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How **Bill Shorten** went from little-known union boss to potential Labor leader thanks to a mine collapse, rich friends and razor-sharp political skills Union leader **Bill Shorten's** role at Beaconsfield attracted national attention. Many believe his ambition now is to be the next Labor prime minister, writes Brad Norington.

It was early evening on Sunday, April 30, when the Australian Workers Union boss, **Bill Shorten**, took an urgent phone call telling him that miners Todd Russell and Brant Webb had miraculously survived the Beaconsfield collapse. **Shorten** was excited by the news, but also frustrated - he'd only returned home to Melbourne from Tasmania that afternoon, convinced all was lost. At this hour there was no hope of getting a commercial flight back to Launceston.

But **Shorten** is nothing if not connected. He phoned Australia's third-richest man, Richard Pratt, the chief of cardboard empire Visy Industries, to ask a favour: "Can I use the jet, Dick?" Within two hours the man who wants to be your prime minister one day - and whom some dismiss as an outrageous self-promoter - was aboard the billionaire's \$50 million, 16-seat Bombardier corporate jet en route to Beaconsfield. **Shorten** was desperate to get back. "The idea that men could survive underground for five days was a miracle."

Over the next nine days of the rescue, **Bill Shorten** would become the public face of the year's biggest news story. And even though he was already assured of entering parliament at next year's federal election in a safe Labor seat, it was Beaconsfield and his role in it - Labor leader Kim Beazley dubbed **Shorten** the "nation's interpreter" - that launched his political career on a trajectory most neophytes only dream about. More than two weeks after that fateful call to Pratt, and with miners Webb and Russell safely at home, Sydney's Daily Telegraph led its May 16 edition with the headline: "BILL FOR PM." Suddenly **Bill Shorten** was no longer a largely unknown ALP candidate. He was a contender. Not since Bob Hawke led the union movement in the 1970s has such a supremely ambitious, aspiring Labor politician attracted so much attention.

Of course, within Labor circles **Shorten's** name has been bandied about for some time as a leader-in-waiting. Supporters of the 39-year-old say he is the talented and articulate populist Labor needs if it is to woo back voters after a decade in the wilderness. Hawke, **Shorten's** role model, is a fan. He even sang at **Shorten's** union gala ball in Melbourne last October. Queensland Premier Peter Beattie enthuses about his "communication skills"; Victorian Premier Steve Bracks says he has "plenty of talent and a great political career ahead of him";

NSW Premier Morris Iemma rates him "a potential leader"; while Beazley concedes he has "the Hawke strand", saying: "I've known **Bill Shorten** for a long time, he's an inspirational bloke." Even Prime Minister **John Howard** has described **Shorten** as "a future Labor luminary".

The man himself is dismissive of all this. "Some of the hype about me becoming a senior Labor politician is just that - hype," says **Shorten**, as we drive through country Victoria on a "see how I

work" trip (before the Beaconsfield mining accident) to visit regional union members. "I've been relentless in promoting the union, giving it a higher profile."

What about the Hawke comparisons? "I don't think I'm Bob Hawke," he says disarmingly. "I think there's plenty of other smart people." But surely he enjoys the attention? "I need to be liked, I need to be busy," he says. "But being a union official means you're inevitably not going to be liked by somebody. Not being liked doesn't cripple me. There are very few days I feel like not getting out of bed and pulling the doona over my head."

In fact, most days there's a spring in **Shorten's** step. And, given his current profile, why not? After all, he is the politician from central casting. He already speaks in media grabs and is cultivating the look, having shed a few kilos and undergone laser surgery to correct his vision - with the cosmetic bonus that he no longer needs glasses.

But was he, as detractors have speculated, smart enough to see the potential of the Beaconsfield catastrophe, positioning himself to be the face of the story? **Shorten** insists that he could not foresee what would happen. He was in Canada on Anzac Day when the disaster happened, and flew to the mine immediately, believing, like many, that he probably faced a tragic recovery operation, not a stretched-out rescue - especially after miner Larry Knight's body was discovered on the third day. "This is what I do. Being a union official means putting in the time and always turning up. This is not about me."

