



Kim Beazley

September 1998

KIM BEAZLEY IS SITTING AT a lunch table in a Newcastle hotel devouring a steak sandwich and chips smothered in gravy. His Hungarian-born wife, Susie Annus, is sitting beside him eating the same fare. It is immediately clear that this man loves his food and conversation and that somehow he has managed to master the latter while still indulging in the former.

For years Beazley's advisers have urged him to lose weight. They've offered to get him lunch. They've offered to prepare lunch themselves. Anything to get him to eat properly. They've even drawn comparisons to his life-long friend the former West Australian Premier Brian Burke, who was grossly oversized up until the early 1980s, when it was suggested he could become premier if he lost some bulk. Burke went on the Pritikin diet and shed loads. Beazley tried the same thing, while stashing boxes of Tim Tams in his Canberra apartment.

Some saw this as a complete failure of personal discipline. 'If you can't control your diet, how can you control the nation?' asks one close Beazley source who declines to be named.

And yet Churchill and Menzies exuded authority. It could even be argued that their very size was a comfort to their countries.

*Let me have men about me that are fat;
Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights.
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.*

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

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And, in fact, Kim Beazley *has* managed to lose about 12 kilograms since Christmas. He is swimming regularly and he has sworn off his beloved junk food. He does say, however, that if he gets to The Lodge there'll be one last Kentucky Fried Chicken eat-out. Just one!

This is the man Bob Ellis described as having 'bewitching affability'; the kind of person Neville Wran said would 'help a lame dog over a stile'. Even Alan Jones, an unambiguous barracker for the Liberal cause, has said: 'You're not going to win any mileage running around telling everyone Beazley's a dope. You might disagree with his viewpoint, but he's just one of the most able people and one of the most decent people they've ever had in the place [Federal Parliament].'

MAYBE AUSTRALIANS WON'T WANT THE Decent Man. Maybe it's a commercial thing, like television. We want everything else—the tension, the hint of villainy or duplicity; the spit and polish and the five-second soundbite, to get the ratings.

Maybe Kim Beazley, fat, cuddly, long-winded, affable Kim—the man who claims to have gorged on humble pie but doesn't say exactly why—maybe he just won't rate.

Time will soon tell. Time will tell whether the one Labor figure John Howard confided he could serve under in a national unity government becomes our next prime minister. Or whether Labor's penance has been too short for us to contemplate its return, and whether words such as 'mild' and 'weak' and 'genial' have lodged themselves too deeply in our minds to hand him the prize just yet.

Immediately after Howard accused his rival of not having the 'ticker' for the prime ministership, Labor's leader was advised to deliver his own putdown. It would have gone like this: 'I survived polio and the Labor Right. John Howard lived with his mother till he was 32!' Beazley would have none of it. Found it improper, ungentlemanly, especially with so many issues at hand.

This is the alternative prime minister we must now assess. Former Christian revivalist, gravedigger, song and dance man, military enthusiast and Rhodes scholar; the man to whom the party turned unanimously, not a drop of political blood in sight, after the debacle of 1996.

The fact that we might be considering his election victory at all says as much about this government's ineptitude on a range of issues as it does about the ability of Kim Beazley to unite a broken, dispirited party. Whether this party, of course, is up to the job; whether, at Beazley's behest, it has restructured itself sufficiently in the wake of

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the 1996 rout; whether it has removed the driftwood and ensured the preselection of enough new, talented people; whether it has learnt anything from 1996 or just cobbled together a policy package on the run—indeed, whether it deserves to take up the Treasury benches after such a brief and unreflective flutter in the wilderness, are all legitimate questions that should be posed.

As is the question of what kind of character Kim Beazley really is, and how that character might inform the policies he would implement as Prime Minister. Because for a very big man, Beazley can be very invisible. What he really stands for; what forces have influenced him; which direction he is taking the Labor Party in; what kind of country this would be were he to lead it—all this remains something of a mystery to many, despite his 17-year presence on the political stage and his stumping of the country during this election campaign.

