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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

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**CONDOLENCES**

**Hawke, Hon. Robert James Lee (Bob), AC**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 3 July 2019**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Senator KITCHING** (Victoria) (11:36): Growing up, I watched Bob Hawke with wonder. He was a star of the screen and felt like part of every Australian family in the 1980s. I distinctly remember watching the seven o'clock news and seeing him and Paul Keating at the economic summit in 1983, which led to me following that summit's progress and its effects obsessively. Later in life, at countless Labor gatherings, he always made such an effort to attend, and even as he got less physically mobile I met with him many times. He was Labor's rock star, who'd pull the biggest crowds and, even in advancing years, would give passionate, persuasive, powerful speeches that left those in attendance walking on air.

He roared with laughter when I told him that I'd been counted off in a ballot for an ALP Victorian branch party president's position, despite receiving the votes to be elected, because none of the male candidates received enough votes, and that the party's affirmative action rule meant we had to choose at least one man. 'A token man,' Bob laughed. Bob had, of course, championed the cause of women in our party and movement long before it was fashionable. But he was a charmer. He would often notice shoes and express his approval for daring choices. He told me that he firmly believed that women who wore daring shoes led interesting lives. He had been a close friend and ally of my father-in-law, Bill Landeryou, of blessed memory, who passed away a couple of months ago. Bill told me many war stories about his adventures with Bob, and it was clear that his role in Bob's ascension gave him a sense of great satisfaction and achievement. That was so much a part of Bob's magic: his love affair with the Australian people, that we all felt like we were part of him, part of his great journey and his amazing life.

He was the greatest postwar Prime Minister we've had. He and Paul Keating opened up the economy in a bold way in an unprecedented partnership with unions, created Medicare, drove record numbers of Australians to finish secondary school and go to university, gave all Australians compulsory superannuation, fought the good fight to protect our beautiful environment and had zero tolerance for racism and extremism. We look back on most of these things and they seem obvious or even easy. The truth is that all of those big changes required great political skill and the very best of leadership, and, fortunately for Australia, Bob Hawke was the very best.

I want to mention a few incidents in Bob Hawke's career that highlight what I think was one of his defining characteristics, and that is his political courage. I think this is important because it contradicts the common view that Hawke was merely a likeable, easygoing bloke who cultivated his popularity while Paul Keating and John Button did all the hard work. That is far from the truth. The first episode was Hawke's determination to reform the Victorian branch of the Labor Party, which, after the 1955 split, was left in the hands of a narrowly based factional junta. It was Victorian Labor's organisational and political weakness that allowed the Liberals, under Bolte and Hamer, 27 years in office. And it was the failure to win any federal seats in Victoria that cost Labor the 1961 election. So, in 1971, Hawke, as ACTU president, was the key figure in backing Gough Whitlam's intervention in the Victorian branch. Whitlam provided the leadership, but Hawke delivered the numbers and the support of the key unions. He did this in the face of fierce opposition from supporters of the factional regime in Victoria. The result was a rapid improvement in Victorian Labor's fortunes, both state and federally.

In 1985 Hawke used his influence as Prime Minister to complete this work by bringing the so-called grouper unions, notably the Shop Assistants and the Federated Clerks, back into the Labor Party, 30 years after the split. Again, he did this in the face of intense hostility, including the notorious incident when tomatoes were thrown at a state conference. My father-in-law, indeed, remembered coming home with his suit jacket on but the sleeves had been torn off. Hawke's efforts brought a large section of Catholic voters in Victoria back to Labor. It is no coincidence that our two recent successful premiers, Steve Bracks and Daniel Andrews, come from Catholic families.

The second episode I want to mention is the 1988 airline pilots strike. Under the Accord between the Hawke government and the ACTU, the unions accepted restraint in the pursuit of higher wages, which only fuelled inflation, in exchange for greatly increased spending on the social wage—improvement in schools, the Medicare scheme and national superannuation. The airline pilots union, a small, non-ACTU union, representing some of

the highest-paid employees in Australia, tried to break this agreement with a rogue strike. Hawke ruthlessly crushed them by bringing in the RAAF to carry passengers. Breaking a strike violated one of the most sacred taboos in the labour movement and horrified even some of Hawke's union supporters, but he was willing to do it for the greater good of Australian workers as a whole.

