

The 2007
Chifley Memorial
Lecture ★



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Labor Going Global

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In inviting me to deliver the 2007 Chifley Memorial lecture, you honour me more than you realise. The Chifley lecture holds a special place in my heart.

In 1975 I heard Gough Whitlam deliver the Chifley lecture in Wilson Hall. It was at the height of the constitutional crisis, and Whitlam was at the peak of his powers.

I was a nineteen year-old Labor activist, suffering from a serious illness. I could only walk at a shuffle, and I was so weak I had trouble opening car doors.

I was inspired that night. As the terrible events of late 1975 began to unfold, my youthful commitment to the Labor cause hardened into a lifelong resolve. So to be standing here, nearly 32 years later, delivering the same lecture is an enormous privilege.

My message this evening is simple. More than ever before, Labor must pursue its objectives internationally. To further our traditional aims of social justice and human rights, we must go global.

Ben Chifley led the first post-war Labor Government. He also led the first internationalist Labor Government. While the Second World War forced the Curtin Government to be international in outlook, it was not until the post-war era under Chifley that the architecture of Australia's modern relationship with the world was created.

Under Chifley, Australia became a founding member of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. He had to stare down serious opposition in the Labor Party to make these commitments. He put Australia at the centre of the new framework of global institutions. Chifley's External Affairs Minister Herbert Evatt played a crucial role in the creation of the United Nations, and famously chaired the UN General Assembly in 1948-49.

Chifley didn't just take Australia to the world. He also brought the world to Australia. Through Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell, he laid the foundations of modern multicultural Australia through a huge surge of non-English-speaking immigration. And he ensured that an American multinational, General Motors, built Australia's first family car, the Holden. GM received government assistance including duty-free import of equipment and unrestricted repatriation of profits to the United States. Internationalism triumphed over isolationism.

Gough Whitlam maintained this internationalist commitment in the 1970s. Australia recognised China, cut tariffs, and ratified numerous international conventions. Whitlam signed international agreements protecting collective bargaining, equal pay, minimum wages, and the right to organise. He eliminated the last vestiges of the White Australia Policy.

Bob Hawke and Paul Keating intensified Australia's integration with the wider world. They slashed tariffs, floated the dollar and allowed foreign banks into Australia. They initiated APEC. They made Australia a key international player on many issues, whether peace in Cambodia, conservation in Antarctica, banning chemical weapons or ending nuclear weapons proliferation. They used international treaties to protect Australian icons like the Franklin River.

These governments also recorded many nationalist achievements. Ben Chifley established Australian citizenship and Australian passports. Gough Whitlam abolished knighthoods and Privy Council appeals. Paul Keating laid the foundations for an Australian republic.

Such achievements are the hallmarks of positive nationalism. They complement Labor's internationalist outlook, they don't undermine it. They reflect the big heart and bold spirit of a confident, positive Australia engaging with the world. Not the nasty, suspicious, aggressive spirit of isolationism and negative nationalism.

The same choices that Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke and Keating faced confront Labor today. They're inevitably different in form, but largely the same in content.

In 1999 I wrote in *Open Australia*: “The primary choice facing Australia is whether we are to be an open or a closed nation”. That’s still the case. Tony Blair put the same question to our Parliament last year.

Are we to engage with the world economically, socially and culturally? Or do we erect the barriers of suspicion and sectional interest? Do we reach out to wider humanity in pursuit of common goals of peace, prosperity and sustainability? Or do we retreat into fortress Australia?

The temptation to pander to social prejudice or short-term self-interest is everywhere. It reaches out to us every time a specific issue about foreign ownership, refugees, or international law emerges. It always offers instant political comfort.

It is no accident that the word nationalist appears in the title of many right-wing parties. Our opponents were called the Nationalists in the 1920s. We still have right-wing National Parties in Australia and New Zealand. A National Party ran South Africa under apartheid. Franco’s fascists were known as the Nationalists. The first word in the full title of the Nazi party was Nationalist. Far Right parties in the European Parliament have just banded together under the militant nationalist banner Identity Tradition Sovereignty. Whether mainstream conservative or far-right extremist there’s little doubt about which half of the political spectrum owns the word nationalist.

There is a positive, big spirited nationalism which we should embrace and promote. The nationalism of violence, suspicion and fear belongs to our opponents, not to us.

In a world where the nation-state is changing profoundly, this is a critical question. Are we primarily national or international?

Because of the efforts of great leaders like Helmut Kohl, the political processes of modern European states are now as much international as national. Out of the ashes of negative nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s, Europeans have built peace, prosperity and community through the European Union. The fiftieth anniversary of that extraordinary achievement will be celebrated later this month.

The sacrosanct status of the nation-state is eroding. All around the world, solutions are being crafted which undermine the traditional nationalist model. In Kosovo, in Northern Ireland, in Quebec, in Hong Kong, in Spain, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the model is being rewritten. It may soon be further rewritten in Israel-Palestine, Sri Lanka and Taiwan.

