Then came ANZAC Day. Instead of crossing the lake from The Lodge to the War Memorial, Keating went to Kokoda, where he paid a carefully-staged tribute to the Australians and Papua New Guineans who stopped the Japanese army for the first time in 1942. This was not simply the repayment of an overdue debt to the locals who helped Australian troops. It was a move calculated to shift the focus of ANZAC Day away from Churchill's Dardanelles folly in 1915 to a campaign for the defence of Australia. It was an attempt to wrest the symbolism of Australia's military heritage from an imperialist to a nationalist cause.

This was accompanied by a minor historical squabble over Churchill's alleged indifference to Australia's fate during the Second World War. Again, the empire loyalists were livid. Finally, in May, Keating used the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea to emphasise his point about Australia's interests being in its own region, not in a sentimental attachment to a defunct empire which, both in war and trade, had deserted us.

It was time to recognise all this in the quintessential symbol of the nation. The Union Jack would have to go. After all, as the Flags Act 1953-73 stipulates, “The Australian National Flag is the British Blue Ensign” with a few stars added. We were ready for a new design symbolising our national maturity and independence. Overnight, the benches of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition sprouted little Australian flags, like a thin blue line of royalist defence, and battle commenced.

According to Michelle Grattan in The Age of 29 April, Hewson accused Keating of being a “wrecker” in the Jack Lang tradition. “He is prepared to tear down a fundamentally important institution and symbol like the Australian flag to satisfy his own short-term political ends”. Rising to the defence of his patron, Keating reached for his sledgehammer. “He (Lang) knew what they (the conservatives) were—snivellers to forces abroad, crawlers to forces abroad, licksplitters to forces abroad—and they have never changed. They do not understand Australia, and they do not understand Australian nationalism.”

There was none of speech writer Don Watson's elegant wit here. This was vintage Keating, the street brawler sticking up for his old mate, 'the Big Fella'. There was, nevertheless, some truth in Hewson's reply that “The attack on the flag is to be seen as nothing more than a deliberate distraction from the main game”. (That's the game for the neo-classical cup, awarded to the team that can level the industrial playing field fastest, not the one that kicks the most goals.) But Keating's nationalism was not just a distraction from the economic debate. It was a good deal more than that, as the reference to Jack Lang signifies.

Lang certainly knew about snivellers, crawlers and licksplitters, and how to kick their heads. He was, after all, a master of the art of populist nationalism, an art he learned from his brother-in-law, Henry Lawson. Between them they spanned the two moments in Labor's history when that particular variety of nationalism occupied centre stage. In April 1888 Lawson wrote an editorial for the Republican bemoaning the neglect of Australian history in schools. He hoped that, contrary to the wishes of “Australian Groveldom”, children might “learn to love the blue flag with the white cross, that bonny Flag of the Southern Cross”. They might also “acquire a preference for some national and patriotic song of their own homes and their own appointed rulers, rather than to stand in a row and squeal, in obedience to custom and command, God Save Our Gracious Queen”.

Within five years a severe depression, strikes and the collapse of the banking system had given a sharp class edge to these nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments. In a series of bitter strikes, the unions were ruthlessly defeated by the combined power of employers, police, troops, the courts and the colonial parliaments. In an effort to capture control of the instruments of the state which were so successfully mobilised against them, they established their own political party in 1891. As Lawson wrote at the time, “We'll make the tyrants feel the sting of those that they would throttle, They needn't say the fault is ours if blood should stain the wattle”.

From its beginnings, the Labor Party's ideology was compounded from a populist amalgam of class, nation and race. Its rhetorical account of Australian society went something like this. Colonial capitalists, in a desperate defence of their own interests, cared nothing for the welfare of common working people. Indeed, they would crush any attempt to build
a more egalitarian society, free from the class-ridden corruption of the Old World. They were not true Australians. Their hearts and heads were in the Mother Country. Having made their fortune and persuaded a colonial governor to award them a knighthood, they might return 'home' in triumph. In pursuit of that dream, they would go to any lengths, including the importation of coloured workers to break down the hard-won living standards of Australian labour. Only the unions and the Labor Party, the true guardians of national aspirations, stood in their way. In its stout resistance to capitalist greed and imperialist arrogance, as well as the protection of racial purity, the labour movement represented the Australian people, not just a class.

Between 1930 and 1932 Jack Lang revived this tradition in his revolt against the deflationary economic policy forced on Australian governments by Sir Otto Neimeyer, the emissary sent from the Bank of England to protect the interests of British bondholders and Australian conservatives in business and politics. The great "battle of the plans" for economic recovery came down to a contest between "men versus money". Orthodox economic solutions demanded that interest owed to British capitalists be paid before anything could be done to help pensioners and the unemployed. In Lang's view, Australia should have renegotiated its debt, reduced payments to bondholders and changed the basis of the currency so that workers and the widows and children of men who had died defending the Empire in 1914-18 could be saved from utter destitution. It was another example of how capitalists and imperialists cared nothing for the welfare of the common people. Indeed, their utter hostility to those who resisted was confirmed when the British Governor sacked Lang as Premier of New South Wales in May 1932.

The young Keating imbibed all of this traditional account when he sat at the feet of Lang in the latter's declining years. It was central to the history of the Labor Party and consistent with the folk memory of Irish Australians who had their own reasons to detest the British Empire. But Keating is far too astute a politician to allow himself the indulgence of a cathartic wallow in Labor mythology. There is a logic in his revival of the old populist tradition—a revival mercifully shorn of the tradition's old racist cast.

On his own side, it's good for the morale of the faithful, at least those who have long memories of Labor's traditional rhetoric. There is even an attempt to present himself as a pale imitation of Lang, the defender of the common people, the bearer of the true populist tradition. It is also intended to depict Hewson and the Opposition as the enemies of the people in the terms of the populist tradition. The story is a familiar one. The Opposition are fawning royalists, loyal to the tattered glory of a collapsed empire symbolised by the Union Jack. They want to break down the centralised industrial relations system which Labor established at the turn of the century to put a floor under wages and conditions. Indeed, they will attack the institutional structure which provides the foundations of the union movement. It is the Opposition which proposes to abolish all protection for jobs in Australian manufacturing and levy a regressive goods and services tax on the necessities of life so that the rich can have tax cuts. This, surely, is sufficient to indict them as un-Australian.

Lately, however, Keating has backed off a little from this line of argument. The polls have shown him that popular support for a new flag is not so strong as he had hoped. But that is largely a symbolic issue, easily turned aside. Perhaps also his minders have pointed out that it might be a little difficult to go all the way down the populist road.

After all, it was Keating who deregulated the monetary system and had a hand in privatising the people's bank—hardly the credentials of an old-style Labor Nationalist. It might have been pointed out to him that Labor has often resorted to populist nationalism in periods when it faced electoral disaster. He may even find that a million unemployed might rally to a familiar flag as they did in New South Wales in 1932.

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