The Treasurer, The Secretary, His Strategist and Their Agenda

ACTU secretary Bill Kelty likes to talk about his friends. Especially if they happen to be Paul Keating or Laurie Carmichael.

In the aftermath of the federal election, the Treasurer and the union strategist are definitely ‘the favoured ones’ in Kelty’s books. Not only are they responsible for much of the Accord, they have kept the industry restructuring line on track and helped propel Australia into a new era - “mature industrial relations”, says Kelty.

And that’s the way it will stay, if he has anything to do with it. Kelty has no intention of wavering from the master plan laid down for the union movement after the return of the Labor government.

Speaking to a Fabian Society dinner in Sydney soon after the election, Kelty warned that the momentum of industry restructuring and union amalgamation will not falter and that opposition will not be tolerated either outside or inside the union movement. “We have never given up, and we will win...as long as there’s a long memory and a hate, you can beat anybody”, he said. Friends are a different matter altogether. And Kelty and Keating go back a few years. “When I first met him I thought he was a typical NSW Labor Party right-wing pragmatic who wanted to be in government but had no ideas. I thought he wanted to be able to retire and say ‘I was treasurer.’”

But all that changed when Kelty realised his mate Paul was one of the ‘true believers’. “His values are uniquely Labor. It was Keating who kept the Accord together. Not because he had to be convinced but because he believed in it.”

Carmichael and Kelty go back even further. Despite an initial reluctance to back the Accord, Kelty claims Carmichael was a “closet supporter most of the time”, who eventually became the “intellectual boss of award restructuring”. Laurie came out of the closet when “over one of those Christmas lunches” (with Kelty) he decided there was no mid-way course for restructuring “either do the lot or none”. The blueprint for restructuring all awards was cooked up with the Christmas pudding and with Keating’s support there was no stopping them. “We just slaughtered the employers. You’ve never seen such a bedraggled lot in your life, with the exception of the MTIA which huffed and puffed a bit.”

Union opposition didn’t stand much chance either. “We got agreement at a special unions conference. They did it partly by default, partly by ignorance. Some of them thought award restructuring would be a bit hard. But we won. We knocked them all off. Most of them couldn’t muster a speech after we’d finished with them.”

Election losers, the Liberal opposition, also came in for some stinging criticism, for their free market approach to life and for Fred Chaney “who is basically a wimp. Andrew (Peacock) said I was a thug. But he basically believes in nothing but the Essendon Football Club. He’ll be happy he almost became prime minister for the second time.” But most worrying about this election, said Kelty, was the handful of people produced by the Liberal Party who really do believe in something - “crushing the unions. They are a different brand, zealots of the right.”

Kelty has a clear message for any union leaders who doubt the long-term value of the Accord, restructuring and the need to create industry unions. “We have to consolidate so we have every position covered. Unions cannot be totally dependent on governments. A public image is nice and it does help. But our real strength is having organisers on the job working with workers.

“That’s what we have to recreate. A lot of union leaders are not committed to their members. We have to face up to either changing that commitment or changing the leaders.”

Clare Curran