

Follow the LEADER

The Hawke-Keating struggle dominated the media in June. But was it worth all the fuss? David Burchell argues that there's more to leadership than meets the eye.

Two events—the NSW election in May and the recent bitterly divisive leadership struggle between Bob Hawke and Paul Keating—have rewritten the script of politics for the near future. Their effects, clearly, have been quite different, but they have one feature in common; they mark the end of an era for left-of-centre politics in Australia. Labor's decade of triumph between 1983 and 1991 has been replaced by a new age of anxiety.

The significance of the NSW result is canvassed at length elsewhere in this issue of *ALR*. However, it raises one important point which is close to the heart of the argument I want to mount here. And that is that—with the exception of a few individuals—almost nobody, Right or Left, predicted the outcome of the election in NSW, and almost no one, once the result had actually been posted, could very

clearly or coherently explain why it had happened. The mass media, in their confusion, leapt to the snake-oil explanations beloved of them—it was all due to bad slogans and PR, or the unpopularity of Mr Greiner as a leader. Forget for the moment that, prior to the election, no one in the media had seen fit to criticise any significant element of the Liberals' campaign, or that Mr Greiner was, by all the polling evidence, far more popular than Mr Carr. The result was, on the face of it, inscrutable, and any explanation had to be imported from outside, as it were—from the magical mirror-world of advertising and market research.

Just as importantly, though, few if any in the Labor camp realised what was about to happen. Labor, like the Coalition and the media, assumed that the political and economic circumstances—almost universally unfavourable to Labor—would inevitably create a certain electoral outcome: that, if you like, certain electoral effects can be 'read off' from certain external economic or political conditions. They were wrong, as such reasoning is always to some extent wrong. Political determinism of that kind



Photo: Peter Morris/Sydney Morning Herald

Keating: Eyes on the hot seat.

more often reflects the outlook of the analyst than of society at large.

What the result highlighted, in short, was the poverty of the analytical armoury customarily employed by journalists and commentators to 'explain' politics. This is not to suggest that there is one, 'real', explanation to the NSW election result (or almost anything else), and that the 'correct' analysis (whatever that might be) will somehow yield that answer. But it certainly does suggest that there is some element missing in the framework used by media commentators to try to connect the happenings in parliamentary politics with those in the outside world. One way of looking at that 'gap' between politics and society in conventional political analysis is to look at the role of leadership in the recent tussle for the prime ministership between Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.

One thing which couldn't be said about the federal leadership challenge was that it was unexpected. The mechanics of leadership challenges are something the press gallery does know something about, and the fervid atmosphere of alliance and intrigue is, after all, the preferred habitus of the media's opinion makers. It's well known that Paul Keating wanted to challenge as early as January but was restrained by a number of factors including the Gulf War. We also now know why he felt the leadership was so rightfully 'his': Bob Hawke had promised it to him.

"Hawke - defensive, snarling, and with a misplaced sense of his own gravitas"

One of the most remarkable aspects of the challenge—or should it be called the first challenge?—was the breakup of opinions outside the hothouse climate of Parliament House. Just about every quality newspaper in the country, as well as a number of the tabloids, editorialised in favour of Paul Keating; the press gallery was near-unanimously pro-Keating; and nearly all the reportage after the event was certain that the Labor Caucus had made a dreadful mistake. By contrast, the opinion polls continued to be overwhelmingly unhelpful to Keating; Bob Hawke is hardly popular at the moment, whatever his backers may claim, but Paul Keating is still unreservedly loathed in the electorate.

