

# Australian establishment pays tribute to ruthless Labor powerbroker

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Tributes have poured in from across the official political spectrum following the death on November 8 of former Labor Party powerbroker, political fixer and bagman Graham Richardson at the age of 76. Richardson is to be accorded a rare state funeral organised by the federal Labor government.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was among those lauding Richardson, hailing him as a “Labor legend.” He told Sky News that Richardson was loyal, insightful and a close friend. Albanese was joined by two right-wing ex-prime ministers—Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison—from the opposition Liberal Party, who also spoke warmly of their friendship with Richardson. Former Greens leader Bob Brown joined the praise.

How can this effusive affection be explained? Richardson was known only as a Machiavellian Labor Party numbers man and utterly ruthless factional brawler for the powerful Right faction of Labor’s branch in the most-populous state, New South Wales (NSW).

Richardson’s title for his 1994 autobiography, “Whatever it Takes,” sums up his entire political career and persona. In it he bragged of his record of enforcing, by any and every means, the requirements of Labor’s right-wing machine, and Labor governments, at the state and federal level.

Richardson is feted because of the essential role that he played behind the scenes in keeping the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating in power federally from 1983 to 1996. That period is widely regarded in ruling circles as the golden era of pro-market reform, in which Labor rammed through the anti-working class agenda identified with US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Richardson was born in 1949 and grew up in a period of political upheaval in Australia and internationally in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Broad layers of youth were being radicalised by hostility to long years of conservative Coalition rule, to its lack of social reforms, to conscription and to sending troops to the Vietnam War.

Richardson, the son of a postal union bureaucrat, joined the Labor Party in 1966 at the age of 17. From the outset, however, Richardson rejected any identification with socialism and embraced a career in the overtly pro-business, anti-communist NSW Right faction. At the age of 22, he dropped his university studies to become a party official in 1971.

He came under the wing of two key figures. One was the Right faction boss, John Ducker, who dominated both the NSW Labor Council, the state’s top union body, and the state Labor Party. The other was Bob Hawke, who had become the president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 1969.

As documents later showed, both Ducker and Hawke were among a multitude of Labor and union informers for the US embassy and the CIA. Moreover, Ducker was an informant to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency.

Ducker was a vehement anti-communist, a veteran of factional battles against the Labor “lefts” and Stalinists who led many of the main industrial unions in the 1960s and 1970s. Hawke was no less right-wing,

but in his rise to ACTU president he cultivated support among Stalinist and left Labor union bureaucrats.

A year after Richardson became a party official, Labor under Gough Whitlam won the 1972 federal election with the backing of sections of the ruling class to stem the rising tide of anti-war sentiment and working-class rebellion.

Whitlam ended conscription, withdrew troops from Vietnam and implemented various social reforms. However, amid a deep global economic crisis and soaring inflation, the Labor government, in response to a massive upsurge of strikes over wages and conditions, resorted to austerity measures.

Amid growing fears in ruling circles in Australia and internationally that the Labor government was incapable of containing that movement of the working class, the opposition headed by Liberal leader Malcolm Fraser blocked supply—that is, budget finances—in October 1975, precipitating an acute political crisis.

With the backing of British and US imperialism, Governor-General John Kerr, the representative of the British Crown, used his extraordinary reserve powers to remove Whitlam from office on November 11, 1975 and install Fraser as prime minister.

Hawke played a critical role, together with other union leaders, including those from the Labor Right, but particularly the “lefts” and Stalinists of the Communist Party of Australia, in quelling the explosive workers’ struggles in the lead up to, during and after the Canberra Coup by diverting popular anger into a new parliamentary election.

The Fraser Coalition government took office in 1975, but was deeply hated by the working class. Fraser attempted to begin the process of pro-market reform, yet also proved incapable of holding back workers’ struggles against the attacks on wages, jobs and conditions. Over the next eight years, the Labor Party shifted sharply to the right as the Fraser government floundered and Labor prepared for office.

