

# Revealing accolades for ex-Australian Labor Party leader Simon Crean

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27 June 2023

Truly extraordinary tributes have been paid to Simon Crean, an ex-leader of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Labor Party, who died on the weekend, aged 74, while leading a business delegation to Germany.

Significantly, former Liberal-National Coalition prime ministers, as well as Labor Party and trade union leaders, have lionised Crean as a “giant” of the “labour movement” and a “servant” of the nation.

The accolades are a measure of the critical services that Crean and his fellow Labor and union bureaucrats have performed, particularly in suppressing the struggles of the working class and imposing the endless “restructuring” dictates of the ruling class since the 1980s.

Noticeably, the compliments were tinged with some anxiety. “His loss will be keenly felt throughout the broad labour movement, to which he dedicated so much of his life,” former Coalition Prime Minister John Howard said. Tony Abbott, another widely reviled right-wing figure, said he would remember Crean as an “admirable man” who gave his party and the workers of Australia “fine service.” Likewise, today’s Coalition leader Peter Dutton said he was shocked and saddened by the news. “Simon was a gentleman to deal with and a giant of the Labor movement,” he said.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said Crean would be missed enormously, saying: “Simon Crean gave a lifetime of service to his nation, and in particular to the labour movement.” Albanese announced that Crean would be afforded a state funeral. An editorial in the *Australian* on Tuesday concluded: “Mr Crean left his mark and will be sorely missed.”

There was a sense of foreboding that the Labor Party and the political establishment are bereft of such figures today, amid an escalating danger of a US-triggered world war and rising working-class discontent and struggles globally, who could replicate the political role played by Crean and others over the past four decades.

Despite being hailed variously as a “thinker” and man of principle, Crean was not a substantial figure, intellectually or politically. He was a life-long union and Labor careerist and factional hack who later became, as most of them do, a corporate business figure.

Crean never attracted popular support. In fact, he had the

dubious distinction of being the only Labor leader never to survive long enough to contest a federal election. He lasted just two years, from 2001 to 2003, before being replaced by Mark Latham, a fervent right-winger who later took Labor’s nationalist perspective to its logical end by joining Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigrant and anti-welfare One Nation.

Nevertheless, despite being discarded as leader, Crean’s role was highly valued in Labor and ruling circles. He was a cabinet minister in no less than four Labor governments, those of Bob Hawke (1983 to 1991), Paul Keating (1991 to 1996), Kevin Rudd (2007 to 2010) and Julia Gillard (2010 to 2013).

Crean played a significant role, as an ACTU leader, in helping impose the corporatist prices and incomes Accords on workers under the Hawke-Keating Labor government in the 1980s, and while Labor leader, in seeking to head off the mass opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

More than anything else, Crean epitomised the union-Labor bureaucracy in its commitment to defending the interests of Australian capitalism and its hostility to the fight for socialism. He was born into that milieu. He was the son of Frank Crean, who became deputy prime minister in the final months of the Whitlam Labor government of 1972 to 1975.

Largely on the back of that pedigree, after university Simon Crean quickly made his way up through the ranks of the Storeman and Packers Union hierarchy. At 30 years of age, he was installed as its national secretary from 1979 to 1985. He then became ACTU president, after already being the ACTU vice president since 1981.

As ACTU president until 1990, Crean performed a supporting part to Prime Minister Hawke and ACTU secretary Bill Kelty as they spearheaded the enforcement of the Accords and the “Australia Reconstructed” programs from 1983 onward. This regime, imposed predominately through the destruction of workers’ factory organisations, drove down real wages, eliminated tens of thousands of jobs, slashed working conditions and suppressed strikes in the name of making Australian capitalism “competitive” under the new conditions of the globalisation of production.

To inflict this brutal pro-business restructuring program, Hawke and Kelty relied on a close partnership with the union “lefts” and Communist Party Stalinists, such as ACTU assistant

secretary Laurie Carmichael. But they also worked in tandem with the right-wing union enforcers, personified by Crean.

Subsequently, Crean was rewarded with Labor Party preselection for a seat in parliament, which he entered in 1990, to be almost immediately hoisted by Hawke into cabinet.

After Labor's landslide defeat in 1996, and another in 1998, Crean eventually became deputy party leader to Kim Beazley. After a further electoral disaster in 2001, Crean was elevated to party leader. He proved incapable, however, of delivering on his promise to "modernise" Labor by purging it of the control of union-based factional powerbrokers. He suffered a humiliating defeat on his plan at a special party rules conference in 2002.

In the wake of his death, Crean's political role and position on the criminal US-led war against Iraq has been totally rewritten and falsified. In February 2003, more than 10 million people worldwide joined protests against the planned US invasion, including well over half a million in Australia—the largest in history.

In an effort to divert the anti-war upsurge back behind Labor and into the blind alley of trying to pressure capitalist governments to change course, Crean opposed the Howard Coalition government's decision to join the invasion without the cover of a United Nations mandate. At the same time, Crean and Labor declared that Iraq had to be "disarmed"—endorsing the lies that it possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and emphasising Labor's readiness to support the war as soon as some kind of UN rubberstamp was secured.

Crean was jeered and shouted down when he advanced this position at a mass demonstration in Brisbane, having been invited to speak by the protest organisers. Any doubt about Labor's backing for the war, and its ongoing commitment to the US military alliance, was dispelled several weeks later when he declared on Australian Broadcasting Corporation television on March 23, 2003:

"The government's decision to commit them [the troops] was wrong but we've got to be realistic about this. They are there, and what we've got to hope for, in the current circumstances, is that their task is completed quickly and successfully."

The truth was that if Labor had been in office in 2003, it would have functioned in the same criminal manner as the Howard government. In 1990, the Hawke Labor government, including Crean, had been among the first in the world to back the first US Gulf War invasion of Iraq and commit Australian forces to it.

Before and after the 2003 invasion, Labor has supported, or directly participated in, every war conducted by US imperialism—from Afghanistan and Iraq to Ukraine—as well as the Howard government's neo-colonial intervention in East Timor.

Beset by poor polling and factional infighting, Crean was dumped as Labor leader toward the end of 2003. But he remained on Labor's frontbench and was a cabinet minister

under Rudd and Gillard, who signed up to the Obama administration's anti-China military and strategic "pivot" to Asia and joined Obama's criminal troop "surge" in Afghanistan. Today, the Albanese Labor government has fully committed the country to joining a US war against China to maintain American hegemony over the Indo-Pacific.

Crean died in Berlin while on another mission on behalf of the Australian corporate elite. He was leading a delegation as chairman of the European Australian Business Council, a peak body of large Australian and European companies. He was also chair of the Australia-Korea Business Council, a similar grouping "supporting the commercial success of Australian businesses entering the Korean market."

Like most other union and Labor bureaucrats, after quitting parliament in 2013, Crean displayed his true class colours by taking up various corporate posts, including as a board member of trucking company Linfox and chair of the Australian Livestock Exporters Council, championing the live export of cattle to Asian markets.

This was further payment for services rendered by him to the capitalist class.

The ruling class eulogies to Crean seek to camouflage his real role in the union bureaucracy and Labor Party as a policeman for the ruling class against workers and to prepare for the greater assaults with which his political descendants are tasked.

The lesson for workers and young people is the necessity for the building of an alternative political party and program. That is the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International, which fights for the overturn of global capitalism and for its replacement with international socialism, based on meeting the social needs for all, not feeding corporate profit for the wealthy few.



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