

From industrial playpen to Labor big time - Australian, The /Weekend Australian, The /Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - May 21, 2016 - page 11

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The plan, as those close to them agree, was for David Feeney to be to **Bill Shorten** what political fixer Graham Richardson was to Bob Hawke.

Fuelled by their collective ambition, the young stars of the Labor movement in Victoria in the 1990s had remarkably similar templates for rising to the top: race through the student and industrial arms of the Labor movement before grabbing a seat in federal parliament. Along the way, **Shorten's** path would take him through the union law firm Maurice Blackburn, where Feeney's wife, Liberty Sanger, remains a principal.

It's a well-trodden route paralleled at "Maurie B's" great rival, Slater & Gordon, where former prime minister Julia Gillard and Labor frontbencher Richard Marles cut their teeth.

For so many of the rising stars in Labor, the path has been the same. A degree (preferably at Melbourne or Monash University and hopefully law), time served at a factionally influential union and then relentless pursuit of the numbers needed to get a seat and stay in parliament.

For **Shorten**, the giddy dream of the prime ministership is now a lot closer to reality than any long-term, grand ambitions Feeney might have held. Mired in controversy over his extensive property holdings, and facing a cashed-up and clever assault from the Greens in Batman, Feeney is fighting for his political life.

Revelations this week about a \$2.3 million house that Feeney and his wife owned but failed to declare — and an investment property he declared but bought off disgraced unionist Kathy Jackson — opened up the extent to which Victorian Labor is so tightly interconnected in ways that are not replicated in any other state.

Feeney cuts a forlorn figure schlepping round the train stations of the leftist enclave of Northcote, stumping for votes in his suit (no tie) and red campaign baseball cap. "He looks like an old man on a disco floor; he looks so uncomfortable," said one source .

Amid swirling reports of his failure to disclose his property holdings, back at the house in Batman he forgot to declare Feeney's tenants have erected a Greens poster in the front yard.

Defence of his dealings has been left to his wife. On a regular radio slot, she complained yesterday about the "victimisation" of having their financial affairs splashed across the pages of daily newspapers, though acknowledging Feeney had "stuffed up".

Shorten, meanwhile, crisscrosses the country leading a campaign where he is potentially weeks away from fulfilling his goal to become prime minister.

Some who have known both men for a long time say they always felt **Shorten** would go further in life. But that wasn't immediately clear when Feeney moved across from Adelaide and got involved in student and ALP politics at university, where he quickly immersed himself in political, social and academic life.

Shorten was already a leading light within Labor at Monash University, later rounding off his studies at Melbourne University. Both ruthlessly ambitious, **Shorten** and Feeney instinctively clashed, according to others involved.

It was a time that produced a remarkable grouping of talent in Labor Right circles at both universities. Martin Pakula, now Victorian Attorney-General, and a band of like-minded souls including former state treasurer Tim Holding and for a time, **Shorten**, were part of a right-wing grouping called the Network, a closeknit, almost cult-like political organisation, according to its critics.

Feeney, who with his blend of caustic wit and cynicism better fits the role of rebel or outsider, instinctively opposed both the Networkers and **Shorten** until, in an almost-forgotten tale, they went bush on a kayaking weekend and emerged "thick as thieves". **Shorten** fished Feeney from the water after he fell out of his kayak, is how one player recalls it.

Before long Feeney had established his own group, Centre Forum, and **Shorten** cut ties with the Network and joined Feeney, along with a band of sympathisers bent on bigger and better things.

"**Bill** asserted his right to lead Young Labor," is how one participant remembers it. "We were fighting the Left, but we were also fighting each other." The world of student politics was never going to be big enough to contain the pair's ambitions and egos for long and in the 1990s both shifted to the time-honoured ALP training ground of the union movement, where with then ACTU assistant secretary Richard Marles, they would become the Three Amigos of Victorian Labor.

Before joining the AWU, **Shorten** did a stint working with Maurice Blackburn, which has also served as a stepping stone for the careers of **Shorten's** former partner Nicola Roxon, current MP Terri Butler and former federal minister **John** Button.

Further down the track, Maurice Blackburn would be another tie binding **Shorten** and Feeney. **Shorten**, by then Victorian head of the Australian Workers Union, a Maurice Blackburn client, is said to have pressed the firm's then head, **John Cain jnr** (son of former Victorian premier **John Cain**) to make Sanger a partner.

Through the 1990s, as **Shorten** revived the moribund AWU, his star would continue rising in parallel Marles' (making his mark at the Transport Workers Union, then the ACTU as assistant) and his now close friend, Feeney.

"We were all as thick as thieves for a long time," says one insider. "There were dinners at each other's houses and holidays together," one leading player recalls.

Shorten has always surrounded himself with successful people, most highly educated, unionists, Labor and more often than not a combination of all three. He did not live a life of privilege as a child

— nor has he necessarily surrounded himself with privileged people — but his mother Ann's determination that he get a good education was the catalyst for his future.

Before Monash, **Shorten** and his twin brother Robert were educated at Xavier College, at the time was Victoria's pre-eminent Catholic school. There he made lifelong friendships with would-be journalists, conservative power players and lawyers-in-waiting. Feeney, meanwhile, was off centre stage in Adelaide (saddled with the nickname "Feeney with the Beanie" and flirting with Left-wing politics, according to some who knew him) until at 19 he moved to Melbourne.

It was there he met Sanger in the early 90s. She was a uni student and he was Labor organiser working on a by-election in the inner-Melbourne seat of Wills.

