

AUKUS, the Australian Labor Party, and Growing Dissent

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It was a sight to behold and took the wind out of the bellicose sails of the AUKUS cheer squad. Here, at the National Press Club in the Australian capital, was a Labor luminary, former Prime Minister of Australia and statesman, keen to weigh in with characteristic sharpness and dripping venom. Paul Keating's target: the militaristic lunacy that has characterised Australia's participation in the US-led security pact that promises hellish returns and pangs of insecurity.

In his [March 15 address](#) to a Canberra press gallery bewitched by the magic of nuclear-propelled submarines and the China bogeyman, Keating was unsparing about those "seriously unwise ministers in government" – notably Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles, unimpressed by their foolish, uncritical embrace of the US war machine. "The Albanese Government's complicity in joining with Britain and the United States in a tripartite build of a nuclear submarine for Australia under the AUKUS arrangements represents the worst international decision by an Australian Labor government since the former Labor leader, Billy Hughes, sought to introduce conscription to augment Australian forces in World War One."

In terms of history, this was chilling to Keating. The AUKUS security pact represented a longing gaze back at the Mother Country, Britain, "shunning security in Asia for security in and within the Anglosphere." It also meant a locking alliance with the United States for the next half-century as a subordinate in a containment strategy of Beijing. This was a bipartisan approach to foreign policy that saw the US dominating East Asia as "the primary strategic power" rather than a balancing one.

For Keating, the impetus for such madness came from a defence establishment that dazzled the previous Prime Minister, Scott Morrison. That effort, he argues, was spearheaded by the likes of the US-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Andrew Shearer of the Office of National Intelligence. They even, he argues, managed to convince PM Albanese, Marles and Wong to abandon the 20-month review period on the scope of what they were seeking.

The steamrolling Keating was also unsparing in attacking a number of journalists for their ditzy, adolescent belligerence. The sword, once produced, was never sheathed. Peter Hartcher, most notably, received a generous pasting as a war infatuated lunatic whose anti-China campaign at the Fairfax presses had been allowed for years.

In terms of the submarines themselves, Keating also expressed the view that the Royal Australian Navy would be far better off acquiring between 40 to 50 of the Collins Class submarines to police the coastline rather than having nuclear powered submarines lying in wait off the Chinese shoreline.

As we all should know, submarine policy is where imagination goes to expire, often in frightful, costly ways. For all Keating's admiration for the Collins Class, it was a [nightmarish project](#) marred by fiascos, poor planning and organisational dysfunction within the defence establishment. At stages, two-thirds of the Australian fleet of six submarines was unable to operate at full capacity. The lesson here is that submarines and the Australian naval complex simply do not mix.

The reaction from the Establishment was one of predictable dismissal, denial and distortion, typical of what Gore Vidal would have called deranged machismo. Instead of being critical of the powers that are, they have turned their guns and wallets on spectres, ghosts and devilish images. The tragedy looms, and it will be, like many tragedies, the result of colossal, unforgivable stupidity.

At the very least, the intervention by Keating, notably in the Labor Party, has not gone unnoticed. Within the Labor caucus, tremors of dissatisfaction are being recorded, breaches growing. West Australian Labor backbencher Josh Wilson defied his own party's dictates by [telling colleagues](#) in the House of Representatives how he was "not yet convinced that we can adequately deal with the non-proliferation risks involved in what is a novel arrangement, by which a non-nuclear weapons state under the NPT (Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty) comes to acquire weapons-grade material."

Wilson's views are not outlandish to the man. He is keen to challenge the notion of unaccountable executive war powers, a problem that looms large in the Westminster system. "To assume that such decision-making is already perfect, immutable, and beyond scrutiny," [he wrote](#) in December last year, "puts Australia at risk of making the most dangerous judgments without the best institutional framework for doing so."

A gaggle of former senior Labor ministers have also emerged, even if they initially proved sluggish. Peter Garrett, former environment minister and front man of Midnight Oil, while proving a bit squeamish about Keating's invective, found himself [in general agreement](#). "The deal stinks with massive cost, loss of independence, weakening nuke safeguards & more."

Kim Carr, who had previously held ministerial positions in industry and defence materiel, [revealed](#) that the matter of AUKUS had never been formally approved in the Federal Labor caucus, merely noted. Various "key" Labor figures - again Marles and Wong - agreed to endorse the proposition put forth to them on September 15, 2021 by the then Coalition government.

He also expressed deep concern "about a revival of a forward defence policy, given our performance in Vietnam". For Carr, the shadow cast by the Iraq War was long. "Given it's

20 years since Iraq, you can hardly say our security agencies should not be questioned when they provide their assessments.”

For former foreign minister, Gareth Evans, [there were three questions](#): whether the submarines are actually fit for purpose; whether Australia retained genuine sovereignty over them in their use; and, were that not the case, “whether that loss of agency is a price worth paying for the US security insurance we think we might be buying.”

Will these voices make a difference? They just might – but if so, Australia will have to thank that political pugilist and Labor veteran who, for all his faults, spoke in terms that will be considered, in a matter of years, treasonous by the Empire and its sycophants.

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