PERHAPS THIS SAYS AS MUCH about the nature of election reporting as it does about Beazley's own curious make-up, that we should feel we know so little about a public figure who was once Acting Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Leader of the House, Acting Treasurer, Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs and Acting Defence Minister, all at the same time.

Either way, it is hard to get a coherent picture of Beazley, personally or politically. At one level he appears the archetypal Australian male. Loves his football. Loves his cricket. Loves the company of other blokes. At another level, he is a spiritual man given to prayer every evening, no matter where he is; and, when at home in Perth, meditating on one of the many religious icons hanging in his living room and bedroom. When troubled, he'll reach for a book of theology.

At one level Beazley is a man with an enormous intellectual life, a voracious reader who became fully acquainted with Voltaire at the age of 14 and who, today, is happiest when discussing ideas or browsing through secondhand bookshops. At another level, he appears much more passionate about the past, about history, about the eclipse of empires, the priorities of great powers, the course of battles, than he is about the future. Hell, it's doubtful if the former Minister for Communications has ever turned on a computer, let alone sent an e-mail.

At one level, Beazley would appear to be a man equal to the times, far more progressive than Howard. In reality he is as much a social conservative as the Prime Minister, at least on issues such as abortion, euthanasia and heroin trials, all of which he opposes. 'He is as rooted to the past as

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John Howard,' says one who knows him well but declines to be named. 'In fact, John Howard and Kim Beazley have a lot in common—their views on women, for example, and the conservative way they think society should operate. Both would be very happy being back somewhere in the 1950s.'

(This, however, does not translate into policy. Beazley has, for instance, pledged to boost funding for child-care centres as well as provide tax incentives for women to remain in the workforce.)

But there's more. At one level, Beazley would appear totally his own man—full, large, visceral and completely at ease with himself. At another level, he is a man who appears to have craved approval, particularly from his father, but, failing that, his father-substitutes. Thus the mentors: Neville Wran. Bob Hawke. Mick Young.

At one level, Beazley is telling us that after years of ambivalence about his own ambitions, he is now hungry to be prime minister. At another level, you can almost feel the palpable absence of messianic zeal, the kind of zeal that seized Bob Hawke and Paul Keating—and, indeed, John Howard.

This could be one of Beazley's most redeeming features—an absence of vaulting ambition—or it could be a window into his well-documented pessimism and his own grim perceptions of what political life served up to his father, and might yet serve up to him.

AH YES, THE FATHER. THERE'S surely no way to understand Kim Beazley Jnr without attempting to come to terms with Kim Beazley Snr, the man who succeeded John Curtin as the Federal Member for Fremantle, and who went on to become a member of parliament for 31 years, as well as education minister in the Whitlam government.

In his warm but penetrating biography of Kim Beazley Jnr, Peter FitzSimons explored the nature of this brilliant, austere, outspoken and highly moral individual who, throughout his career, was forever engaging in political combat, whether by just struggling to save his own seat, or fighting the war of ideas with the government of the day, the unions, his own State executive and his caucus colleagues.

Today at 81, Kim Beazley Snr is still possessed of a keen mind and a sharp tongue. He is described by one source I spoke with as a 'charming egocentric', a man predisposed to giving lectures on subjects ranging from Poland's national debt to the Enclosure Movement of the 18th century. Blessed with a photographic memory, he has also been acclaimed by many,

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including Bob Hawke, as having been the most brilliant orator and intellect of his day, someone who could have—and perhaps should have—been leader of his party.

What prevented him from realising his full potential was his adherence to a spiritual/religious movement known as Moral Rearmament. This dovetailed with his vehement anti-communism and made him, in the eyes of family friends and fellow Labor Party members, exceedingly priggish. In fact, so intolerant was he of excessive drinking, smoking, foul language and salacious anecdotes that Gough Whitlam often used to amuse himself by deliberately swearing in his presence.

The basis of Moral Rearmament was a constant analysis of past actions and future intentions. Am I absolutely pure? Am I absolutely honest? Am I absolutely altruistic? Am I absolutely loving? Dawn would never break in the Beazley household without these considerations being taken up by the parents and three children, although the middle child, Merrilyn, was in constant revolt against this imposed doctrine. Not so her elder brother. He was no rebel (although he was later to throw off the Moral Rearmament strictures).