How are we to explain this? Is there some crude form of capital-logic at work trying to force Keating to the prime ministership 'in the interests of capital' and against the wishes of the electorate? Hardly—unless Bob Hawke is to be considered some arch-nemesis of the business com-

munity. More helpful in trying to explain the line-up of forces in the Keating-Hawke struggle is to unpack the significance and symbolism of the two candidates in terms of the massive political drama being played out in Australian politics at the moment.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between the two candidates was their post-challenge press conferences. There was Paul Keating, cool, controlled and with a marvellous sense of the theatre of the occasion. And there was Bob Hawke, defensive, snarling, and with a distressingly misplaced sense of his own gravitas. The contrast exemplified at least one of the reasons which makes the press gallery such avid Keating apostles. Keating's sense of theatre (or 'vaudeville', as he puts it, with his customary lack of respect for the pretensions of his audience) touches their deepest instinct that politics is, in the last resort, a kind of tragic drama in which the key element is the clash of forceful but fatally flawed personalities.

In this regard the press gallery is half right. It's simply not adequate to say—as many on the Left have undoubtedly been muttering grumpily—that the theatre of the leadership struggle is a distraction from 'real' politics, that politics 'out there' in the community is the 'real' agenda, and that the Canberra theatre is consequently a sham. In the first case, the struggle over the direction of the government at perhaps the most crucial time in Australia's modern political history can hardly be irrelevant. Perhaps equally significant, though, is the role that leadership plays in a symbolic sense in public political discourse. Leaders are important not just because, by smiling sweetly, they may win the hearts of people too foolish to know the 'real' issues at stake. Rather, leaders are important because into their public personae are poured a range of political symbols and images which do relate to real issues and policies, but which are expressed in this human guise, as it were, in shorthand form. It is in this light that the Hawke/Keating dichotomy becomes important.

Probably no one has exploited this merging of public persona with a repertoire of political symbols more successfully than Bob Hawke. So successful has he been that many people in the wider community simply associate the Labor Party with what they understand by the words 'Bob Hawke'. This makes Hawke's public persona (which is, we are told, quite different to his private personality) very important to him. In particular, we are told, Hawke hates to have his integrity questioned. Even more obviously, he hates to admit to lying, even when it is obvious that he has done so.

The media made much during the leadership tussle of the lack of credibility of a prime minister who lied to the electorate. More to the point, one might have thought, is the lack of credibility of a prime minister who can't admit having lied to the electorate. The ability to admit one's past untruths is a kind of badge of ordinary humility, a demonstration that the liar is willing to be taken down a peg or two. Bob Hawke's inability to do that—his overweening sense of his own dignity—is the fatal flaw of his relationship with the electorate. Pinocchio, we are told,

discovered that when he lied his nose grew. In Bob Hawke's case, when he dissimulates—as he does so badly—it is his syntax, rather than his nose, which takes its revenge. The long rambling sentences start to unravel. And there is a glimpse of a private persona quite unlike that known to and beloved of the electorate.

Interestingly, though, while the mass media have been very conscious of the opinion polls which show Hawke's relative popularity with Paul Keating in the electorate, there has been remarkably little analysis of what this means in political terms. After all, the electorate empathises with Hawke not simply as an avuncular father-figure, but as a prime minister. One might wonder then what his prime ministership symbolises.

“Keating, like Margaret Thatcher, is a ‘conviction’ politician”

The clearest symbolic resonance in Bob Hawke's 'long-running love affair with the Australian people' (as unexpectedly sentimental journalists are wont to describe it) is compassion and a sense of the fair go. Compassion because the essence of Hawke's rhetorical appeal, amid the twisted syntax and half-hidden bad humour, is—to put it simply—a vocabulary of caring. At times this vocabulary of caring creates problems for Hawke, such as when he exhibits an almost desperate desire to have a more caring message to give than that which has often been available to him in the austere climate of the 80s. One could read his notorious 'No child will live in poverty by 1990' remark in this manner.

