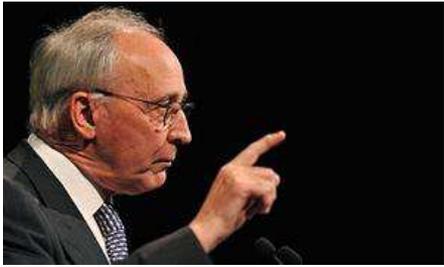


Paul Keating lets rip (again): Indigenous recognition could make Australia great

The former prime minister renews calls for a republic, but says the country will only stand tall when it deals with the dispossession of Indigenous people



Of bringing in the historic Mabo legislation, Paul Keating says, ‘We beat being marginalised, like South Africa was with apartheid, by the skin of our teeth.’ Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

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We need an Australian republic and our own flag, but only Indigenous recognition will make us a truly great country, former prime minister [Paul Keating](#) has said during a wide-ranging discussion about his legacy.

“I always hoped and believed that Australia would be a great country,” the former Labor leader said of his vision for Australia when he became prime minister in 1991, after eight years as treasurer.

“No great country has a monarch of another country as their head of state,” Keating said at the Sydney Opera House, in conversation with ABC presenter Kerry O’Brien on Tuesday evening. “No great country has the flag of another country in the corner.

“But more than that, but more than that, no country which is great, and calls itself great, wants to live with the shame of the dispossession of its original people.”

The sold-out crowd roared when Keating and O’Brien walked on stage and applauded every time he delivered a good line with his signature wit.

Indigenous dispossession and Australia’s colonial shame was a theme Keating returned to often during the lively 90-minute discussion, saying his greatest “emotional commitment” was the historic Mabo legislation that he ushered in which recognised the land rights of Australia’s indigenous people.

“We beat being marginalised, like South Africa was with apartheid, by the skin of our teeth,” Keating said.

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Malcolm Turnbull could deliver a republic in his next term in office, Keating said, in a strong push for an Australian republic.

“What are we going to end up with? Charles and Camilla for God’s sake?” Keating said. “Prince William is the nicest royal to show up for donkey’s years.

But he added, “We don’t need him and his lovely wife as our heads of state. It’s an affront to everything we’ve created here. It’s a spoof of everything we’ve done with ourselves in history to be landing back there waiting for Prince Charles to inherit the throne. It’s deeply sick.”

After engineering a strong economy during his time as treasurer, Keating said he was ready to attack the bigger picture when he became PM. “We had to turn the place over. What I wanted Australia to be was an open, competitive, cosmopolitan country, which was a republic ... had I won in 1996, we would be a republic by now.”

Now 71, Keating says he will never write an autobiography because “anyone who’s any good never wrote about themselves” – but he is certainly making sure his legacy stands, book or no book.

He is doing this by talking to the ABC veteran at length: first for the four-part TV series Keating – The Interviews, then for O’Brien’s new book, Keating. To mark the book’s release, Keating agreed to a couple of live events in which the two former sparring partners would adopt a more relaxed tone.

Gone was the forensic questioning which marked O’Brien’s interviews with Keating on The 7.30 Report and Lateline in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

At times O’Brien would ask a question Keating believed was not in keeping with the collaborative tone of the evening. “Your 7.30 slip is showing Kerry,” Keating said to rapturous applause.

It was a softer, more reflective elder statesman that the largely Labor audience got for the \$50 ticket price – and they lapped it up, applauding every time he delivered a sharp line and laughing at all his jokes.

The career politician said it was the love of his grandmother and his mother that gave him the confidence and self-assurance he needed to seize power and use that power to change the country.

“My grandmother died when I was 12; I was devastated,” he said. “I could do no wrong with her. I was absolutely ace. And I do think you carry that with you.”

In Keating’s assessment, his time at the top was marked by its policy achievements rather than by the “tricky politics” of earlier administrations, but he did concede, with some prodding from O’Brien, that he may have had some tricks. But not many.

Still intact was his ability to cut down his opponents, or even his own political colleagues, with a blistering remark. Yes, Gough Whitlam was all about policy too but he fell over too soon, Keating said – “you’ve got to stand long enough on your feet [to make a difference]”.

Yes, he had a “hugely talented cabinet” but he alone was the “guiding light” who gave the government “spiritual nourishment”. Bob Hawke got on with the business of government but it was Keating who made sure we didn’t “dilute” the vision.

“Prime ministers are very useful to a treasurer,” Keating said mischievously, and Hawke and I had a great relationship until he “produced a nasty little book”.

“So I decided to do the TV series with you.”

Keating ended his grand performance with a line about his political opponents, in particular former Liberal leader John Hewson, which drew the loudest applause of the evening: “I threw them around like rag dolls. It was such fun.”