Similarly, evenings would never draw to a close without a reading of this moral compass. This was a household where alcohol was never served; where Sundays were reserved for God; where passions were kept in check—except when it came to politics—and where, according to one family friend, Beazley's vivacious mother, Betty, was 'never quite allowed to be herself because of this rather cold-fish intellectual'. It was hard to win the old man's approval.

But it was also, significantly, a home into which people could come and feel welcome; a multicultural environment for students travelling on the Colombo Plan from Africa and Asia; for naval recruits from HMAS *Leeuwin*; Labor Party figures such as Jim Cairns; fellow travellers in Moral Rearmament and Aboriginal figures such as Margaret Tucker, who would later become an author but who then would simply fascinate the young Beazley boy with tales of her abduction as a child at the hands of the Aboriginal Protection Board.

It is still a source of great pride to Beazley that his father was responsible for introducing the concept of Aboriginal land rights onto the Labor Party platform at the national conference in 1951. 'He was far ahead of his time in some of his thinking,' notes the son who, 46 years later, was to weep in Federal Parliament over the report into the stolen generation.

But who could live up to this ghostly, distant presence, this absentee father and political giant who had taken over Curtin's seat and had served alongside Chifley, Calwell and Whitlam? Certainly his son never felt he could. 'He's brighter,' says Beazley. 'Better orator. He's got a photographic

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memory which I'd kill for. He can remember all the poems that he just virtually read when he was a boy.' The leader of the Labor Party says this without a hint of ill-humour.

Peter FitzSimons believes that at some stage in a father's life it is imperative for him to pass the torch on to his son—a graceful recognition of the old making way for the new. FitzSimons asked Beazley what age he was when this torch was finally passed to him. 'Never has,' Beazley replied softly. 'Never has.'

AND SO HERE HE IS, open face, wide girth, gravy on his chin, talking about the main influences in his life, beginning with the formative trauma of being stricken with polio at the age of six, having part of his own childhood, in effect, stolen from him. But rather than curse his legs and his luck, it gave him a sense that he might be fortunate. 'Most people who got a dose of it didn't end up like me,' he says. 'I've come through it pretty well.' And not the least reason being that his parents forced him to swim regularly in the Swan River and then perform exhausting calf-muscle exercises for an hour each day.

There were other ways, too, in which Beazley felt humbled. His family had discovered that his younger brother, David, was intellectually disabled, not because of any congenital abnormality but, in all likelihood, because he fell off a change table as an infant. It is clear Beazley has no interest in pursuing the subject.

The divorce from his first wife, Mary, remains the saddest, most gut-wrenching experience of his life. 'People have said that divorce is very like death,' he says quietly, 'and there is a similar sort of effect on you.' Beazley knows something of death, too, having lost a friend to suicide in his younger days, and then his closest friend, the Labor icon Mick Young, shortly after becoming Opposition leader in 1996. 'I still miss Mick,' he says.

Ask Beazley what the most shocking experience in his life has been and after a considerable pause he says: 'The drive into Bombay from Bombay airport. I'd never seen poverty before. People were doing it just very hard, hard beyond belief, and it sort of struck me this was a place I would never know. This was a society I would never understand . . . and it's one of the reasons I did Indian history as my undergraduate degree—to try and get an understanding of that place.'

Beazley had gone to India at the age of 17 after finishing school. He had been drawn there by Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Rajmohan, a journalist and key proponent of Moral Rearmament in India. Beazley wanted to help save India. To that end he joined a troupe which moved from

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town to town performing songs about reconciliation and self-betterment. Beazley played piano, guitar and harmonica.

