

Over the weekend, The Australian published a [piece by Troy Bramston](#), plugging his recent biography of Paul Keating. In the article, Keating is quoted as suggesting Bill Shorten is not the right person to lead the Australian Labor Party (ALP). He argues that Shorten has led the Party too far from the political centre and that this is part of the reason the ALP's primary vote is languishing in the mid-30s.

It is true that, in recent years, the ALP has haemorrhaged middle class progressive votes to the Greens, and is now in danger of losing working class votes to insurgent parties like One Nation.

But what of Keating's solution? He argues that the ALP should re-embrace his philosophy of "an open, competitive, cosmopolitan" Australia. Here, Keating is affirming his belief in the liberal free market as the best and most sustainable way to manage the economy and a radically open cosmopolitanism to govern social policy.

Keating is kicking around the same ideas - underpinned by the same free-market, cosmopolitan philosophy — he had when he became Treasurer in 1983. That was almost 34 years ago, and 34 years after Ben Chifley and Labor lost government in 1949. Imagine for a moment if the Labor Party had run on the same platform in 1983 as it did in 1949, promising to nationalise the banks and a largely white Australia. We wouldn't have stood a chance!

Just this year, we have seen those who have been left behind by the militantly free market, cosmopolitan philosophies reject their advocates at the polls. Think of Brexit. Think of Trump.

Australia is not immune to this kind of uprising. Dennis Glover has [eloquently illustrated](#) that many of the people who were "liberated" from assembly lines here in Australia were not liberated at all and instead spent the rest of their working lives in the social security queue.

Australia's de-industrialising suburbs and towns are still feeling the pain. We have high levels of underemployment, an increasingly precarious labour market and for most young Australians the housing market is almost completely inaccessible. The widespread sense of alienation and disenfranchisement witnessed in Britain and the United States may not be present on the same scale in Australia, but some of the preconditions are there.

The task of each generation of the labour movement is to renew and revitalise the cause of social democracy for a new moment and historical context. And the Australian labour movement has much work to do.

The project of rebuilding should begin with the movement's core values. Last year's ALP federal conference resolved to re-examine the Party's objective, a task not undertaken since 1981. Hopefully, this process will be a democratic one, taking into account the ideas and motivations of trade unionists, social activists and rank and file Party membership, as well as sympathetic think tanks and academics.

It would be premature to assert what this process might decide. But we can hope the ALP will renew its focus on economic and social equality, and on defending the dignity of all people. This means the ALP should explicitly state its commitment to subordinating market forces to democratic ones. In short, the labour movement should campaign and govern in a way that aims to remove any obstacle that stands in the way of good human relationships.

This kind of philosophical framework would help us tackle the major policy problems of our time; radical ideas like the universal basic income may be coming of age.

Bill Shorten has started to do some of this work. His commitment to tackling housing affordability by reforming capital gains tax and negative gearing was a courageous sign that perhaps he understands better than some the importance of this moment in history. But there is much more for him, his parliamentary team and the rest of the labour movement to do.

It would be folly to ignore the successes of the past. The Hawke and Keating governments had many considerable achievements. We reorientated Australia towards Asia and opened up the economy while improving the social wage by expanding Medicare and other social services. But the policies that facilitated these accomplishments belong to a different time.

There are, nonetheless, lessons to be learnt. The collaborative model of governance pioneered by Bob Hawke when he was prime minister utilised all the talents of the cabinet and the caucus, as well as the government's social partners in the trade union movement, and brought the business community along too. Shorten will need to channel the abilities of his colleagues in parliament as well as those of the broader progressive movement if he is to lead the ALP back

Brian Howe on what Bill Shorten must do to revitalise social democracy

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to government and succeed when he gets there.

But ultimately, history will judge Shorten on his ability to bring together a government capable of tackling the problems of our time — yawning social and economic inequality, climate change and increasing social alienation — not on the musings of former prime ministers.

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