The essence of the child poverty message, as originally formulated, was that rational individuals who used government allowances wisely could raise their children's living standards above the poverty line—which is actually a rather bureaucratic and economistic way of looking at things, given that a great many people are not aware of their entitlements, and are thus unable to utilise them (even assuming that utilising them will indeed rescue them from poverty). Hawke was not content with this dour message: he wanted to be able to present the electorate with a solution to the problem of child poverty, with a caring fait accompli. He wanted to demonstrate a government intervention which consciously and deliberately removed suffering from the shoulders of Australian children and parents. The resulting furore exposed his leadership to ridicule—and for a remarkably similar reason to that which currently has his leadership exposed to ridicule. Bob Hawke wants to be liked, but he wants to be liked in particular in the manner in which a kindly, caring parent is liked: to be trusted implicitly, and to be seen to have

dispensed sympathy and shelter. If the message is seen to be bogus, the image very rapidly dissipates.

Not even Paul Keating's greatest admirers would claim that his image is of a caring leader. Rather he has acquired the unenviable image in the electorate at large of the cold and calculating 'economic man'—of an individual who weighs up the costs of economic decisions in the vocabulary of 'the macro balance' and 'the big picture'. Contrary to what some journalists may believe, this vocabulary has a rather narrow constituency. It may have impressed the finance sector in the 80s that a Labor treasurer could demonstrate such a consummate grasp of economic logic, and be able to present economic concepts with such disarming simplicity on the public stage. But to most people the vocabulary of economics is only sympathetic if they feel that they themselves (or their family, or their community) are benefiting as a result of all that lever-pulling and brake-holding. In the mid-80s, with record unemployment levels and a buoyant level of demand, this was plausible to many. In the early 90s it seems plausible to very few. This will be a terrific obstacle to a renovation of Keating's image should he actually become PM within the next few months. He will have to develop, not just a warmer image ('the family man' will undoubtedly be top of the list), but also a new vocabulary, and this will mark a sharp and possibly (for him) discomfiting break with his established public persona.

However, there is another point to these widely divergent public images. The Labor image worked in the 80s because 'Labor' meant Hawke and Keating together, as a team. In other words, Hawke's caring vocabulary was plausible precisely because it was intertwined with the austere economic vocabulary of Keating, like sweet and sour. After all, most people are suspicious of an idle caring rhetoric—something which many on the Left are slow to realise. Those political salespeople, whether of the Left or the Right, who promise material gain without material pain, tend to be regarded with an often well-justified, lack of trust. This suggests that, whether or not Keating returns to the frontbench as leader, a Keating substitute will have to be found. Hence the microscopic attention to every utterance of the new treasurer, John Kerin, on the part of the media and the financial markets. There is almost a need for Kerin to slip into the Keating persona, to 'become' Keating.

All of this of course is hardly without significance for the government's policy direction, no less than for its public face. The decision of Labor's parliamentary Left to hitch its own fate to that of Hawke has prompted the inevitable jibes from the press gallery that the government has become a 'prisoner of the Left'. This is, of course, nonsense, except in the obvious sense that Hawke now personally relies on the Left's indulgence for his continued survival. However—though this has been little noted in the media—it was not self-evident that the Left would have pulled so firmly behind Hawke in the first place. That it did is worthy of examination, particularly in terms of the political symbolism of the two candidates.

Three reasons suggest themselves. Firstly, the Left hates Keating—with a vengeance, and not without reason. After all, in the 80s Keating seized the mantle of radical change from the Left and made it his own; henceforward the Left was reduced in the public eye to the status of a group of reactionaries, often arguing lamely for the return to the status quo ante of 1983 in economic policy. Moreover, the means with which Keating carried out his task of opening the Australian economy to the world were both deeply flawed and deeply antithetical to the Left. In the shortest political shorthand of the postwar era, 'more market' meant Right, and less meant Left. Whatever its other failings, Keating's economic revolution in the 80s fundamentally riled the Left because it seemed to be unravelling the many incremental curbs on the market put in place over the postwar era, both by regulation and by the extension of the public sector. That most of the regulatory regime of postwar Australia was dominated less by a leftist desire for social justice than a pervasive political culture of pork-barrelling was thought to be beside the point. Keating was the acolyte of 'the market' and for that he will bear the Left's continued disapproval, regardless of the ministerial ambitions of one or two disgruntled members.

