

Father of the House: The memoirs of Kim E. Beazley

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I'm in quite a fortunate position for someone launching a book. Not only did I get an advance copy of *Father of the House*, but Kim Edward Beazley's son, Kim Christian Beazley, gave me a copy of his father's memoir in manuscript form more than a year ago. So I've had the opportunity to become very familiar with this book, and with the story that it tells.

Ladies and Gentlemen, *Father of the House* tells the story of Kim E Beazley, elected to represent the Labor Party for the seat of Fremantle after John Curtin's death in 1945, when Beazley was just 27 years of age. When he retired in 1977, he was the longest serving member of the House of Representatives: from the "Student Prince", as he was once nicknamed, to the Father of the House.

And it tells that story in his own words: from a childhood marred by the poverty and fear that followed his father's struggles with alcohol, to the Chifley Government, through the tough, grinding struggle of 23 long years in Opposition, to the three years as a Minister in the Whitlam Government, when he had responsibility for what became some of the Whitlam Government's most enduring and iconic reforms. As Minister for Education, Kim Beazley oversaw the ending of the funding divide that separated private and public schools, and the introduction of free tertiary education. And then two very tough years after the defeat of the Whitlam Government – not helped by his growing disillusionment with Gough Whitlam's leadership.

The story this book tells is a remarkable one. But more remarkable is the way that it reveals, in his own words, Beazley's convictions, his conscience and his courage in the – sometimes unpopular – defence of both.

He says in this book that although in his **thirty-two** years in Parliament he sometimes, in the interests of Caucus unity, voted against his judgement, he *never* voted against his conscience.

Those **thirty-two** years covered a period from the close of WWII to the aftermath of the Whitlam Government. It was a period of Australian political history and Australian Labor Party history that was turbulent, challenging and demanding. *Father of the House* gives an extraordinary first-hand account of those times – a first-hand account from the view of one of its key players.

Some recollections are light-hearted. Among the many memorable anecdotes in this book is the story of Kim Beazley's attendance at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. He wrote:

"After the magnificence of the ceremony, we were brought down to earth. Four of us Australian MPs left Westminster Abbey in a Rolls Royce provided by Australia House, and travelled along the route along which the Queen was due in minutes. Suddenly the car coughed and stopped: it was out of petrol. We had to get out, resplendent in our white ties and tails, and push the car into a side-street – to the delight of the London crowd, who cheered us wildly."

Some are more grimly humorous such as Eddie Ward's declaration after Doc Evatt stunned his Party by reading out in Parliament a letter from Russian Foreign Minister Molotov to

support his contention that Petrov's allegations were false. "Kim, I have the perfect poster for the next election," Ward said as the House adjourned. " 'Molotov says Vote 1 Ward'!"

But taken together, the stories in this book illustrate both the down-to-earth every-day experience, and the more elevated political concerns, of the author, and of the times.

I think it says something very important about Kim Beazley's character that in his account of the long years of opposition he devotes only a few pages to what must have been the dispiriting experience of many long years on the Opposition side of the House during question time after question time.

Instead, he writes at great length and detail about his work on the Select Committee for Voting Rights for Aborigines. Beazley's concern for the just treatment and respect for the human dignity of Indigenous Australians is evident. His rejection of doctrinaire one-size-fits-all solutions is equally evident. But this is something we all already knew about Kim Beazley's long activism in the area. What this book makes clear, though, is that in looking back over those years, Kim Beazley didn't dwell on the frustrations of what he *couldn't* do, but on the satisfaction of what he achieved.

In internal Party matters, too, Kim Beazley was no bystander. He held strong opinions about the direction of the Labor Party, opinions that placed him at odds with his own Party Branch in Western Australia. Although not a Catholic and never a Grouper, he had a deep antipathy to the atheist convictions of the Communist Party and a belief that the "tragedies of the world" were due to mankind ignoring the tenets of religion. He did not leave the Party during the Split, but as for so many members of the Labor Party in that era, the Split had a long-lasting effect on Kim Beazley's career, as it did on the fortunes of the Party.

Beazley lost his membership of the Federal Executive for defying the left-wing State Secretary, Joe Chamberlain, and voting to support Gough Whitlam's intervention in the unelectable Victorian Branch and against intervention in the right-dominated NSW Branch. He paid, and was willing to pay, a personal price to support Whitlam's leadership and his very necessary Party reforms, without which there would not have been a Whitlam Government.

And I would like to take the opportunity at this launch of *Father of the House* to point out the strength of character which it must have taken to defy Joe Chamberlain. I'd like to point it out, because Kim Beazley doesn't. Typically, he doesn't dwell on his own role in that crucial intervention or his own courage in pursuing what he believed was best for the Party.