Richardson shot to prominence in the immediate aftermath of the Canberra Coup and played a crucial role in consolidating the Right faction’s dominance within the party. Having earned a reputation in the sordid factional infighting in NSW Labor, Richardson was installed by Ducker first as assistant state secretary, then as state secretary, after he managed Labor’s successful NSW election campaign in May 1976.

Richardson became known as the enforcer of the Right faction, which engaged in factional warfare against the Left with the help of organised crime figures. In July 1980, the bashing of Peter Baldwin, a Labor Left state MP, made national news with his severely battered face featured frontpage. While Richardson denied involvement, he presided over a party machine that encouraged such political gangsterism.

## Richardson’s role in the Hawke-Keating governments

In 1983, on the eve of a federal election, with the discredited Fraser government facing certain defeat, Richardson delivered the numbers inside Labor's parliamentary caucus to dump party leader Bill Hayden, who was essentially a holdover from the Whitlam government, in favour of Hawke.

The Labor Party had drawn the political lesson from the Canberra Coup that it had to have a mechanism to suppress opposition in the working class to its agenda. Hawke as ACTU president was notorious for suppressing and selling out strikes and had been crucial in stemming the eruption of anger over the sacking of Whitlam.

Hawke, who had only entered parliament in 1980, laid out a blueprint for what was to become the Prices and Incomes Accord partnership with the ACTU and the union bureaucracy, including the Labor "left" and Stalinist bureaucrats, to suppress strikes.

At the same 1983 election, at the age of 33, Richardson secured his own elevation on the NSW Labor ticket into the Senate. With his factional power and corporate support, he helped keep the Hawke government in office as it went on the offensive, aided by the unions, against workers' jobs, basic rights, and conditions.

Hawke, with Keating as treasurer, worked hand-in-glove with the trade unions to impose the global "free market" program of real wage cuts, industrial job destruction and privatisation. Through a series of corporatist Accords, Labor and the unions imposed sacrifices on workers to try to make Australian capitalism "globally competitive" under conditions of globalised production.

The leaders of the Left faction, out of which Albanese emerged in the 1980s, played a crucial role in inflicting the attacks of the Labor governments. In control of key industrial trade unions, they sought to appease the discontent in the working class by formally opposing some of the measures of the Hawke-Keating government, such as the privatisation of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank.

Their show of resistance was a sham, however. The Left leaders refused to take up a political struggle in the working class against the government's policies. Instead, their "fight" consisted of posturing and moving motions at party conferences, knowing full well that the Right had engineered a majority and would vote them down. In practice, they struck power-sharing deals with their right-wing foes.

Richardson, along with other Right faction leaders, including Robert Ray in Victoria and Brian Burke in Western Australia, was instrumental in this sleazy backroom wheeling and dealing within Labor. He played a similar role in the Senate where Labor lacked a majority in securing the passage of legislation. As bagman for Labor, Richardson cultivated relations with the wealthy corporate elite and secured substantial donations to fund its election campaigns.

As workers became increasingly disillusioned with and hostile to the Hawke government, Richardson played a critical function in ensuring it stayed in office as Labor's vote slumped.

In 1988, Hawke appointed Richardson as environment minister. Richardson had not the slightest concern over climate change and the environment. The primary purpose of his appointment was to strike deals with Bob Brown, then the leader of the embryonic Greens, as well as the Australian Democrats, to allocate their preference votes to Labor.

These preference votes allowed the Hawke government to cling to office at the 1990 election, despite winning only 40 percent of the primary vote. In his tribute to Richardson, Brown absurdly painted Richardson as a champion of "wildlife and nature." More to the point, he praised "Richardson's political savvy in repeatedly garnering green votes in the environmentally charged Australian electorate."

Richardson's deal with Brown set a precedent. It began the process of establishing the place of the Greens in the parliamentary corridors of power, shoring up Labor governments and the capitalist political system as a whole, even as the corporate profit-driven climate disaster intensified

across Australia and internationally.

