

Sydney Morning Herald 15 October, 2007

Integrity and principle beyond political success



Initiated great change ... Kim Beazley sr in his role as minister for education in the Whitlam government.

October 15, 2007

Kim Beazley sr, 1917-2007

When Kim Beazley entered the federal Parliament in 1945 at the age of 27, he was hailed as a politician to watch. The Labor prime minister Ben Chifley saw him as someone who was "going a long way". Some believed he could be a future party leader, while others tipped him as likely to become minister for foreign affairs in a future Labor government.

Beazley, who died in Perth on Friday night, aged 90, was certainly seen as one of the Australian Labor Party's bright young hopefuls when he won the seat of Fremantle after the death of the revered wartime prime minister John Curtin. When he took his place in Parliament he was the youngest member and, in those early earnest years in Canberra, he was looked upon as a "favourite ALP son" and dubbed "the student prince" or "young Lochinvar".

Yet, despite formidable intellectual gifts and a high reputation as a capable and effective minister in the Whitlam years, he never scaled the topmost heights. Like other talented Labor people of his era, he was caught up in the internecine strife in Labor's ranks under Dr Herbert Evatt.

Furthermore, with Menzies and his coalition government at the height of their fortunes, he faced more than frustrating 20 years in opposition.

It was not until 1972, with the advent of the Whitlam government, that Beazley had his chance in the ministry, although in education rather than foreign affairs, which he would have preferred and which would have given a broader range for his talents.

Nevertheless, having been a schoolteacher and university tutor, he applied himself assiduously to his new task, making a significant impact on education in Australia.

He successfully implemented Labor's radical program providing for free tertiary education on the basic policy principle that education systems should deal equitably with the needs of all children. On taking office, one of Beazley's first initiatives was to arrange for Aboriginal children to be taught in schools in their own language, with English as a second language. Until then teachers in some states could be penalised under the law for teaching in an Aboriginal language, or any language other than English. When Beazley left the ministry, Aboriginal children were being taught in 22 of their own languages. He was also one of the pioneer fighters for Aboriginal land rights back in the early 1950s, when he got Aboriginal land ownership on to the Labor Party platform, though it took 20 years until Labor could initiate legislation for land rights.

Throughout much of his parliamentary career, Beazley was often regarded as the "conscience of the ALP". He earned the respect of colleagues and opponents as a man of high integrity. Yet, after Beazley reached a profound turning point in his career in 1953, serious doubts were raised in some ALP quarters of his ability to survive in politics. This arose from his connection with the Moral Rearmament Movement and his declaration 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 to my motives." Hardly usual language for a politician.

One political columnist wrote: "No one with even a slight working knowledge of politics could fail to delight in the confusion that could result from even one of our politicians resolving to be absolutely honest." Many Labor adherents were quite disturbed. Alan Reid, then doyen of political correspondents, reported that Beazley was facing political destruction:: "Powerful office-hungry individuals fear that his idealism and his current determination to pursue truth, whatever the price, could cost the Labor Party the next election. The story they are assiduously and effectively peddling is, 'Beazley has lost his balance.' So the word has gone out, 'Destroy him.'"

But they did not destroy him. Beazley went on to become one of Parliament's longest-serving members, having worked 32 years in the House of Representatives when he retired in 1977.

Kim Edward Beazley's background was country working-class. His father was a storeman in Northam, north-east of Perth, his mother a teacher with strong religious convictions. He knew poverty as a child and remembered having to attend school with no shoes. Before going to university, his secondary education was at Perth Modern School, which also produced such figures as Sir Paul Hasluck, Dr H.C. "Nugget" Coombs, Bob Hawke and John Stone.

In 1948 he married the noted Australian athlete Betty Judge, who held the Australian 880-yard record from 1940 to 1951. They had two sons and a daughter. The eldest son, Kim jnr, followed his father into federal politics. He was a cabinet minister in successive Hawke and Keating governments and twice served as leader of the Labor Opposition.

Beazley senior's association with Moral Rearmament, added to a certain scholarly aloofness, tended to invest him with the mantle of a "loner". However, he gave greatly in service to the Australian Labor Party and was respected as one of the party's thinkers. At the Adelaide ALP conference in 1951 he wrote the preamble to the party's national platform and constitution. He served on the national executive as well the state executive in Western Australia.

From 1969 to 1971 he was the ALP's senior vice-president. In 1955, the year of the Labor Party split, Beazley was among delegates who walked out of the federal conference in Hobart over an issue of principle - the seating of rival delegations from Victoria. Basing his view on party precedent, Beazley held that both delegations should be excluded from conference until the matter

under discussion was resolved, instead of one delegation remaining seated to pass judgment on the other.

Beazley was regarded as one of the best orators and most decisive debaters in the house. Some of his remarks have passed into parliamentary folklore, such as when he accused the National Party (then the Country Party) of "socialising their losses and capitalising their profits". He was also prepared to speak against his own party. He once accused both colleagues and opposition members of "selective indignation" and "capricious morality" over the Vietnam War.

On another occasion he stung the left-wing Victorian ALP executive when he referred to its "Midas touch of failure".

Why did Beazley fail to realise his great early potential? The answer almost certainly lies in the political game and the way it is played. Intellectual brilliance, debating skill and high moral integrity doesn't necessarily put runs on the board, especially these days. In debate and in his dealings with people Beazley had what in the present-day parliamentary climate would be regarded as a rare fault - he never tried to personally hurt others. In politics, it is generally the man or woman who can and does hurt others who gets ahead.

Another feature of politics that probably told against Beazley was that men and women of principle do not readily reap the highest prizes. Beazley resigned on principle from the Labor shadow cabinet as spokesman on education and defence in March 1976 after Gough Whitlam's condemnation by the ALP national executive for his role in the Iraqi funds affair. Beazley said he was satisfied he would never know the truth about the Iraqi funds proposal and he could not be collectively responsible for what he did not know. Nor could he explain it to the general public.

Upon his retirement he could hardly have been more respected on both sides of the House. The speaker, Sir Billy Snedden, from the opposing party, paid tribute to him as a "fine parliamentarian and a great Australian".

Beazley was a rarity among politicians; he was not overly concerned about his own popularity. He saw there was choice involved. "If you do not accept the importance of conscience, you accept only the importance of power," he once said. "I have spent 28 years in opposition, and I have come to believe that the true function of an opposition is to out-think the Government at the point of its successes. Only then can alternative competitive policies be framed and social advance take place."

Beazley applied that himself in opposition and from there contributed greatly to the welfare of the Aboriginal people as well as in the preparation of Papua New Guinea for independence. This, and his contribution to education, was recognised in the honorary doctorate of laws from the Australian National University and his being made an officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1979. Beazley contributed much, both in government and opposition, to bringing progress and healing to some of the great issues facing Australia and the government of his day.

Kim Beazley is survived by Betty, Kim jnr and daughter Merrilyn (Mrs Robert Wasson, of Darwin). Another son, David, died last December.

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