"He took me out to the streets of Coburg - a girl from Wodonga who had never been to Coburg before - he dumped me on the streets with a map and some pamphlets. I had no idea where I was ... and he left me there until well after dark," Sanger later told the Herald Sun. It wasn't an instant match but Feeney did eventually charm her.

They married in 2002, when Sanger was moving up the ladder at Maurice Blackburn and he was making his name as a party powerbroker.

In Victoria, as Feeney and **Shorten** climbed through the ranks, they would also carve out an alliance with Stephen Conroy, who stepped into senator Robert Ray's shoes to become the real power in the Victorian ALP Right. The **Shorten-Conroy** alliance has endured through rough moments and is now referred to as the ShortCon bloc.

Feeney, recognising he lacked an industrial powerbase of his own, reignited ties with the colourful couple at the head of the Health Services Union, the now disgraced Jeff and Kathy Jackson. Feeney had been close to Kathy Jackson in their university days. These links would later be the source of bitter tensions between the two men.

Feeney had tasted success as a campaigner, taking over the leadership of the party in Victoria as state secretary, putting the icing on the cake baked by his predecessor **John Lenders** in winning the 1999 state election over Kennett. But the seemingly unstoppable rise of the Three Amigos hit its first bump in 2002 when ALP national president and National Union of Workers leader Greg Sword took his union out of the Right and into an alliance with the Left. That would cost **Shorten** the Victorian party presidency and Feeney the state secretary's post. The many enemies they had accumulated while rocketing upwards cheered long and loud.

Those volcanic splits and power plays made Victoria the party's most Balkanised branch. More trouble loomed when Pakula replaced Sword at the head of the NUW and brought the union back into line with the Right. The move allowed **Shorten** to challenge successfully for the seat of Maribyrnong, Pakula to unsuccessfully contest Simon Crean for Hotham and Marles to win Corio.

Feeney, under the game plan, was to take the number one Senate spot for the upcoming election, but in the hurly burly of fights, scheming and machinations, he was somehow relegated to the dicey number three position. For reasons difficult to unpick completely, Feeney is thought by many to have blamed **Shorten**.

"The deal to come back to the Right was that the Network would eventually get Hotham. **Bill** said to Pakula why not kill Simon now?" a source said.

"He (David) blamed **Bill** for encouraging Marty to run and the whole deal falling over." While Feeney pondered his misfortune, the Jacksons' attacks on **Shorten**, to anyone who would listen, became ever more virulent.

"Jackson started attacking **Bill** and David would defend her," a source said. "When the corruption started coming out, he kept defending her. They were direct conflicts between them over the Jacksons with him defending her and **Bill** regarding her as a cancer." Later on, in 2008, the Jacksons' assault on ShortCon-aligned state secretary Stephen Newnham would set the scene for the next great Victorian realignment: the 2009 formation of the Stability Pact that united the Left and Right majorities, freezing out Feeney's forces and the SDA group.

Back in April 2006, the Beaconsfield mine disaster had put **Shorten** squarely on the agenda as a future Labor leader. He had been flown to Tasmania on packaging king Dick Pratt's jet to steal the show during an agonising wait for the rescue of two surviving miners, who were AWU members.

Shorten, who has always been a relentless networker, met his first wife Deborah Beale when they were studying business degrees, just as Jeff Kennett was about to be ejected from office in Victoria. They also shared a connection through the billionaire Pratt, who astutely walked both sides of the political street and was close to Beale's father, Julian, a former Liberal MP.

When **Shorten** and Beale parted ways, it caused deep angst within the (mainly Right wing) Victorian Labor family. She was highly regarded not only by subsequent premiers Brumby and Brack, but their wives as well.

"Deb was very much part of the gang and was always going to remain a part of the gang, but loyalties do run deeper than marriages," one Labor insider said.

By the end of 2007, Feeney, while unhappy at his shaky grip on longevity through the Senate ticket imbroglio, was at least in federal parliament and ensconced in red leather for six years. He was soon back in the spotlight in a negative sense as one of the "faceless" men — along with **Shorten** — involved in convincing Julia Gillard to depose Kevin Rudd. They were later, reluctantly conscripted to help depose Gillard.

With the 2013 election looming and the third spot looking perilous, he engineered a shift to the lower house seat of Batman, once a Labor stronghold held by Martin Ferguson.

Demographic change and soaring incomes and house prices have turned much of the seat into a Greens enclave, and the party, recognising the impact of the housing scandal and the Liberal threats to preference the Greens, is pessimistic about him holding on.

"He looks f..ked; in fact he is f..ked. He treats the seat like it is the safest in the country," one insider said. "It's f...ing not. He's a creature of the machine and we need to move on from those days." One former ally concurs. "He wanted to be Richo to **Bill's** Hawke. Instead he is stuck in this

quagmire of Batman where even if he was a good MP he might lose the seat. He's surrounded by savages in hemp shirts and nose rings." Meanwhile, Feeney's relationship with Shorten, never the same since the Senate preselection, remains delicate, even before Feeney's property portfolio missteps derailed the Labor leader's campaign for several days.

"It's a working relationship, but there is a fair bit of reserve and distance there," said one insider. "One of the blocks to it is Feeney keeps making incursions into Conroy's portfolio of defence. Conroy is very tired of him." Factionally, Feeney remains isolated, with the ShortCons and Kim Carr and the rest of the Left poised to re-ink the stability pact. Feeney's allies prefer to see the situation as Shorten and others looking after their own interests in a way that was captured in the Hawke era by the Redgum song The Drover's Dog: "There's only room for one dog here. I'll piddle on your head if you get too near."

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