

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



EMBARGOED UNTIL 10 P.M.

PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
FABIAN SOCIETY CENTENARY DINNER - MELBOURNE - 18 MAY 1984

For any Association or secular institution to reach its first century is noteworthy and, in our times, remarkable enough in itself.

That alone would be sufficient reason for us to join together tonight in this celebration of the centenary of the Fabian Society, brought into formal existence in London a hundred years ago this month.

And, incidentally, I trust it will be noted in the appropriate quarters that those of us here tonight associated with the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Labor Government have been so far able to overcome our notorious prejudices as to celebrate a British centenary and a British institution - indeed, in many respects, a quintessential British institution.

But seriously, I invite you all to consider the wider and deeper significance of this achievement - because it goes far beyond the Fabian Society's mere survival in the technical and temporal sense.

For tonight we are marking the centenary of a Society and an idea which, of its very nature, could not at its birth be thought to have had much chance of survival at all - much less survive into the very end of the 20th century.

For this was, and is, that most difficult things of all to maintain - a political association. It was founded as, and remains, a purely voluntary association of like-minded men and women, bound by no dogma or creed or fixed body of doctrine. Unable to offer its members inducement or rewards, or to impose discipline or enforce rules; an association based entirely on moral and intellectual ground and, by the very essence of its nature and purpose, having only the loosest structure and formal organisation.

Further, the century since 1884 has been the most turbulent and eventful in human history, a century of tremendous change in human attitudes and standards, a revolutionary era in which no political, social or economic assumption made a century ago has gone unchallenged, and few, if any, have not been fundamentally changed.

Yet the Fabian Society and its original ideals endure.

That a Society so conceived could survive in such a century - and survive with continuing vigour - is surely striking testimony to the enduring strength of the cause with which it has been so closely identified and to which it has contributed so much - the cause of social democracy.

I deliberately use the words "the cause with which it is identified", because the Fabian Society did not and does not claim to be a cause in itself.

Rather, it was called into existence to represent and promote an idea and an ideal - and, most important - a method, an approach by which that idea could best be implemented and by which the ideals of social democracy could be given practical effect.

And almost from the beginning, its founders envisaged that the vehicle would be a labour party - long before the British Labour Party as such existed.

Sidney Webb - one of the founders of the Fabian Society and for so long its presiding genius described the process in this way:

"From 1887, the Fabians looked to the formation of a strong and independent Labour Party. we did all we could to foster and assist, in succession, the Independent Labour Party, then the Labour Representation Committee and then the Labour Party but we also set ourselves to detach the concept of socialism from such extraneous ideas as suddenness and simultaneity of change, violence and compulsion, and atheism or anti-clericalism nor did we confine our propaganda to the slowly emerging labour party, or to those who were prepared to call themselves socialists, or to the manual workers or to any particular class."

So, from the beginning, the Society drew its strength from its vision of the future of Labor and the Labor Party.

But beyond this fundamental strength, many factors have contributed to the strength and survival of the Society.

First, we cannot ignore the personal element - that extraordinary galaxy of political, intellectual and literary talent which made up the firmament of Fabianism - the Webbs, Graham Wallas, George Bernard Shaw; then later Tom Mann, who helped introduce Fabianism to Australia; then later on again people like Bertrand Russell, G.D.H. Cole, Harold Laski and R.H. Tawney.

Many may think that, in terms of his contribution to Fabian philosophy and social democratic thought, Tawney was the greatest of them all. Certainly his great work Equality stands as the definitive exposition of the true meaning of social democracy, both as an ideal and a practical program.

Another source of the Society's strength was what we may call the methodology of Fabianism - the primacy given to facts, knowledge, proper research and solid information as the basis for action - whether political, social or economic action. It was the recognition, as Beatrice Webb put it, that:

"Reform will not be brought about by shouting.
What is needed is hard thinking".

And the third and greatest and most enduring source of the influence of Fabianism was the idea of practical relevance. And this is the very essence of Fabianism.

It is the recognition that the commitment to democracy and democratic means is fundamental.

It is the recognition that this fundamental commitment imposes on social democrats obligations and restraints in terms both means and ends.

It is the recognition, as I myself put it in the "Resolution of Conflict" lectures - the Boyer Lectures, in 1979 - "of the need for those who would advocate change to temper their fervour with a sense of gradualism".

And it cannot be emphasised, too strongly or too often, that this approach is not a matter of mere pragmatism. It is equally a matter of principle.

It is a principle which follows inexorably from our commitment to democracy.

And it is a principle which lies at the very heart, not only of Fabianism, but social democracy throughout the world.

