Paul Keating’s oblique reference to a republican future for Australia during the recent royal tour outraged John Howard and like-minded royalists. It was ill-timed, provocative and, worst of all, it was bad manners. When our Prime Minister laid a guiding hand on the Queen of Australia’s back, all hell broke loose. Television news bulletins around the world ran it as their ‘amazing scenes’ segment. The British tabloids, ever the guardians of royal dignity, were near to apoplexy. This was more than just the gauche familiarity of a colonial Prime Minister, even a Labor one. It was lèse majesté. Ian Botham, here to smile the colonials at cricket, blustered threats against those who would insult his sovereign. It was all good knockabout stuff for the silly season.

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, licksplittles 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 licksplittles, 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 Labour’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 aspira­
tions, stood in their way. In its stout
resistance to capitalist greed and im­
perialist 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 govern­
ments by Sir Otto Neimeyer, the emis­
sary sent from the Bank of England to
protect the interests of British
bondholders and Australian conser­
vatives in business and politics. The
great "battle of the plans" for
economic recovery came down to a
contest between "men versus
money". Orthodox economic solu­
tions demanded that interest owed to
British capitalists be paid before any­
things could be done to help pen­
sioners and the unemployed. In
Lang's view, Australia should have
renegotiated its debt, reduced pay­
ments 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 im­
perialists cared nothing for the wel­
fare 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
nationalist tradition. It is also in­
tended to depict Hewson and the Op­
position as the enemies of the people
in the terms of the populist tradition.

The story is a familiar one. The Op­
position are fawning royalists, loyal to
the tattered glory of a collapsed em­
pire 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 at­
tack 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 deregu­
lated 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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