

# Address to National Press Club

George Wright, National Secretary of Australian Labor

Thank you for the introduction.

Can I start by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of this land.

I wish to pay them my respects and also thank Maurice and the National Press Club for inviting me to speak today.

Today, I have 30 minutes of speaking to fill.

But what I really want to say can be summed up in three words.

I - hate - losing.

And I hate it even more when the side I am playing for is something as dear to me as the Labor Party and the things that it stands for.

And when the prize is something as important as a Federal Labor government – with which so much good can be done for so many people and for this country.

These post-election National Secretary's addresses are all about winners and losers.

You come here to listen to the victorious, and today the humbled, and hope to get some insight into the competition of politics.

So my job today is a bit like that of a losing Captain in an AFL Grand Final.

Suck it up, honour your opponent and console your own side and its supporters with the promise that next season will be different.

That next time we will go one better.

It might be a formula but for anyone who thinks it is easy, I ask you to recall Collingwood Captain Nathan Buckley after his team lost the 2002 AFL Grand Final to Brisbane.

Buckley had won the Norm Smith Medal for Best on the Ground in that game - one of the highest individual honours a player can receive.

But Buckley took that medal off as quickly and forcefully as he could after it was hung around his neck – as if it's very touch was burning his skin.

For him there was no individual prize.

Just heart breaking, angry loss because the team — his team — had failed.

Of course, no-one would be suggesting that I should have won the Norm Smith for this election. Far from it.

The medal for best on ground from the 2013 election belongs to my opposite number Liberal Campaign Director Brian Loughnane.

His stewardship of the Liberal campaign and in the years leading up to it - was driven, disciplined and delivered for his side.

I will have more to say on that in a minute.

But first I want to talk about the pain of losing the election for Labor people, and why it hurts so much.

To do this I have to pay tribute to the person most to blame for me being here in this job - My mother Madeline who has not been well and she can't be here today.

But she is being well looked after by my father and by Labor's universal healthcare system Medicare.

When my mum was a young married woman, working and raising 3 young children in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Labor's first Prime Minister in 23 years, Gough Whitlam, was elected and then sacked.

Like many women of her generation, Gough's 1972 campaign launch speech beginning with that most inclusive and at the time radical salutation "Men and Women of Australia!" affected their lives like an earthquake.

For women like my mother they were hearing themselves, as Australian women, spoken to as real subjects of politics for the first time.

And when Gough was sacked in 1975 my mother was devastated – we children knew it and saw it – in her hurt and in my father's rage, which he has faithfully maintained.

Mum wrote to Gough after his 1977 election loss.

She wanted to tell him how much he and the issues he had put on the national agenda meant to her and her family.

Even down to his National Sewage Program which brought sewage to our outer-suburban home for the first time.

Well of course Gough wrote back.

And when a telegram arrived at our Ringwood home on December 23, 1977, the day after Gough had stood down as Labor Leader, my dad immediately asked - 'who's died?'

But no-one had died.

The message read

*'Madeline Wright – messages such as yours have made it all worthwhile. Many thanks and best wishes. Gough Whitlam.'*

So I grew up with the belief that the Labor Party mattered.

Really mattered. It was worth sweating for, straining for, and shedding a tear for.

The Labor Party my parents introduced me to was courageous, visionary and striving for equity and opportunity.

And despite Labor's recent troubles, I don't believe it has changed too much.

The progressive achievements, issues and programs that Labor set its course on during the Rudd and Gillard years won't be buried by the political rubble that era also created.

Or by the current Coalition government.

Tackling climate change, justice for people living with a disability, needs-based education funding, world class broadband, equitable access to university, properly funded retirement incomes, fair workplace rights, balancing the demands of jobs and the environment.

These issues will not be kicked off the national agenda.

We must never walk away from them because they are our mandate.

They speak to who we are and who we represent - and it is still only Labor can truly progress them.

For me, Labor is still the Party that my mother loves with a passion.

And losing Government is as painful now as it was then.

But on September 7 the Australian people passed their judgement.

Labor's history of infighting in office left us unworthy of re-election in too many voters' minds.

A slower growing post-GFC economy and the return of deficit Budgets made many voters uncertain about the future.

Issues around asylum seekers arrivals remained a persistent political problem for the government until its last days.

By the time the election campaign arrived these issues were so well entrenched that little could realistically be done to turn them around.

Labor didn't so much lose the election as lose government.

And we lost it because of a lack of unity and too much infighting.

This is to take nothing away from Brian and his team.

We put the Liberal's ten goals up when the political year started.

Brian was always going to win as long as he held his nerve when we inevitably made a comeback, as we did when Kevin Rudd resumed the Labor leadership.

And the crucial thing that Brian and his team had in spades and ruthlessly drove home their advantage with, was the biggest thing Labor's team lacked:

Discipline.

I'm not sure if history will remember Brian's campaign as brilliant, but it should be remembered as brilliantly disciplined.

From their captain to their most junior back-bencher they played like a team, and it worked.

The up-shot of this was that Brian was able to manage his Leader Tony Abbott to the needs of his Party's campaign strategy.