It is of course the classic concept of Fabianism - the inevitability of gradualness.

And nothing is more widely misunderstood or more frequently misrepresented.

It was never conceived as a justification for opportunism. It was, and is, a principle of necessity.

The principle was first and best propounded by Sidney Webb himself. Speaking as President of the British Labour Executive at the Party Conference in 1923, he said:

"Let me insist on what our opponents habitually ignore, and, indeed, what they seem intellectually incapable of understanding, namely the inevitable gradualness of our scheme of change. The very fact that Socialists have both principles and a programme appears to confuse nearly all their critics.

Webb continued:

If we state our principles, we are told 'That is not practicable'. When we recite our programme the objection is 'That is not Socialism'. But why, because we are idealists, should we be supposed to be idiots? For the Labour Party, it must be plain, Socialism is rooted in Democracy; which necessarily compels us to recognise that every step towards our goal is dependent on gaining the assent and support of at least a numerical majority of the whole people. Thus, even if we aimed at revolutionising everything at once, we should necessarily be compelled to make each particular change only at the time, and to the extent, and in the manner, which ten of fifteen million electors, in all sorts of conditions, of all sorts of temperaments, from Land's End to the Orkneys, could be brought to consent to it."

That was Webb in Britain in 1923. It is as relevant and true in Australia in 1984. For it represents an unchanging truth and a fixed principle for the Labor Party and social democrats everywhere.

And I repeat and emphasise: it goes beyond pragmatism; it is the principle which flows from our fundamental commitment to democracy.

I suppose there is no greater hero in the pantheon of radical reform than Aneurin Bevan, who was also a great Fabian. He was never accused of selling out, or selling the cause short. He was never denounced as an opportunist or derided as a pragmatist.

Thirty years after Webb's analysis which I have just quoted, Bevan wrote this magnificent confession of his faith:

"The philosophy of democratic Socialism is essentially cool in temper. It sees society in its context with nature and is conscious of the limitations imposed by physical conditions. It sees the individual in his context with society and is therefore compassionate and tolerant. Because it knows that all political action must be a choice between a number of possible alternatives it eschews all absolute prescriptions and final decisions.

Consequently it is not able to offer the thrill of the complete abandonment of private judgment, which is the allure of modern Soviet Communism and of Fascism, its running mate..... It accepts the obligation to choose among different kinds of social action and in so doing to bear the pains of rejecting what is not practicable or less desirable.....

It seeks the truth in any given situation, knowing all the time that if this be pushed too far it falls into error..... Its chief enemy is vacillation, for it must achieve passion in action in the pursuit of qualified judgments. It must know how to enjoy the struggle, whilst recognising that progress is not the elimination of struggle but rather a change in its terms".

In this brief review, I have said enough to indicate the spirit, ideals, methods and objectives of the Society whose centenary we celebrate tonight.

I have so far referred only in passing to its Australian contribution, as part of its general contribution to the cause of Labor and social democracy.

But Australian Fabianism and Australian Fabians have made a specific and significant contribution to the Australian Labor movement and the Australian Labor Party.

The circumstances in which the Society in Australia has operated have, of course, differed considerably from those of the parent body. So too has its role.

The Australian Labor Party is many years older than the British Labour Party. Our Parliamentary success came much earlier and has been much more consistent than that of the British Labour Party. That early and consistent success, combined with our historic origins in the trade union movement, meant an emphasis on practical achievement above theory and doctrine.

And indeed, the Australian men and women of the 1890's and the early 1900's had already recognised the inevitability of gradualness and applied it in practice, at a time when, for the British Labour Party, it was merely a statement of principle for future Labour governments, yet to be elected.

A further difference in the role of Fabianism in Australia lay in the nature of our Federal system - and I mean, not only the Federal nature of the Australian Constitution, but the Federal structure of the Australian Labor Party itself.

It may even be that the comparative success of the Society in Melbourne relative to other capitals reflected something of our colonial past. It certainly established Melbourne in its role as the headquarters of the radical tradition in Australia.

But despite the differences, Fabianism has made a valuable and enduring contribution to social democracy in Australia, in both thought and action.

Fabian Societies were formed here as early as 1896.

As Frank Crean has recalled, the present Society, the Fabian Society of Victoria, - now, I am pleased to say, properly named the Fabian Society of Australia - was formed in 1947.

And of course that was a very significant year in the history of the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Labor movement.

I hasten to say that I'm not suggesting that importance derives anything from the fact that 1947 happened to be the year I joined the Labor Party in Perth.