Even for a relatively isolated country like Australia, the crude nationalism of the twentieth century is no longer a realistic option. Our lives are becoming more and more international, and so are our problems.

Climate change, terrorism, and Iraq are inherently international. The debate about the incarceration of David Hicks revolves around the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war. Issues like water, industrial relations and education have obvious international dimensions. The unfair dismissal laws Labor seeks to restore are based on an international convention. The big threats in health like SARS, AIDS and bird-flu are international. We now compare ourselves endlessly with other countries on almost every issue, whether education performance, productivity or crime statistics. Our own backyard is a lot bigger than it used to be.

This trend should be welcomed by Labor true believers. Our ideals are universal. Pursuing them beyond Australia's shores is no longer an optional extra. If we want to advance our cause within Australia, we have to pursue it internationally.

What does this mean in practice? It means supporting foreign investment, free trade and immigration. It means increasing our foreign aid effort, both regionally and globally. It means resisting calls to close off Australia from the world.

We're currently debating the future of Australia's car industry. An industry built on foreign investment and immigration. An industry facing enormous challenges because of structural economic change across the globe.

Should Australia jack up tariffs to protect our car industry? Definitely not. Should our government help the industry to transform itself to ensure viability in a very different world environment? Absolutely.

Labor didn't object to the proposed Shell takeover of Woodside, which the Howard Government blocked. We supported a proposed Singapore Airlines takeover of Ansett. We supported removing restrictions on foreign ownership of Australian media. Arguments for restricting foreign ownership only have merit in a handful of cases with companies delivering essential services that our entire economy depends on.

It is only a short step from opposing foreigners owning Australian companies to opposing foreigners coming to Australia as migrants. Australian investment in other countries is roughly equivalent to foreign investment in Australia. Australian investment in the United States is larger than American investment in Australia.

Some Australians think we should let foreigners in only if they agree to stop being foreigners. At best, this sentiment is patronising. At worst, it's overtly racist.

We must repudiate this view absolutely. There will always be tricky areas where migrant customs meet Australian rules. We should deal with these issues on their merits, not on preconceived notions of cultural superiority. Our society should always be governed under a single set of rules, but we should never overlook our cultural diversity. Peacefully absorbing large numbers of migrants from all over the world is our most outstanding achievement as a nation.

Fighting racism has been the great cause of my generation. It still is. Prosecuting this great cause demands consistency. We must always stand firm in support of non-discriminatory immigration, compassionate treatment of refugees, and social and economic integration with the wider world.

We are extraordinarily privileged as a nation. Reasonably well off Australians are amongst the world's wealthiest people. With that good fortune comes responsibility. We have an obligation to share and to lead. We must not take the selfish, narrow-minded path that sets Australia against other nations, most of them much poorer and more populous than ours.

When John Howard says he won't do anything to tackle climate change that hurts our economy, it sounds logical. Isn't that what you'd expect our national leader to say?

Actually, it isn't that simple. We're not dealing with zero-sum conflicts between nations where someone wins and someone loses. We all share the one atmosphere. Australia's economic future will be determined by action taken on climate change by Americans, Chinese, Indians, Japanese and Europeans. If we sit back and do nothing about climate change, how can we expect them to act? Our living standards are much higher than China's. How can we ask them to make sacrifices to save the planet, if we won't? And if no-one acts, the long-term damage to our economy will be enormous.

It's the same with pandemics. AIDS hasn't been restricted by national borders. Bird-flu certainly won't be. Events in Asia are now crucial to protecting the health of Australians.

It's the same with our economy. We're riding a wave of prosperity driven by the minerals boom. That gives Australia a very big stake in the health of the Chinese economy. It makes us an attractive location for foreign investment, which increases economic activity and jobs. If Australians are so nervous about foreign ownership of our industry, why are we so agitated about the threat of Mitsubishi leaving? If we're worried about foreign-owned telecommunications companies, why have we put Americans in charge of Telstra?

It's the same with national security. The war with Al Qaida is truly international. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are too. Isolationism is no longer an option. Whether in Kosovo, Darfur, Somalia, Bosnia, the Solomons, East Timor or the Middle East, we have a role to play. And despite the narrow view taken by the nationalist right, these conflicts are not just about us. When John Howard argues that a premature withdrawal from Iraq would be a disaster for western security interests, does he spare a thought for the Iraqis? The people who are dying in their tens of thousands in the wake of the invasion and occupation of their country?

Denial of human rights in Vietnam isn't just a Vietnamese issue. It's our issue. So is mass murder in Sudan. We may not be able to redraw borders or depose governments, but that's no excuse for turning a blind eye. As Martin Luther King famously commented, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

I grew up in the 1970s. In those days we spent a lot of time bashing multinationals and promoting self reliance. Macho concepts of Australian independence were used to promote unsustainable economic models. We were wrong. Globalisation has simply underlined our error.

Our attitudes on international relations from that era are also long out of date. Nations are no longer pawns in a global Cold War. We are ever more interdependent with each other.