Indeed, you could spend a very long time looking in this book without finding any instances of Kim Beazley blowing his own trumpet. In his political career, Beazley was always known for his interest in issues rather than personalities, his dedication to causes rather than career. So it's not surprising that his memoirs tell us more about the questions of policy that mattered to him, than about his own contribution in bringing those policies to fruition.

And perhaps the most significant of those policy areas was education.

Like many Labor figures – like me, for example – Beazley's path through tertiary education was made possible by his employment as a teacher. Even without the burden of fees at the University of Western Australia, the cost of books and other expenses were beyond the means of a young man from a battling family during the Depression. Beazley took a monitorship at a state school and then a course at the Teacher's Training School, paid £60 in return for a commitment to teach for five years.

There are those in political life who have always aimed to become reformers – whose ambition for social change has guided all their choices.

And there are those whose political career emerges, almost taking them unaware, from their deep and genuine commitment to a particular issue.

Kim Edward Beazley was one of the latter.

His own experience – from a boy standing in the back row for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York with the other children whose parents could not afford shoes (so, as a teacher explained, the royals would not be saddened by the sight of children with bare feet) to the future unlocked for him at Perth Modern, to teaching in the state school system – left Beazley with a powerful understanding of the role education played in transforming lives and an abiding conviction of the responsibility government bore to make that transforming opportunity available to all Australians.

Struck by the vast differences in education opportunities available in the state’s public schools and private schools, Kim Beazley joined the Australian Labor Party with the aim, he wrote, of bringing to Australia high-quality universal education.

And as this book shows, *his* education – in **politics** – followed.

Western Australia was not immune to the thorny issue of State Aid. Beazley came to believe that the antipathy between the government and non-government systems was the root cause of successive governments’ inability to provide high-quality universal education.

It took nearly thirty years, but before the end of his parliamentary career Beazley was able to say that he had overcome that obstacle, and achieved the aims that first took him into politics. Indeed, as Senator Robert Ray said, speaking on the Condolence motion for Beazley last year, “his activities helped mark the end of sectarianism in this country as we knew it ... almost overnight, sectarianism disappeared in this country. We are a much greater country for it, and Kim Beazley contributed enormously to that.”

Those policy reforms changed the landscape of Australian education. Two ideas were firmly enshrined in Australia’s education policy:

- The principle that university access ought to depend on merit, not wealth;
- The idea that the government is responsible for ensuring the quality of education of all Australian students.

There are a great many Australians today who have had an opportunity to make far more of their lives that they otherwise could have, because of their access to education – access that they owe to the reforms introduced by Education Minister Kim Beazley in the Whitlam Government.

Beazley was so dedicated to the reforms that he worked night and day, criss-crossing the country, until he collapsed from exhaustion. As *Father of the House* tells, the legislation was introduced while he was recovering in hospital.

Beazley’s dedication to education continued after his retirement from Parliament in 1977, chairing a comprehensive enquiry into the state of education in 1983.

He never lost his passion for the transformative power of education in people’s lives, particularly the lives of children who might otherwise be trapped in social disadvantage.

Father of the House tells the story of that great passion.

It also tells the story of another of Kim Beazley's dedications, to Moral Re-armament. MRA became a guiding force for Beazley after he attended a Moral Re-armament conference in Caux in 1953.

His declaration on his return to Australia that he had made a decision "to concern myself daily with the challenge of how to live out God's will and to turn the searchlight of absolute honesty on my motives" was viewed with consternation by some political colleagues. Nor was his enthusiastic evangelising on questions of personal morality welcome in all quarters.

Although some of his views may seem alienating to us, the sincere impulses from which they sprang can only be viewed as admirable. And I don't think any reader of this memoir will fail to appreciate the central role MRA played in Kim E Beazley's life, as both guidance and support, and the enormous impact it had on his political views and in the way he conducted himself.

This memoir ends with Beazley's hopes for the future – for Australia, and for the world. And it is only fitting that a man who dedicated his life to building better lives for his fellow men and breaking down the barriers between them and opportunity – and between them and each other – should conclude his story of his life with the hope that Australia could shape "a moral order in which all our cultures can feel at home, where all can find the confidence that underlies creativity and the energy to tackle our social problems", not just for the benefit of Australia but to be an example to the world that "a political community can flourish among people of every race and creed".

This was, for a man who first took his place in Parliament in the Government of Ben Chifley, his own 'light on the hill'. Readers of this memoir will be left in no doubt that he tried to live his life, and practice his politics, according to that aim. And *I* think that they will be left in no doubt that he succeeded.