India, of course, was not saved by Kim Beazley, but it did leave its indelible mark. While studying Indian history at the University of Western Australia, Beazley joined the Labor Party, managing to work his way onto the State executive at the age of 18 and then taking on his father's mortal enemy, the WA Labor boss Joe Chamberlain. (Around the same time, he also got a job as a gravedigger at Karrakatta cemetery, where he often used to wander over to the grave site of the wartime Prime Minister John Curtin to reflect on his epitaph: *His country was his pride. His brother man, his cause.*)

Although he had become a committed social democrat, organising campus seminars on issues such as Vietnam, apartheid and world poverty, Beazley was considered by many of his contemporaries to be 'old before his years'. As John Dawkins, a fellow student and former minister in the Hawke/Keating governments told FitzSimons: 'We knew that his father, of course, was in Moral Rearmament, but in a funny way his father was a very left-wing sort of religious man, whereas Kim Jnr was conservative in every way, really "God Squad". Not just politically, but no drinking, no smoking—what we always used to say was "If Kim is as conservative as this now, how conservative is he going to be when he's his father's age?" Everyone was to the left of Kim in those days.'

LONG BEFORE KIM BEAZLEY EVER began developing an ambition to lead the country, his ultimate aim was to preside over the defence forces. As a little boy growing up in Perth, he had become imbued with the sense of vulnerability that afflicts many living in the world's most isolated city. He drew ships. He played war games. He built an air-raid shelter in his backyard. He sat at his father's knees and absorbed the sweep of military history and the cut and thrust of politics.

At university in Western Australia he'd done his master's degree on the Labor Party's attitudes to the American alliance. As a Rhodes scholar at Oxford he'd written his thesis on the superpowers in the Indian Ocean and then co-authored a book on American naval strategy. As a tutor at Murdoch University he had regaled his students with stories of the American Civil War and Vietnam. He was a brilliant scholar, utterly fascinated by international relations, issues of world security and Australia's strategic vulnerability. He was convinced that governments needed to play a central role in the conduct of their countries' affairs.

By the time he was 36 he'd become the youngest defence minister in

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Australia's history. His champions in general were the NSW Right and, in particular, Bob Hawke. By Hawke's own admission, Beazley was just like a son to him. 'I really loved Kim,' Hawke told Peter FitzSimons. 'I still do. Kim had that sense of Realpolitik that his father basically was lacking. He is essentially a man who has got the cloudlands and the grass-roots. He is a thinker, but he also knows that if you are going to be able to translate your ideas into action, you have got to be "down there" in touch with the grassroots and I just found him from the word go a charming, good man—and I formed the view very early that he could go where his father hadn't been able to go.'

THERE ARE ESSENTIALLY TWO VIEWS about Beazley's tenure in Defence. Both are probably accurate. The first is that there has never been a better minister. For more than five years, from December 1984 to March 1990, he turned the country's defensive structure upside down, dragging it into the modern era. He pursued a concept of self-reliance while reaffirming the American compact. He transferred the main defence facilities from the south-east of the country to the more vulnerable north-west. He spent billions on new frigates, submarines, helicopters and the Jindalee radar project, causing a huge cost blow-out in the process.

He knew more about defence matters than the entire Cabinet put together. As the former tourism minister John Brown put it: 'Most of us wouldn't have known a Hornet [jet fighter] if it bit us on the bum.' Beazley made a huge impression on his American counterparts, which was not surprising given that he also supported their aims. He defended US intelligence-gathering facilities on Australian soil, supported our involvement in the MX missile tests and, at the time of the Gulf War, advocated a commitment to the US-led alliance. The former US Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger described Beazley as 'one of the finest defence ministers' he'd ever worked with. The former Secretary of State George Shultz labelled him 'outstanding'.

But for all this, he had his critics. His preparedness to consider sending troops to Fiji and Papua New Guinea during internal crises—indeed, during his tenure he put the army on alert four times—earned him the moniker 'Bomber Beazley' and his approach to defence nothing less than a 'new militarism'.

Labor's Leo McLeay said: 'I think he was the most dangerous person that the defence of Australia ever had. It was all big toys—all of a sudden he got all the toys he would have liked in his life.' The journalist Brian Toohey also observed: 'Australia might have been better off with the

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20,000 people in the armed services [that were retrenched under Beazley] than with [Collins class] submarines capable of going all the way to Vladivostok.'