Secondly, the Left has practical reasons to support Hawke. The claim that the Left now 'dominates' the government is palpable nonsense, as will rapidly become obvious to all but the most stubborn of commentators. However, for the pragmatic element on the Left led by Brian Howe, Hawke's reign has been the time of an unprecedented cohabitation of the factions in government. It has been, of course, a very unequal partnership; the government's dominant economic direction has increasingly been driven by a combination of the hardheads in parts of the Centre Left and the Right, with most of the Left as virtual spectators. However, unlike other Labor governments, the Hawke government has operated by an uneasy style of consensus. Once it has become clear where the numbers lie, an effort is made to make decisions at least more palatable to other interests. And for those on the Left who accepted that the government was a government, and not (in Lindsay Tanner's phrase) simply a collection of warring tribes, this has created the possibility for more practical influence on policy from the Left, within the basic direction of government strategy, than it has usually been within the capacity of the Left to exercise.

Moreover, this has been integrally associated with Hawke's leadership style. He is widely described as being 'a good chair'—of not pushing his own opinions (where he has any) too hard, and of generally resting with what he understands to be the feelings of Cabinet. On the other hand, Keating, like Margaret Thatcher, is a 'conviction' politician, and to the Left this suggests that, as a leader, he would try to lead by domination rather than cohabitation. And Keating's origins in the NSW Right might be proffered in evidence for such suspicions.

Of course, the Keating of today is not the Keating of the NSW Right of the 70s, with all the bully-boy tactics and macho mateship which that culture exuded. Come to that,

almost none of the senior Labor figures who have come to positions of power through the agency of the NSW Right are, in any real sense, part of that culture today—Keating, Richardson, Bob Carr all come to mind. To a large extent, the NSW Right remains what it always has been: a vehicle for ambitious working class boys made good to better themselves in the labour movement. The rest of its awesome reputation is largely window-dressing for that end.

Finally, the Left supported Hawke because, as I noted above, he symbolises the compassionate face of the government, and that compassionate face is more than anything else the province of the Left. It is in this respect that Keating's departure might seem to open up new horizons for the Left in the government. A Hawke-Howe government might be interpreted as bringing a return to the 'traditional Labor' equation of Labor and compassion. (And the Coronation Hill decision might be proffered in evidence of that.)

Yet this is largely a mirage. As I've also noted above, compassion is hardly plausible without an economic strategy to sustain it—and an economic strategy dominated by the problems of the external constraint and its implications for the stance of fiscal policy. This should not be read as suggesting simply 'a concern for the sentiment of the financial markets', as one Left MP put it recently—although that can hardly be unimportant.

Nevertheless, it certainly does mean that the Left can't simply wave goodbye to the Keating years. Important elements of the Keating strategy are effectively irreversible. Old-style regulation and protectionism is dead — though there is no reason on earth why the alternative has to be open-slayer deregulation or complete free tradeism. Above all, the external constraint is immutable. Australia's place in the world economy forbids any simple return to old-style reflationism and expansionism. The heavy task of the Left is to reconstruct a Left politics which can move creatively and innovatively within these awful constraints. Waving farewell to Paul Keating will make surprisingly little difference to the weight of that task.

In that sense, Labor's Left is guilty of the mirror-image of the problem which afflicts the press gallery. The press gallery associates Keating with all that symbolism of the economic process of the last few years for which it feels such enthusiasm, and which Keating, for want of a more tasteful way of putting it, made sexy. The Left associates Keating with all the features of the economic policies of the last decade it loathes. In each case this is to put far too much weight onto the role of Keating the individual, and far too little on the much wider forces he's come to symbolise.

Win or lose in the continuing leadership duel, Keating's legacy will be with Labor for a long time yet.

DAVID BURCHELL is ALR's managing editor.