

**Speech by Troy Bramston at the launch of *The Wran Era***

**Monday, 8 May 2006**

**Parliament House, Sydney**

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Thank you Mark. Friends, family, colleagues, political tragics and junkies alike; welcome and thank you for coming.

Thirty years ago this month, Neville Wran led NSW Labor to victory. With a one-seat majority, it heralded the beginning of one of the most important, successful and reformist governments in Australian history. With this book, we can look back and reflect on that government, its achievements and failures, and its remarkable leadership.

It is a great honour for me to have Neville Wran here today. He remains an inspiration. I must say that I was not even 6 months old when Neville was elected premier, so my direct memories of these years are a little hazy. However, his record-breaking run, his policy achievements and his legacy is felt all around us today. With this book, he was generous with his time, gave me access to his papers, and I am very grateful.

It is also a great personal honour for me to have Paul Keating here. It was Paul who inspired me to get interested in politics and the Labor Party when he became prime minister in 1991. I was working an evening shift at Miranda Woolworths when the news came though that Paul had become prime minister and I was captivated. His policy legacy will warm the soul of Labor supporters for generations to come. Thank you for being here.

In an age when commentators often bemoan the dreariness and blandness which characterises our politics, here in this room we have two political leaders – Neville Wran and Paul Keating – who injected passion and vision into politics with colour, style, and a touch of excitement.

It is also great to see so many of my friends and colleagues here, as well as my family and Natalie's family. A special thank you is owed to my mum and dad who are here and have supported me in all of my endeavours.

My wonderful wife Natalie is also here and helped me enormously on this book. Partners put up a lot during these projects. In the past 12 months we effectively lived with Neville Wran. Rarely a day would go past without mention of the great man.

My 11-week-old daughter, Madison, is also here, and to whom this book is lovingly dedicated. No doubt, in 2036 when Madison is also thirty, she will turn her mind to writing about the life and legacy of Premier Morris Iemma.

I must thank many people for their help in putting this book together.

I was delighted that so many distinguished participants and observers from the era accepted my invitation to write for the book. They did so earning no income, dedicated themselves greatly to the task, and put up with my urging and prodding to meet the deadline. I will always be thankful.

A special thanks must go to the Federation Press team, and in particular Chris, Di, Trisha, Clare and Debbie. They saw the importance of this book and were great to work with. They produced a splendid book.

Thanks also to ALP Secretary Mark Arbib. When I went to Mark with the idea to do this book he became an enthusiastic supporter. He wrote a foreword, gave me access to the party's archives, and is hosting this launch. Thanks also to Kate Elliot from the party office.

This book tells of the story of the Labor Government, 1976 to 1986. At the helm was one of the most effective, popular and longest-serving political leaders.

Wran showed modern Labor how to win and how to govern. In doing so, he defined the template which is effectively still followed today. That's the legacy. Scores of leaders past and present have tried to emulate the Wran approach but none have been as successful.

Consider the achievements. Wran won four elections including two landslides. No state leader has matched this since. The 1978 election win was achieved with a primary vote that remains the highest in a century. The 1981 election win captured for Labor its largest proportion of seats in parliament.

He remains one of the most popular political leaders. He had an approval rating at one time of over 80 per cent and national polls often rated him Australia's most popular political leader. John Howard, for all the talk of his success, has never even rated 70 per cent approval, let alone 80 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Wran was popular because of his empathy with the concerns of ordinary people and a trust which he engendered. He was at ease at the opera or at the football. Combined with his talents as a communicator, this was intrinsic to his political appeal.

But it was not a one-man show. First and foremost with Wran's trusted deputy, Jack Ferguson, it was a talented cabinet of diverse backgrounds, some of whom are here today. Indeed the first cabinet included a former premier, a former party leader, past Lord Mayors of Sydney, railway workers, teachers, lawyers, a car dealership proprietor, a pharmacist and trotting stud owner, a fitter and turner, and a former professional boxer.

Wran led a government which was fiscally responsible and pursued moderate progressive reform. And the voters liked what they saw. The key focus was on the bread and butter issues such as jobs, health, education and transport, but it was also a creative government in areas like protecting the environment, the arts and heritage protection, consumer affairs, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity law reform, and electoral and institutional reform.

And imagine what he could have achieved if he had gone into federal politics. For the first time, the book details Wran's hunger for federal politics and the party's attempts to find him a federal seat. But as he said, on that one, the planets were never in alignment to make the shift.

But he dominated NSW politics for over a decade. He made it seem too easy. Even *The Daily Telegraph* once dubbed the premier "SuperWran", likening him to a "political phenomenon" and the "king" of NSW.

To be fair, and as Wran has acknowledged, a feeble and divided opposition made this easy. In realm of political combat Wran tore them to shreds. He once said the Opposition was the "mule of Australian politics; without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity". During the 1981 referendum campaign, the Liberals complained that a TV advertisement - which showed a Labor and Liberal voter discussing the proposals - was contrived to make the Liberal voter look 'wooden and unintelligent'. In response Wran said 'As to the Liberal voter looking dumb - he didn't look any different to any other Liberal voter.'

*The Wran Era* is no whitewash. This book details the government's successes and failures. It includes the views of insiders, outsiders, supporters and others who didn't always see eye to eye with the government. It is a fair and balanced account, and is stronger for it.

The book showcases a shining moment in Labor's history. Especially for the Labor Party, it is its history which gives meaning to the continuing struggle for equality, opportunity and social justice.

Now I hope you all buy a copy. It's a good read, and finely edited, if I may say so. In fact, feel free to buy more than one. It would make a great gift, and for all those MPs in need of fundraising dollars for the next election, it makes a great raffle prize. And the editor will happily sign any copies along with the contributors.

It is my hope that the legacy of the government will continue to provide inspiration for those dedicated to the progressive reform challenges of the next century.

I'd like to finish by quoting the great historian Manning Clark, who for me speaks of the types of leaders in politics like Paul Keating and Neville Wran, whom we need more of:

'The whole point of writing a history is to present the past as a book of wisdom for those now living; to increase the number of mourners and decrease the number of mockers; to increase the number of lovers and believers. There is a Chinese proverb: it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.'<sup>2</sup>

If anything, this book is a call for more 'lovers and believers' in politics.

Now it is my task to introduce our keynote speaker.

Paul Keating was elected to parliament in 1969, aged 25. He was briefly a minister in the Whitlam Government. During part the Wran years he was President of the NSW Branch of the party. Wran once described him as 'a class above the average foot soldier in the NSW right who carries a bible in one hand and a dagger in the other'.

Indeed, in 1983 he became the reforming and dynamic Treasurer during the Hawke Government. He was prime minister from 1991 to 1996. As prime minister he continued the economic reform program, embraced the arts and multiculturalism, advanced Aboriginal reconciliation, advocated a republic and sought a greater engagement for Australia in Asia, as well as many other things. Please welcome Paul Keating.

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<sup>1</sup> Newspoll: 10-12 May 1996 (67%), 21-23 Sept. 2001 (61%); 5-7 Oct. 2001 (61%); 8-10 Feb 2002 (62%); 18-20 Oct. 2002 (62%); 1-3 Nov. 2002 (65%); 15-17 Nov. 2002 (60); 16-18 May 2003 (61%); 20-22 June 2003 (61%); 4-6 February 2005 (63%).

<sup>2</sup> M. Clark, *Speaking Out of Turn: Lectures and Speeches 1940-1991*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1997, p.137.