After the narrow 1990 win, Hawke appointed Richardson as social security minister. In that capacity, despite today's efforts in the media to depict Richardson as a kind-hearted defender of the poor, he implemented a witch hunt against welfare recipients. His data-matching regime between the social security department and the tax office, aimed against so-called welfare "cheats" and "overpayments," was part of an offensive to drive people off welfare and provide cheap labour for employers.

Richardson was not satisfied with being social security minister, however. He had sought the transport and communications portfolio, due to his close relations with billionaire media magnates such as Kerry Packer. During 1990, Richardson shifted his numbers to Paul Keating, who advocated even deeper attacks on workers to satisfy the financial markets and accused Hawke of baulking at the hard decisions, branding him "old jellyback."

Richardson played a deceptive role. After Keating's initial failed bid to topple Hawke in June 1991, Richardson assured Hawke of his support while conspiring to finally oust Hawke in December 1991. He later boasted, in "Whatever it Takes," of how he had deceived Hawke into thinking that he was backing him.

Keating intensified the assault on the working class, working closely with union leaders through the imposition of enterprise bargaining laws that prohibit industrial action outside of union-controlled bargaining periods.

In return for his help in ousting Hawke, Keating gave Richardson his eagerly sought portfolio of transport and communications. Richardson's cosy relationship with Packer earned him the nickname "the Minister for Channel Nine."

Richardson was forced to resign from the ministry in May 1992, however, after revelations he used his position and influence on behalf of a cousin by marriage who had been arrested in the Marshall Islands over a migration scam. Information also emerged about Richardson's lucrative friendship with a prominent stockbroker, Rene Rivkin.

Nevertheless, after the Keating government's election win in 1993, Richardson was promptly returned to cabinet, this time as health minister. In that role, he introduced measures to subsidise private health insurance for those who could afford the hefty premiums to avoid lengthy waiting times in the public Medicare system.

A year later, after facing further allegations of corruption, Richardson retired from parliament in 1994, citing ill health. Those allegations included the 1993 incineration of the Offset Alpine printing plant in Sydney, in which Richardson, in cahoots with Rivkin, was a secret shareholder. The plant had been insured for three times its value.

Widely hated in the working class, the Keating Labor government lost office in 1996 after the Liberal-National Coalition, under right-wing, pro-market figure John Howard, won the election. Howard, however, simply extended the anti-working class measures for which the Hawke and Keating governments had laid the groundwork.

Richardson never returned to parliament but continued to play a powerful role behind the scenes in determining positions and policies in the Labor party. He was sought out and well rewarded for his services as a business lobbyist, corporate consultant and media commentator. He wrote weekly columns for the Murdoch media's flagship newspaper, the *Australian*, and hosted programs on Murdoch's right-wing Sky News.

In 2020, the Morrison Coalition government made Richardson an Officer of the Order of Australia, one of the highest official honours, for "distinguished service of a high degree." Such was the value of his service to the capitalist ruling class.

Today the entire political order that Richardson epitomised is in a historic crisis. After years of bitter experiences, active working-class support for Labor and the unions has disintegrated. Labor's primary vote has slumped to about one-third and union membership has shrunk to

around 13 percent.

The factional divisions of Right and Left have become completely meaningless. Albanese, from the NSW Left, has no difficulty hailing Richardson, the right-wing powerbroker, as a friend. All factions have come together to implement the ruling-class agenda of war preparations and austerity, which, amid the profound crisis of the Liberal-National Coalition, is heavily dependent, at this point, on the Albanese Labor government.

Across the corporate media following his death, Richardson has generally been portrayed as a likeable rogue. He was in fact a ruthless political operator and Labor bureaucrat who, by his own admission, did “whatever it takes,” not only to advance his own career, power and wealth, but to refashion the Labor Party into an instrument of social regression and war.



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