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For the True Believers: great Labor speeches that shaped history
edited by Troy Bramston. The Federation Press, 2012, xxxi + 448 pp, RRP \$59.95

Labor historian and journalist Troy Bramston has gathered together 88 speeches which ‘give voice to Labor’s enduring values, philosophy, history and achievements’. As well as researching comprehensively to harvest famous and some not so well known speeches, he has provided an introduction to each placing it in its ‘historical context, recalling its immediate impact, arguing why it mattered, explaining how it helped to shape history and why it deserves to be remembered’. Most of the contributions have been edited, which makes them more concise and readable. Speeches are grouped thematically and cover topics such as ‘economics, social policy, workplace relations, immigration and multiculturalism, Aboriginal reconciliation, the environment, inequality, the arts and foreign policy’. Bramston has concentrated on the ALP rather than the broader labour movement, national rather than state politics and on the Party’s leaders. Many of the speakers are obvious: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Wran, Hawke, Keating. There are also some less familiar names — Nicholas McKenna, Frank Forde, Dorothy Tangney, Joan Child — and some surprising omissions, chiefly Jack Lang and Bill McKell.

Graham Freudenberg contributes a Foreword with insights distilled from his lifetime at the centre of Labor politics. He laments the decline of the public meeting at which so many politicians learnt the art of oratory:

Its extinction is being connived at by the politicians, party managers, political staffers and speech writers. The displacement of the public meeting from its central role in the public discourse has meant not only a loss of spontaneity and oratorical skills. What is being lost is also the bonding between the leadership and the rank and file and the sense of public participation, dialogue, and continuity in the public debate.

A former prime ministerial speechwriter, Bramston has written a useful introductory essay. He points out the centrality of the speech in politics:

It gives coherence, depth and ballast to the swirling mix of political tactics, strategies, policies and programmes that a political leader deals with and the citizenry try to make sense of ... A speech can define a moment in time, help to explain and give meaning to events as they turn, and serve as a signpost marking a decisive moment ...

Bramston also examines what makes a great speech and the complex relationship between leaders and their speechwriters. He sums the latter up well:

The task of the speechwriter is to amplify the thoughts, ideas and arguments of the speaker. It is a collaborative relationship ... and in the final analysis, the speaker will usually approve the final draft and will say what they want to say.

While Bramston notes that Freudenberg was ‘the first person employed specifically as a speechwriter in Australian politics’, this underestimates the historical role of press secretaries as speech writers. The legendary Quentin Spedding, for example, wrote speeches for five successive NSW ALP premiers from McKell to Renshaw. In the 1960s, Lang’s *Century* wrote disparagingly of Premier Bob Heffron reading out ‘his Spedding essay’ at public functions.

Although Bramston unapologetically and rightly promotes the legacy of his Party, it is going too far to say that conservative politicians do not ‘place a premium on the importance of speeches’. Barton made a nation with his speeches and Deakin and Reid were legendary orators. Menzies’ ‘forgotten people’ speeches are key political and historical documents.

More could have been said about the inherent constraints of assembling a collection such as this. Many worthwhile speeches have not been preserved because of the transient nature of politics. There have been leaders who gave prosaic and dull set piece speeches but sparked memorably in debate and repartee. Some speeches that inspired adulation when delivered turn out to be less than memorable in print. As well, there has been a traditional emphasis on the down to earth rather than the visionary in the speechmaking of Labor figures. ALP supporters often preferred practical plans to high flown oratory. After the desertion of famous early orators such as Holman and Hughes in the conscription split, sliver-tongued intellectuals were suspect. Labor activists preferred Lang, who told the NSW Annual Conference in 1926: ‘I am here tonight not to tell you what I would like you to do, but to learn from you what you would like the government to do’.

These reservations aside, Bramston has succeeded in compiling a valuable work of reference that is also a *de facto* history of leaders, events and ideology in the Australian Labor Party. ▲