Integrating with the World is in our interest; it's in our region's interest; it's in the world's interest; it's happening.

So where does this leave the Australian Labor Party?

The echoes of economic nationalism can occasionally be heard in Labor rhetoric, but the substance has changed forever. The cultural chauvinism of the past is long gone. Our national security framework is global, as well as regional. We might still think as nationalists, but we act as internationalists.

The new world is a world imagined by Evatt, by Whitlam, by Evans and, I believe, by Rudd. A world where politics is more and more international. A world in which it is easy for Australia to get left behind if we don't actively engage.

It's time we got serious about that world. Reforming the World Trade Organisation is crucial to establishing fairer trade arrangements. Negotiating a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change is critical to the future of the planet. Entrenching the International Criminal Court is vital to preventing future atrocities. Reforming the United Nations is essential to creating a legitimate framework of global governance. Extending the impact of the International Labour Organisation is vital to protecting the rights of exploited workers.

The sanctity of the nation-state is the last refuge of the tyrant. We should never allow the need for international stability to overwhelm our responsibility to help the victims of tyranny and oppression around the world. International relations will never be perfect. We have to ensure they involve relations between peoples as well as states. The invasion of Iraq is both morally and legally wrong, but it shouldn't be allowed to discredit liberal internationalism. Family autonomy is no longer a shield for domestic violence. National sovereignty cannot be a shield for mass murder.

Australia has had a very low profile in the world of global governance. Since the Second World War, there are only three instances where Australians have headed international regulatory bodies, for telecommunications, meteorology, and agriculture. Our lack of a natural international club is partly to blame, but so is our general indifference to events beyond our shores.

In 2001 my colleague Duncan Kerr advanced a sophisticated argument for internationalising politics in his far-sighted book *Elect the Ambassador!* Amongst his proposals was a suggestion for a second United Nations Assembly, directly elected by the peoples of member nations. His model reflects the European Parliament, which has become a very important transnational political institution. Such ideas are worth debating and pursuing.

Internationalising politics may be an elite interest for now, but so was federation once. Just as the Australian colonies outgrew their origins to a point where joining together became natural, individual nation states are gradually integrating into a global web of economic, social and political activity. Even in a country as physically remote as ours, interacting with other people and organisations around the world is now a simple matter. Acting in concert to advance common values and interests across national boundaries isn't easy, but organisations like Greenpeace have shown how it can be done.

We now have a fourth tier of government in Australia. As the significance of other tiers, particularly State governments, shrinks, we should lift our eyes to the international stage. That stage is filled with similar people with similar parties and similar values. They're all confronting the same issues we are. Climate change, Iraq, nuclear proliferation and technological change.

Yet we have little systematic contact with them about these issues. Where is the dialogue between social democratic parties on climate change? Who is developing a global strategy to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons? Australians have little involvement in the very modest international social democratic activities of today. Tomorrow will be a different story

The values underneath the word “Labor” are universal. They know no national boundaries. Our natural theatre of political struggle in pursuit of these values has been national. That struggle must continue, but as the centre of gravity of national politics shifts into the international arena, we have to move with it.

Modern Labor governments have always displayed the courage required to lead Australia in the international sphere. From Chifley to Keating, Labor has ensured that our values and ideals have been advanced internationally.

Kevin Rudd is Labor’s most international leader of the modern era. He speaks Mandarin. He has lived in China. As Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, he has visited countless countries and involved himself in many crucial international debates. He’s a committed internationalist. Embracing the world is now a core Labor value, and Kevin Rudd reflects that.

The night I listened in awe to Gough Whitlam's majestic oratory, all those years ago, I had little idea I'd be delivering this lecture to night. I had no idea how much the world would change in the intervening period. But I did know one thing then, and I still know it. Labor stands for justice, for humanity, for decency. We are proudly Australian, but our core values are universal. As globalisation accelerates, it's time we put more effort into pursuing these values internationally. That's where the action is.

Joseph Benedict (Ben) Chifley (22 Sep 1885 – 13 June 1951), former Federal Labor member for Macquarie (1928-31 & 1940-51). He was the 16th and one of Australia's most influential Prime Ministers (1945-1949). Among his government's accomplishments were the post-war immigration scheme, the establishment of Australian citizenship in 1949, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the national airline TAA, a social security scheme for the unemployed, and the founding of ASIO.

Lindsay James Tanner has been the Federal Labor member for Melbourne since 1993. Born in Orbost in 1956, he was educated at Gippsland Grammar and the University of Melbourne. Lindsay has worked as a Solicitor, Electorate Officer and State Secretary of the Federated Clerks' Union (1988-93). Lindsay authored *Open Australia* (Pluto Press, 1996) exploring ways that then emerging information technology could be used to enhance social justice and economic equality.

In this speech, *Labor Going Global*, Lindsay Tanner describes how internationalism is a core Labor value and has been at the heart of Labor's post-war governments. He argues that globalisation is changing the structure of politics and Labor's mission is now more international than it's ever been.

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