But the year 1947 represented both a high tide, and a turning of the tide, for post war Labor, and for the Chifley Labor Government. It was for the movement as a whole a year of great optimism and enthusiasm and achievement. The work of post war reconstruction was going on apace. Full employment was established as a national principle and a national goal.

But 1947 was also a year when the challenge against bank nationalisation forced on us a realisation of the restrictions and restraints imposed by the Constitution, and in particular by Section 92.

Consequently, this led to a rethinking of our approach. Because, unless the Platform was just to stagnate into irrelevance, the search had to be made for alternative means of achieving our objectives.

And in that search - and it was a search and a development of policy that went on for more than 20 years - Fabians were in the forefront - Fabians like Frank Crean, Jim Cairns, Kim Beazley, Race Mathews, and not least our own Fabius Maximus - Gough Whitlam himself.

Throughout the long years in the wilderness, the Society played a valuable role in producing and disseminating information and ideas, and in promoting dialogue.

It preserved the Fabian tradition of research as the basis for reform.

There were times in the bitter years after the Split when the Fabian Society seemed almost a lone voice for sanity, civility, realism and genuine idealism amongst us in Victoria.

But above all, the ongoing importance of Fabianism in Australia has been to help bring to our movement, and our cause, that quality which I said before was the essence of social democracy - the need for a sense of relevance, in the application of our ideas and our ideals to practical purposes and achievable goals.

And in this I gladly acknowledge the debt of my own Government to Fabianism.

Earlier I dealt at some length with the principle of the inevitability of gradualness.

There was another important idea - a method more than a principle - which became closely associated with Fabianism.

Sidney Webb called it "permeation".

Today it would be called "consensus".

Webb put it this way:

"Most reformers think that all they have got to do in a political democracy is to obtain a majority. This is a profound mistake. What has to be changed is not only the vote that is cast, but also the mental climate in which Parliament and the Government both live and work."

That I find, to be an accurate description of the approach I and my colleagues have tried to bring to the affairs of this nation in our first term of office. From the National Summit on, we have attempted to transform the atmosphere of politics - the background, the assumptions, the shared information and perceptions of common goals, through which decisions can be made, not just by the Government and Parliament but by key groups and interests like business and unions.

Of course there are some who will misunderstand or misrepresent the nature of this approach and the meaning of consensus.

It was ever thus.

Beatrice Webb describes in her diary of their Melbourne visit in 1898 a meeting with people whom she only identifies as "some Victorian socialists" - from her unflattering description clearly not members of the Labor Party - and writes:

"Sidney tried to explain the Fabian policy of permeation, with the result that the Chairman, in his concluding remarks, recommended the meeting to adopt Mr Webb's suggestion of taking the capitalist down a back street and then knocking him on the head."

We all have to face the fact that if our Government is to make really great and worthwhile reforms - reforms that will endure, reforms that will permanently change this nation - then it is not enough simply to obtain a temporary majority at an election, or even successive elections.

For our reforms to endure, the whole mood and mind and attitudes of the nation must be permanently changed.

Certainly, we are proceeding to implement the policy on which we were elected and the platform of the Party with a thoroughness, I believe, not excelled by any previous Labor Government in our history. But that specific task must go hand in hand with the more general and deeper, longer range task - the task of establishing, in the mood and mind of this nation, permanent acceptance of the naturalness and inevitability of change and reform, as the authentic Australian way of life.

And that, for the first time in our history, is what this Labor Government is attempting.

Let me conclude:

An occasion like this serves to bring home to us all, one of the great truths about our cause in Australia - the cause of Labor and social democracy.

And that is the continuity of our movement and the continuity of our role in our nation.

The Party itself is a hundred years old in 1991. The Labor movement is already well over the century.

One of the great paradoxes of Australian politics is that the parties and forces of conservatism and reaction - for all their self-proclaimed loyalty to tradition - have no real continuity and no true sense of continuity.

And without a sense of continuity - in the case of individuals or parties or movements or nations - there can be no true sense of identity.

And I believe it is precisely because our adversaries lack that sense of their own continuity, and in a deep sense, their own identity, they are obliged to seek it outside themselves - in other institutions and even other nations.

And that I believe explains, at least in part, much of their current conduct - their lurches, not only in search of a policy, but in search of an identity.

It is, by contrast our own sense of continuity, as a government, a movement, a party, a cause which provides us with the stability and strength to overcome the countless setbacks we have suffered and, equally, in the days of triumph, to live up to the motto set for itself by the Fabian Society one hundred years ago:

"For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did, most patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain and fruitless."