He was able to stick to his plan of keeping his Leader under tight control and of resisting pressure to release detailed policies and costings until after the voters had made up their minds.

Their research would have been telling him the same thing that ours was: Mr Abbott was neither all that respected nor all that liked.

Mr Abbott likes to portray himself as The Iron Man, but when most voters looked at him what they saw was the mild-mannered Bruce Banner trying to suppress his inner Hulk.

By way of digression, as a former Aussie Rules half back flanker, I'm also an English Lit major. And because of that I know 'The Hulk' is a 1960s cartoon re-working of Robert Louis Stevenson's famous horror Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

In fact, Gothic Horror was a favourite subject of mine at Melbourne University.

So, as you can tell, I was perfectly qualified to be in charge of the ALP over the past couple of years.

The Liberal's determination to keep the focus off Tony Abbott and on Labor was executed with ruthless precision.

Yet despite all their campaign successes, and the ridiculously large target Labor presented, it should not be forgotten that the Coalition only improved its Primary vote at the 2013 election by 1.8 per cent.

And as we stand here today Labor remains competitive - particularly if under Bill Shorten's Leadership we can show unity, freshness, energy and discipline over the next three years.

For the Labor campaign the challenge was quite different.

Having changed leaders just weeks out from the likely election date—our campaign had to be the inverse of one the Liberals undertook.

It had to emphasise Kevin Rudd and his strengths and work the Party's strategy into making the most of these, not the other way around.

To do anything else would have been implausible.

For the Party to install a new leader in such drawn-out and dramatic circumstances – well, our Leader was always going to be in the spotlight.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had earned the right — you could say he had accepted a duty—to campaign on his strategy.

Quite obviously, given the election outcome, we couldn't pull off the impossible victory.

But by changing Leaders back to Kevin Rudd, Labor did cauterise its potential losses.

In the second quarter of 2013 our polling was telling us Labor was looking at being reduced to as few as 30 House of Representatives seats.

Western Sydney looked like it would become a Liberal heartland.

Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia all risked being reduced to a single Labor seat each.

And we fully expected that Tasmania and the Northern Territory would return no Labor seats at all.

We ended up holding 55 seats.

A solid loss. A bitter disappointment.

But as one commentator wrote, we pulled off a Dunkirk—suffering a major defeat, but managing to escape with our army intact. We live to fight another day.

And fight we will.

As Bill Shorten's new Front Bench proves, Labor's generation-X saved its seats and that means Labor has good grounds for future optimism.

As does the entry into the caucus of a new generation of high calibre Labor MPs like Claire O'Neill, Jim Chalmers, Pat Conroy, Tim Watts and others.

There are other good grounds for optimism too.

Organisationally, we have started work on the hard-headed changes Labor needs to make.

When I became National Secretary I set myself a number of goals related to rebuilding the strength of the Party at a national level.

The first was to win the election – fail there obviously.

The others were to strengthen the Party's finances, reinvigorate our campaigning capacity and finally work on the democracy deficit in the Party that has frustrated many of our members and put a strain on our grass roots connection with the community.

On all of these objectives we still have much work to do, but we have made progress.

Over the past two years we have re-organised our finances and fundraising and eliminated a decade's worth of operating debt.

Most importantly we have also started to re-tool the way we engage with our members and supporters and how we campaign.

I believe that Labor has started building a stronger, more inclusive and effective campaigning machine that will positively contribute to our competitiveness in future elections.

With the assistance of many dedicated Labor people, we intend to take Labor into a new third generation of large scale political campaigning.

Unlike the two previous generations — which relied first almost exclusively on mass advertising, then second on demographic targeting, this third generation relies more heavily on direct and individual, one-on-one conversation and voter engagement, and the micro-targeting of information and messages to individuals.

It requires better trained, organised and resourced campaigners and supporters at every level of the Party.

And will only work if we are truly willing to invite our supporters into our Party and our campaigns.

This type of campaigning requires widely accessible resources and many thousands of volunteers - but has a target audience of one.

A year out from the 2013 campaign we significantly increased the resources dedicated to digital and good old fashioned face-to-face campaigning.

In the hands of good local members, trained local organisers and their campaign teams, this investment I believe, made a material difference in a score of seats across the country.

Since 2011 we have increased by more than 10 times the size of our campaigning email list of potential volunteers and donors.

Back then, our most popular online material was attracting around 50,000 views – in 2013 we were achieving as many as 3 million.

We increased the amount of campaign funds raised from small donors by more than thirteen times.

Small on-line donors now contribute more than twice the campaign funds to Federal Labor than any individual union or corporate contributor.

This will have a significant and positive impact on our Party into the future, and I intend to keep building on it.

More than 12 months out from the 2013 election Labor also placed 40 full-time national organisers into the field across our most contested electorates.

Their task was to build large volunteer networks who made more direct and face-to-face contact with voters than we ever have before.

As just one example of this, the number of volunteer and candidate one-on-one phone calls to voters in our campaigns increased more than 12-fold between the 2010 and 2013 election campaigns.

None of this of course won us the election.

But it did help Labor hold seats like Parramatta where Julie Owens and her team knocked on more than 10,000 doors.

