

**State Funeral of Neville Wran
Sydney Town Hall
1 May 2014**

Remarks by PJ Keating

Neville Wran had a zest for politics.

His brain was forever crackling with ideas. This allowed him to bound over the time-serving drudgery which was the lot of most people in public life.

And a lot of those crackling ideas had a devilish venality about them. Mostly reserved for opponents, but not too sparingly, for allies alike.

Devilment was a line on Neville's calling card. He backed himself in to get on top of anyone who represented even the slightest competition. Being the professional he was, he regarded every personality as a problem. Or a potential one.

He possessed an almost lethal dose of inner confidence, the very reservoir a high professional needs to stay in front and on top of the game.

That is, someone who wanted to change things while simultaneously visiting pain and suffering on his opponents. Neville always wanted to do both.

He was street smart to a blade-like sharpness.

As they say, he could hear the ants change step.

The instinct of the person in the street never left him.

Nor did a conscientious understanding of the need of the mass of them for a helping hand. As he would have put it, a leg up.

A smart person like Neville could have ingratiated himself with the top end of town, registered with the silk department and eased himself into all the reinforcements that that comfort provides.

But he didn't.

That compelling sense of what was fair and just and reasonable always had the better of him. He knew there was no premium for helping the ordinary bloke in the street, save for the psychic reward. But an innate sense of what was right and decent drove him on to do so.

Neville always found it difficult to suppress the entertainer in him; and contempt for his opponents invariably brought it out.

He not only wanted to beat them, but felt compelled to entertain himself doing it.

There was a lot of the artist about Neville. In another life, he might have excelled in the theatre or cabaret. He understood you could carry an important idea more easily if it was dressed in colour and possessed some poetic movement about it. Better the idea dance across the despatch box than land like a brick.

But Neville used poetry in other ways. You may know he had a PhD in poetic profanity. He was a champion swearer. But he knew how to employ the profane with much creative flourish: for indignation, for rage or as often as not, in pathos. But it was always effective. Partly because no one was ever quite sure how much he meant it - the inner depth of feeling being never quite revealed.

The great turning moment in his life was leading New South Wales Labor to victory in 1976.

After Federal Labor lost in 1975, he provided the vivacity to shape a relevant alternative to a relatively old coalition government. He knew a disappointed and disconsolate Labor Party would need new positioning and panache to unseat even a tired government. And he provided it.

And it is a matter of record that he went on to lead Labor in winning a record four consecutive terms of office.

In doing this, he created a new model of how a Labor government, intelligently and expansively led, could relate to much broader sections of the community – broader than the narrower ones traditionally embraced. And that broader embrace brought its rewards in the two so-called ‘Wranslide’ elections.

Neville bought into the interests of the ‘top end of town’ but was never seduced by them. He knew keeping the ‘top end’ purring made a difference to state economic activity, but that was always in service of his main goal – the interests of the broader public.

But he did effect a socio-economic change in Labor’s otherwise traditional approach. A change which eased the way and made less controversial, the wholesale overturning of the old non-business model by Bob Hawke and me, on coming to government in 1983.

I don't think there is any doubt that Neville's leadership and the advent of his government gave heart to the labour movement as a whole and provided important buoyancy during Labor's challenge to Malcolm Fraser. And that buoyancy was in the most populous state.

Of course, in this place, the Town Hall, the venue of Labor annual conferences since the 1890s, Neville would have spoken as Leader on probably 11 or 12 occasions.

In those halcyon days when ideas were fought over, when the great contests between the Left and the Right of the Party were at their highest pitch, Neville would do the annual speech and supply some healing balm. I was Party President for four of his 11 years, from 1979 to 1983 following John Ducker's resignation. These were the years of high contretemps. And I did my level best to keep him and his government above the flack. And as you would expect from Neville, not a jot of thanks for it.

He was a hard marker – it's one of the things I trust we had in common.

Like any Labor leader who had success and longevity, he came in for extra-critical scrutiny by the conservative press. In this case, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and its coadjutor straightener, the ABC's *4 Corners* program.

In the glory years of the Suich-Gardiner regime at the *Herald*, Labor leaders were attacked from the Left. The implicit charge against people like Neville Wran, and I might say later, Bob Hawke and me, was that we were not really Labor – we were faux Labor, because in their opinion, we did too much for and had too much to do with the business community. I christened that particular clutch of journalists, the 'Glebe Point Gulag'. And quite a few of them still inhabit grey spidery corners.

But the constant carping and the rumour-mongering did wear Neville down, but not by enough to stop him winning his great and final victory in 1984. He was always at his best under pressure.

Most of us who knew him, were pleased that without so much of a change in step, he went on to pursue a successful career in business. And was able to do so, agreeably, in partnership with Malcolm Turnbull.

His wife, Jill, re-lit his life following their marriage in 1976, and their two children, Harriet and Hugo, must already miss his fatherly countenance. And this, I'm sure, is the case for Kim and for Glenn.

Neville Wran was a big figure: big-brained and brave who straddled the political world for as long as it held his interest. And he left when he had had enough of it.

I doubt there would be a soul here who would not believe the public of New South Wales owes him a great debt. Because, the Labor Party certainly does.