Another who has seen him up close says: 'He gets carried away in a crisis and starts reaching for crazy solutions. Fiji was a classic.' So were the 1986 Budget deliberations when the then Finance Minister, Peter Walsh, sought to cut defence expenditure by \$500 million. Beazley was so upset that he began talking about resignation. It was only when a formula was devised that would preserve defence spending at a zero rather than negative growth rate that he was finally placated.

THERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS that need to be answered about Kim Beazley, and they have nothing to do with basic human virtues. We already know that on both sides of politics he is liked and admired. We have seen his integrity in many forms—in the way he holds the hand of a trembling drug addict for a full 10 minutes, as he did when approached on the hustings recently; in the way he touches his wife on the back in unguarded moments of affection; in the way he talks with journalists, over a drink and late into the night, with such breathtaking candour that it would be impossible to write about for fear of closing these fissures forever.

We can see the humanity, if we cast our minds back, in the way in which he treated his opponents when in government. The 'barbs without the venom', as one put it. 'There were bloody Opposition backbenchers who'd come in and get just about as good treatment as the Labor blokes. Like at a personal level!' his private secretary of the day, Damien Wallace, has said.

We could see it during Keating's leadership challenge to Hawke in the early 1990s when, alone among his colleagues, he was able to maintain relationships with both men despite being Hawke's most ardent—and some might say most sycophantic—supporter.

We could see it in his unwavering (or was it blind?) loyalty to Brian Burke when the former WA Premier was accused of helping enrich his mates and then gaoled for defrauding his parliamentary travel account. Beazley stood by him to the end.

No, it's not his sense of honour and fidelity that is in question. And it's not the possibility that Australia might not grow to love him given half the chance. It's more about what he would do in a time of crisis. What he would do if things really turned bad. Would he rise to the occasion? Would he get spooked?

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As Robert Manne has written, Australia has, for the past 20 years, been engaged in a cultural and economic revolution. The cultural revolution embraced multiculturalism and the quest for reconciliation with Aborigines. The economic one—started by the Hawke/Keating governments—involved an adherence to financial and labour-market deregulation, a dismantling of tariff protections, a move to smaller government, a push for more privatisation. Needless to say, popular support for both revolutions has collapsed.

What Beazley is trying to do now is remain loyal to the cultural agenda—despite being deliberately vague on immigration issues—while turning his back on the Hawke/Keating economic agenda. He wants more government, less privatisation, greater regulation, a place for tariff protection, a reassessment of national competition policy, an end to the productivity commission. It's called product discrimination, an attempt to distance himself and the party as much as possible from Keating.

To that end he is banking on a few things. He is banking on voters forgetting that when he was aviation minister he swore Labor would never sell Qantas. It did. He is banking on our forgetting that as finance minister he articulated the case for selling off the family jewels—the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, the Sydney Gas Pipeline, the last half of the Commonwealth Bank. He was, as one political observer put it, 'up to his neck in privatisation'.

He is banking on our not pressing him for a detailed analysis of the mistakes of the Hawke/Keating governments, in which he played such a principal role. Indeed, he tells us he has eaten humble pie for the past two-and-a-half years but says nothing that suggests there was anything wrong with what they did, other than fail to sell the policies properly.

He is also banking on our forgetting that he was one of only a handful of key ministers in the mid-1980s who enthusiastically supported Keating's consumption tax proposal and that now, in the late 1990s, despite the deep misgivings of business and the welfare lobby, despite what his advisers and former Labor ministers urged him to do two years ago—which was lead the tax reform debate with a food-exempted GST—he has refused to budge from his opposition to the government's position.

He wants a decent public sector—considerably more spending on hospitals, jobs, education and infrastructure—but does he have a decent way of paying for it? If Beazley looks a little like the man who has stepped away from the car crash disclaiming any responsibility for the accident, is it because it is politically imperative for him to do so, to look like the unwitting passenger rather than the backseat driver? Or is it also because he has never been as comfortable with the whole arc of deregulation and privatisation as were some of his colleagues? In the case of Telecom,

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he fought passionately and successfully to protect the institution from Keating's more competitive model. He later opposed the full sale of Telstra on the grounds of public ownership of an important national resource.