Like Greenway where Michelle Rowland's volunteers made phone contact with more than 50,000 households.

Like McEwan where Rob Mitchell's team of volunteer tele-campaigners made thousands of calls right up until mid-day on September 7 – Rob won his seat by 380 votes.

Like Kingsford Smith and Adelaide where we held our ground against the tide.

Like Morton, Blair, and Chris Hayes seat of Fowler where we had swings to us.

And like Solomon where Luke Gosling won votes off Natasha Griggs and nearly took the seat.

The green shoots of a bigger, stronger and better Labor Party are starting to come through.

Yes Labor lost the 2013 election.

But we are in good shape to rebuild and wage an even stronger campaign next time.

My message for Labor Party MPs, members, supporters and voters is that we can come back.

We will continue to strengthen the Party's financial resources.

We will continue to improve the effectiveness of our local and national campaigning.

And we will continue to democratise the operation of our Party.

In the past two years as National Secretary I have overseen the conduct of three national ballots of all ALP members.

For the Party President, for membership of Labor's new National Policy Forum and most recently for the election of Labor's Leader.

Forget the Liberal spin.

The participation of Labor members in the direct election of our leader was an outrageous success.

More than 4,500 new members have joined the Labor Party since our September 7 election defeat.

The conduct of Anthony Albanese and Bill Shorten and their campaign teams was exemplary. An example to all of how Labor supporters want their Parliamentary leaders to conduct themselves.

This process has delivered Bill Shorten the most solid platform that any Labor opposition leader anywhere in the country has had for a long, long time.

Bill will lead Labor to the next election.

No ifs, no buts, no second guessing.

And I know Bill, Tanya and their team will take advantage of that certainty to craft a winning course.

This process has been a shot in the arm for Labor and we must embrace it, build on it and drive it forward.

So what is the real significance of the 2013 election?

The Rudd and Gillard Governments kept Australia out of a world recession and struck out in new directions crucial to the future of our nation.

Improving our schools, building a world class NBN, creating a modern early-learning infrastructure, tackling climate change, extending the principles of Medicare to disability, greater equality for women, and many other things.

The forward march of this Labor agenda may have been temporarily halted because the government failed to manage its time in office successfully.

But that agenda has not yet fully played itself out.

For me, there's an optimistic parallel here with the years 1975 to 1983.

When the Whitlam Government was defeated, it wasn't so much because of its program of reform but because of its management of reform. The things Whitlam introduced couldn't be consolidated without better political management.

But they couldn't be stopped either.

It was replaced by a government, led by Malcolm Fraser, which knew what it was against, but not what it was for.

Labor under a new generation was able to get its act together sufficiently quickly to take advantage of the lack of purpose in Fraser's administration and the deterioration that inevitably resulted.

My point is that the circumstances of Labor's 2013 loss of government do not necessarily forebode of a long time in opposition.

If Labor can learn the necessary lessons, it can be back in government sooner than many think.

The 2013 election may have been dominated by voters distaste for Labor's instability – the politics of the recent past.

But it did not resolve the big questions voters really want answered about the future.

Where is Australia headed?

Where will our economy and community be in 5, 10 and 20 years from now?

Where will the jobs of the future come from beyond the China mining boom?

Will I or my kids ever be able to afford to buy their own home?

Will our education, health, broad-band, roads and transport services help my family and my community get ahead - or will they leave me behind?

At the 2013 election the Liberal's won the past.

But they did not win the future.

This, in my view, remains the great opportunity for Bill Shorten and Labor in Opposition.

I opened with my mother and her telegram from Gough.

A cynic would say that Gough's message to my mum was probably received by a lot of other mums and dads too – I hope it was.

Perhaps an old Labor staffer like John Menadue or Race Matthews had the task of drafting those telegrams and dispatching them at the Post Office.

Similar or identical telegrams might be framed and lining the living room walls of retirees across Australia.

But the point is, the Labor Party, having learned the lessons of internal division and defeat in the 1960s, could speak to thousands and thousands of people like my mother in a way that touched them intellectually and emotionally because it was focussed on the big issues the nation wanted their politicians to solve.

Too many issues from the past six years of Labor in office remain unsolved for those issues to go away.

And, if like the Labor Party in previous times, Labor can talk about those issues instead of talking about itself, it will reach out and energise the Gen-X and Gen-Y versions of my mum and dad.

The telegram may have been replaced by e-mail, the internet and social media, but achieving that goal of making Labor's message personal, immediate and deeply meaningful to Labor's supporters once again, is the task we must set ourselves for the next few years.

I want to close by thanking the many thousands of people who worked on and contributed to Labor's campaign.

But especially the staff at the ALP National Secretariat.

I particularly want to acknowledge the work and leadership of - ALP Assistant Secretaries Nathan Lambert and Nick Martin, Director of Digital Skye Laris, Seb Zwalf, Sandy Rippingale and Dennis Perry, Brigid Lever and Kate Dykes and of course Bernie Shaw – thank you.

And finally to my wife Susana and our daughter Maria – it's been a bumpy ride at times over the past 3 years – but I am so grateful to have travelled it with both of you.

Thank you.

[Ends.]