

Keating's Economic Statement is only part of this story of Labor revival. In itself The Statement doesn't contain much that is surprising, but, then, neither did the Accord. Policy auras somehow have an effect beyond what's on paper, to the extent that a Labor government which months ago looked to be floundering, today again seems to have some electoral chance. The Labor Party obviously had great difficulty accepting the idea that Hewson had taken the initiative; *One Nation* endeavours to grab it back. But more than that, there's the war-footing taken up more generally by Keating, whose period of unbearably goodboy behaviour now seems (thankfully) to be over. For a while there it looked as though Keating

was a shag on the prime ministerial rock, unable to engage in the piercing bullyboy rhetoric which has been so much his hallmark. Now he's back fleecing the opposition.

Does this constitute a rush of leadership to the new boy's head? It's hard to say. Certainly it's reassuring to see Keating sleazebagging again, as contrasted to the apparently lost persona of his first days as Prime Minister. But Hawke also knew how to kick heads, even with an enthusiasm that was lagging and only revived by the musical cash registers of the well-timed TV explanation for his departure. He may now come back as Donoghue. Keating, meantime, has picked up the part of Fearless Leader.

Now we have *One Nation*, aggressively Australian, oriented to Asia rather than Britain, kicking the corgi. The funny thing about this is how contrived it looks—Keating and his mates seeking to dress Hewson up as Stanley Melbourne Bruce, arch-tory, tophatted and British to the bootstraps, with them in stubbies and thongs. No longer holding his tongue, Keating bites back. Some parts of the campaign are smarter: calling the GST the food and clothing tax, for example. Certainly, it's hard to resist the sense that Keating is back in his element, rubbing Hewson's nose in it. So why the populist inflexion? It works, and it places Keating back in labour history, taking advice in his weekly yarn with Jack Lang (who also had a plan against the contemptible Britishers and their local lapdogs).

The story thus sounds a bit like Hawke's fantasy about reliving Curtin, Australia's saviour against the hun internal or external, real or imagined. In academic circles this is called the invention of tradition—though another part of it is called porkbarreling: promise not to spend your family's \$125 on imported lollies. Born-again Keynesianism it

isn't; the message is closer to Prince's creamy crooning, exhorting us to get on top.

Does all this colour and movement suggest then that there is an outbreak of politics? Certainly there is, albeit within the parameters of this rhetoric and stage management. Plainly both major parties have put more energy recently into policy than they have for a long time, though one is also given the sense that they've put as much time or more into cooking up snazzy titles which are not exactly recipes for the cookshops of the future. If we leave the issue of Union Jack Hewson out of it, there has been some useful attempt to clarify some of the differences which might provide the basis for a revival of Australian politics.

*One Nation* is certainly a paler labour utopia than that which was presented, however vaguely, in the original ALP-ACTU Accord. The now obligatory noises about social justice establish exactly what the document sets out to deny, that social policy remains a pathetic appendix to the real game in economic policy itself. For all that, there is still some sense conveyed in these packages of what we see and what we might stand to get.

These are images, in a nutshell, of society which is more or less deregulated: only the more or less now really matters. When politics comes back into the shallows and thunders the words "I'm back!" we can begin to sense something of the difference between the bites: on the Right it's Freddy Krueger; on what used to be called the Left, it looks uncannily like Aunty Jack.

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