The third episode I want to mention is Hawke's response to the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing in 1989. Hawke had worked hard to build a good relationship with the Chinese leaders and reacted angrily to their murderous assault on peaceful demonstrators. His decision to allow over 40,000 Chinese students and others to stay in Australia was his alone, unilateral and spontaneous. He later recalled: 'I was told: "You cannot do that, Prime Minister." I said to them: "I just did. It is done."' His decision was a courageous one, a year before the 1990 election, at a time when Australian immigration was still a politically dangerous subject.

Fourthly, I want to mention Hawke's resolute commitment to the Australia-US alliance. I do so because I think this is particularly relevant to us today. President Reagan's arms build-up was, to put it mildly, not popular on the progressive side of Australian politics. Remember, many wanted to follow New Zealand's lead and withdraw from the ANZUS alliance and evict the US from joint facilities such as Pine Gap. Hawke refused to consider this and instead built a very good relationship with Ronald Reagan. In 1991, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Hawke was the first allied leader to commit support to President Bush's determination to use force against Iraq. Again, he faced down fierce hostility on this position. The lesson for us is that our security alliance with the US is more important than what we think of any one President. Prime ministers and presidents come and go, but our security interests do not change.

I also want to mention Bob Hawke's close relationship with Australia's Jewish community and his emotional support for the state of Israel. This has already been mentioned by Senator Cormann. Among Hawke's closest friends were Lionel Revelman, his partner in the ACTU Bourke's store venture; Sir Peter Abeles; and Saul Same. In fact, I have spent many a pleasant summer evening on the Sames' tennis court with Bob Hawke, at a function they typically have in late January. Bob Hawke also counted Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin as friends. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, he warned:

If the bell tolls for Israel, it won't just toll for Israel, it will toll for all mankind.

He was also a strong supporter of the Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union. He even went to Moscow to try to persuade the Soviet leaders to relent on Jewish emigration. These positions earned him death threats at the time. After his retirement, Hawke continued his support and he did call for a two-state solution as the only way to end the conflict.

To more recent times, it was a sad coincidence that Bob Hawke's death came just two days before our defeat in the 18 May election. Despite the passionate desire of everyone in the Labor Party to 'Do it for Bob', we were unable to deliver the victory he would have loved to see. After every election loss, there must come a time of questioning and reassessment, and that's what we're going through at present. We owe it to Bob Hawke to do that, and we also owe it to the millions of Australians who look to Labor governments to improve the quality of their lives, just as Bob Hawke's governments did.

We also need to recognise, as Bob Hawke did, that Labor's electoral success has never rested on unionised working class alone. One of the reasons Bob Hawke supported the reform of the Victorian ALP in the 1970s was so that the great Melbourne middle class would again be willing to vote Labor, which they increasingly did from 1972 onwards. The great victories of Cain, Bracks and Andrews could not have come from working class votes alone. Winning a federal election also requires support from a broad spectrum of Australians, not just working class voters. Further to this, a 2015 ANU study found that 52 per cent of Australians identified as middle class, and this figure is even higher among young voters. Bridging the gap between working class and middle class Australians, between inner-city, suburban and regional Australians, and between different ethnic and religious communities, and assembling a winning coalition of voters across classes, regions and identities requires three things. It requires soundly based policy, it requires inspirational leadership and it requires consistent and effective messaging. Clearly Bob Hawke was a master of all three of these. His leadership inspired confidence and trust. He knew how to communicate with the Australian people and he was able to persuade a majority of voters to support his policies.

Every time I am in the Labor caucus room in Canberra and gaze upon his smiling face, I will remind myself of the example he set—to work as hard and as passionately as he did, to try to think and communicate as clearly he did

and to act as bravely and inclusively as he did in the service of the nation he loved so dearly. My condolences go to Blanche and to his children and grandchildren. They can be very proud of him; we all are. Vale, Bob Hawke.