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By Noel Pearson

The Weekend Australian



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Amigos para siempre. Friends for life. The theme song for the Barcelona Olympics was the ironic caption we printed on the bottom of a commemorative photograph of myself and elders in front of a large ant hill in the middle of Cape York Peninsula, together with then Queensland premier Wayne Goss and his wunderkind head of the cabinet office, Kevin Rudd, in 1991.

At the time, Rudd was leading the development of Queensland's land rights legislation and I had taken time off from my law studies at the University of Sydney to join the taskforce at Goss's invitation.

I was later to fall out with the Goss government over the miserable legislation that emanated from this taskforce.

Rudd was my first boss in my first official job. Notwithstanding the acrimony of our parting – which developed into a febrile conflict when Goss and Rudd attempted to sabotage Paul Keating's commitment to a principled outcome in the 1993 negotiations on the Native Title Act by conspiring with the states then ruled by the conservatives – it was not possible to work with Rudd without being impressed by him.

Even in the depths of my detestation of what I considered to be his mealy political trimming when dealing with issues that had been on Labor's policy platform during the long winter of Nationals rule in Queensland, I have never been able to deny a grudging regard for Rudd. After all the expletives and bile would come: "Yes, but this man is formidable."

Rudd has the intellectual power of Keating, but he probably lacks the breadth of imagination that drove Keating's policy brain. He will need to find his muse. The federal Labor caucus would be mad not to elect Rudd as its leader at Monday's secret ballot. Beazley should be put out there in the long yard, as Slim Dusty used to sing, with those other frontbenchers who are to resign at the next election: how ridiculous and how indicative of the electoral mind-set of a horse heading faithfully and inexorably towards the knackery.

It is trite but nevertheless true to say that Beazley's problem is that of the dynastic son: someone who has been waiting for the crown to be offered to him on a plate.

People who don't come from royal lines have only their hunger and their grasping hands with which to seize power.

The fact that Beazley had to inform Australia he was "hungry for the job" was very telling: when you have to tell people you're salivating, you're already behind. They should be able to know from the spittle that you're hungry.

Mark Latham was an outsider and he reminded us of this ad nauseam. But Rudd is also a true outsider and the difference is that he has never used this as his political credentials.

Rudd's chief credential for Labor leadership is that he knows power and has exercised it at the highest levels of government.

He ran the government of Queensland for six years as the director-general of the cabinet office. In this sense, he has more experience and knowledge of the organisation and workings of government than most ministers accumulate in a lifetime.

No other member of federal parliament is as qualified as Rudd on the workings of the machinery of government.

His diplomatic background means there are few harder and more inscrutable negotiators than Rudd. I recall witnessing a 33-year-old Rudd deal with industry and civic leaders and lobbyists with breathtaking verve and skill. His arrogance, however, was equal to his abilities.

In meetings with mining industry leaders, Rudd would hold court with his feet on the desk in front of his supplicants.

Rudd is now 49 and much wiser, but notwithstanding that, he appears to have not lost the impression that he is also mightily impressed with himself; he has done the hard yards and come a cropper often enough.

I don't fear his lack of ministerial experience, and everybody who comes to the prime minister's job for the first time is inexperienced.

In those areas where John Howard has been so comprehensively ascendant over Labor, security and economic management, Rudd is strong and not at all flaky.

It is in relation to security issues that ordinary Australians have come to know him and be impressed by him.

It remains to be seen whether he will keep pushing his recent polemical crusade in favour of what I could call a more Christian capitalism, with the consequent risks to Rudd's economic policy credibility. I think Queensland MP Craig Emerson has a much better feel for the interface between economic and social policy.

My questioning of Rudd concerns his attitude to welfare reform and social policy. I fear he is mostly an unreconstructed defender of the traditional welfare state. This, I think, is a product of his experience.

He and his family were assisted by the welfare state to rebuild their lives following the death of their father, so Rudd, correctly enough, will never repudiate the safety net.

But my view is that welfare worked in the way it was intended to in relation to the Rudds. Passive welfare is a different problem, and Rudd must take seriously the problems of dependency and passivity that now sustain disadvantage not just in indigenous communities but in the Australian mainstream.

For Rudd to succeed on Monday and for Labor to have a real chance next year, two things have to take place within the ALP.

First, Rudd's contemporaries in the jockeying for the next phase of the Labor leadership must concede that he is now the first among equals.

Rudd's fellow Queenslander and fellow Nambour State High School alumnus Wayne Swan and West Australian Stephen Smith must jettison the alliances and prejudices born of the manoeuvrings of their own aspirations. They must acknowledge the higher imperative.

Swan, in particular, is key. He knows Rudd intimately and Monday's ballot will be a measure of his capacity to see things from the commanding heights rather than from the trenches of competitive brotherhood.

Second, the Australian Workers Union supremo Bill Ludwig must end the fatwa against Emerson.

He is the most economically literate member of the caucus and it is ridiculous that he sits on the backbench. He must be brought into a senior economic portfolio, if not as shadow treasurer.

These are, of course, not the only things that need to change within the ALP.

But they will be the bellwethers that determine whether the grand old party is serious about seizing government at the federal level next year.

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