

PJ KEATING

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Hon Bob Hawke AC

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12 July 2010

Dear Bob,

It was with much disappointment that I opened the weekend Australian to find on page three the headline 'Hawke's take on ditherer Keating and lying Richo' and to read at the first line that either you or Blanche had described me as 'an ailing vacillator'.

As you know, I have written no book about my years as Treasurer or Prime Minister. I have declined repeated requests to 'get it all down and set the record straight'. And not only have I not written a book, as Prime Minister, I did not respond to the book you yourself wrote after you left office; the so-called history of the Hawke government. In it, as you know, you treated me shamefully while attempting to diminish my motivations and larger schematic. Yet I did not upbraid you for it.

Indeed, you will have well noticed that I have desisted from writing any exposes; that I have not reflected adversely on your years as Prime Minister. When criticism of the Labor years often arose at the hands of Howard and Costello, I would more often than not, make a defensive comment in terms of 'us' or 'Bob and I', because I believed the unity of our purpose reflected more strongly on what we achieved and on Labor's record. That is, we looked stronger together than as two personalities separated as to objectives and outcomes. And this was the way I was happy to leave it.

But you are not happy to leave it. You want to retrace the ground for a second time in a major book, only this time a book written by your wife. Of course, I have not yet seen the book; I can only go on the serialised excerpts and news stories of the kind referred to above. But the Dusevic news story on page three is obviously a lift from the book where you (or Blanche) wilfully misrepresent my role in the float of the exchange rate with supportive quotes for your line by Ross Garnaut, your rusted on, if one eyed adviser at the time. The book apparently quotes Bill Hayden saying 'he wanted me to be on side with him to oppose it'. This, of course, is totally untrue, as my real mission with Hayden at that time was to bring him on side as he was one of the few people in Cabinet able to upend or delay it. But to give Hayden his due, he always saw the sense of it. Or at least from May 1983 when it became apparent that the managed system was on its last legs.

The Dusevic story then goes on to misrepresent my position in relation to the first Gulf War. As you know, in 1991 I was in favour of the United Nations system returning to life after the long impasse of the Cold War and in meetings with you I said that if President Bush, two years after the Wall had come down, was prepared to reinvigorate the UN with a UN mandated assault upon Saddam Hussein, I believed Australia should support it. And if you remember, I advised you to get in early before Mulroney and the British because the Americans were looking mainly for early moral support rather than material support. I went on to say, this should allow us to put a couple of ships up the top of the Gulf rather than commit ground forces and aircraft. And you were happy to agree. As I remember at the time, mighty happy, for I was both Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer and effective leader of the Right in the Parliamentary caucus. My agreement meant full political protection for you.

Which brings me to the point, what do I do from here? The first thing I will do is, when I get hold of a copy, read the book. But I suspect the book will be a more polished reflection of your self-serving account of your years as Prime Minister. I will bet, London to a brick on, that the book will do way less than share those years of achievements with me, or my work or indeed adequately with the work of other ministers. I will also bet, London to a brick on, that notwithstanding what the serialised account on Saturday had to say of your breakdown in 1984, that the book will fail to make clear that your emotional and intellectual malaise lasted for years. All through the Tax Summit year of 1985; through to your lacklustre performance through the 1987 election, to the point when in 1988, four years later, Dawkins had to front you, asking you to leave. It was only after that that you approached me; at your initiative, to enter into an agreement with me to succeed you following the 1990 election. An agreement you subsequently broke.

The fact is, Bob, I was exceedingly kind to you for a very long time. I knew the state you were in in 1984 and notwithstanding a lot of unhelpful advice from Garnaut and other obsequious members of your staff, I carried you through the whole 1984-1987 parliament, insisting you look like the Prime Minister, even if your staff, the Manchu Court I called them, were otherwise prepared to leave you in your emotional hole. No other Prime Minister would have survived going missing for that long. But with my help, you were able to. Kevin Rudd had two months of bad polls and you were the first to say he should be replaced. And you have since repeated it. Indeed, when Blanche asked me to be interviewed for her book, I told her she could not write about your years with me, without dealing honestly and fully with your long years of depression and executive incapacity. I told her for that reason alone, I should prefer no interview with her.

This letter is written now, not simply to express my disappointment but to let you know that enough is enough. That yours and Blanche's rewriting of history is not only unreasonable and unfair, more than that, it is grasping. It is as if, Narcissus-like, you cannot find enough praise to heap upon yourself. In hindsight, it is obvious yours and Blanche's expressions of friendship towards me over the last few years have been completely insincere. I can only promise you this: if I get around to writing a book and I might, I will be telling the truth; the whole truth. And that truth will record the great structural changes that occurred during our years and my own as Prime Minister, but it will also record without favour, how lucky you were to have me drive the government during your down years, leaving you with the credit for much of the success.

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Paul', with a large, sweeping flourish above it.

PJ Keating