It could be argued that Beazley's recently articulated suspicion of market forces fits neatly into his longstanding strategic world view, one in which the state plays a crucial role in international and national affairs, and where on economic matters the government refuses to relinquish power to the marketplace.

Given the shell-shocked state of the country with respect to economic and social change, this scepticism towards free-market orthodoxy appears good politics. For the moment. It allows Beazley the opportunity to try to lure back the voters who deserted Labor in 1996, many of whom have been most damaged and demeaned by the forces of globalisation.

The question is, what then? Will it be sound, long-term economics? Would he be able to reconcile in government the populist rhetoric and policies of Opposition if faced with the global realities of currency collapse, financial meltdown, plunging stock markets and a crisis of confidence in the Australian dollar? (Would anyone, for that matter?)

Would he revise his stance, say, on tariffs, the sale of Telstra, the role of the Industrial Relations Commission, if he found himself caught between harming his constituency and doing what was best for the country?

Given his affection for institutions—Parliament, Telstra, the Labor Party, government itself—could he adapt if he decided change was necessary? Could he reframe his ideas when put to the test? Could he assert his authority over his party and generate, as, say, Tony Blair did in Britain, a sense that he was the man for the future? Would he be prepared—as all Labor leaders have had to be—to take on the factions and party machine when necessary? Would he be able to reconcile the party's traditions with the requirements of Realpolitik? Or is Realpolitik now a movable feast in which people such as the billionaire speculator George Soros, Bill Clinton and a growing number of economic commentators are all allowed to speak out on the need for greater regulation of the world's economy?

The answer, of course, is we don't know. We don't know what he would do if handed the tiller. We don't know whether he would make a good leader, bad leader or no leader at all. What we do know, though, is that there is nothing Kim Beazley has thought more about than Australia's survivability.

'From the day I went into politics, or earlier than that,' he told Peter FitzSimons, 'I've always thought that you've got to look at the logic of history, and that it is not kind to nations like Australia, occupying large areas with small populations, culturally different from the region around them.'

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'I've always thought survival for Australia is going to be a close-run thing. I think we're capable of it, but we have to always properly situate ourselves internationally so as to do it. We cannot be totally self-absorbed; we do not have that luxury. But as a historian, I [know] there is nothing inevitable in anything and there are choices.'

The choice, then, for voters on October 3 is whether to place our faith in a man whose leadership is untried in the big job but who has—with the government's help—almost worked a political miracle by resuscitating his party to the point that it could win the unwinnable election. Certainly, he now seems determined to be his own person, to step out from the shadows of his father, his mentors and his predecessors. Indicative of this has been his polite refusal to accept Bob Hawke's tutelage for the past two-and-a-half years. 'Bob,' he's reported to have told him, 'it's not like it was in your day.'

Another sign is also perhaps the knowledge that he carries inside himself a rich life outside of politics. There are the two books that he is researching and preparing to write—the first on the Labor Party's alliance with the United States; the second on John Curtin's relationship with the American wartime General Douglas MacArthur.

There are also, naturally, his wife and three daughters, whom he never sees enough of. There is the Catholic Church, which he apparently intends to join. There are the drives through the streets of Perth, windows down, listening to his favourite 1960s rock classics blaring from the car stereo. And, of course, there are the food, the conversation and the secondhand bookshops that forever put him in his element.

It's probably why the political observer Malcolm McGregor once noted that 'in Kim [Beazley], the Labor Party has a leader for the first time since [Ben] Chifley who doesn't have a major personality disorder'.

Postscript

Kim Beazley lost the 1998 Federal election with a majority of the two-party preferred vote. However, the policy vacuum at the centre of the party was exposed within days of the election by the very public departure to the backbench of his outspoken education spokesman, Mark Latham. Latham was highly critical of the party's failure to grapple with the changed political landscape.

Beazley's deputy, Gareth Evans, also announced he was retiring from politics, but then, just as quickly, stated he would see out his three-year term. His position as deputy was seized by the ambitious Simon Crean.