In person, **Shorten** is funny, engaging, likeable. He appears happiest when the conversation centres on him, but is genuinely interested in others. He treats colleagues well and commands remarkable loyalty. But his attention span can be brief and at times he gets moody. (He's known to throw the occasional tantrum). Even some of his closest political admirers observe that while he's "intelligent, hard-working, articulate and educated", he can be "insufferably egotistical - it comes with the territory - and he's not as attentive to detail as he might be".

Shorten's fondness for his hi-tech mobile phone is legendary. Sometimes it seems permanently glued to his ear, and he uses it like a toy to search the internet. One of his favourite pastimes is to play a game in which he asks companions what world figures, living or dead, they would invite to dinner if the choice were completely open. "I think it tells a lot about people," he explains, shortly before we arrive at Esso's headquarters in Sale, Victoria, to be greeted by jovial union members calling out: "When are you going to be PM, **Bill**?"

Who would **Shorten** choose to dine with? "Winston Churchill and Roosevelt, Truman or Kennedy," is his reply. "They are very strong people and not afraid to have an opinion."

While he knows how to dish it out to opponents and loves publicity, **Shorten** is ultra-sensitive about what is said about him. Some supporters call it "**Shorten's** glass jaw", a potentially fatal weakness for a politician. Ron McCallum, one of **Shorten's** lecturers in the 1980s at Monash University, believes his former student will find the Canberra hothouse much tougher than unions. "Politics is a hard school where you cannot afford to take criticism personally," says McCallum, now dean of law at the University of Sydney, who still occasionally catches up with **Shorten**. "And he will have to come to grips with that."

Shorten has had no trouble moving between different worlds in the past. Though he has worked his way up the ladder of Australia's oldest and most right-wing blue-collar union, he was educated at Xavier College, one of Melbourne's most exclusive private schools and started his career as a lawyer. Not only that, he is married to Deborah Beale, the daughter of a rich former Liberal MP from Toorak, Julian Beale. And, like Hawke, he's close to a number of wealthy businessmen, including Pratt, who admits to being something of a **Shorten** mentor and will happily sing his praises.

Pratt says he met **Shorten** through very good friends: the young union leader's in-laws, Julian and Felicity Beale. "From the outset he struck me as being very intelligent, focused and articulate, and in line for bigger things," says Pratt, who believes **Shorten's** ability to mix in business and union circles should be an asset, adding: "He has the vision and the drive that sets the best leaders apart."

The billionaire denies he is financing **Shorten's** political career, but confirms he has helped several times with fund-raising events. These include making his lavish Melbourne home, Raheen, available to **Shorten** for dinners with Beazley and South Australian Premier Mike Rann. **Shorten's** engagement party was also held at Raheen.

When **Shorten** gave his first address to the National Press Club in 2002, Pratt travelled to Canberra to witness it. The relationship appears unaffected by recent investigations into alleged price-fixing involving Pratt's company. "I get on well with him," **Shorten** says. "I don't always see eye to eye with him on politics, but he's accomplished a lot whatever you think of him."

Mutual affection aside, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the relationship with Pratt has been most beneficial to **Shorten**: it has helped to present him as the reasonable face of the union movement and given him access to business leaders. Even conservative commentator Gerard Henderson has described **Shorten** as -"impressive". **John Roskam**, one of **Shorten's** best mates from schooldays and now executive director of the anti-union Institute of Public Affairs, explains: "The business world loves celebrity and to be close to power."

ALL OF THIS IS GIDDY STUFF for a man on the political make. But if it threatens to cost **Shorten** perspective, Deborah Beale, his effervescent, devoted wife, will be there to bring him back to Earth.

Beale was a futures dealer for Merrill Lynch when she met **Shorten**, and now consults for Ernst & Young on corporate governance. She declined to be interviewed by The Weekend Australian Magazine, but she knows she may be merely delaying the media spotlight if her husband goes as far as he hopes.

The couple met at Melbourne Business School in August 1999, when they were both studying for MBAs. ("I was getting the hang of being a union official - I had a law degree but a weakness in formal business training, so I needed to put myself through it," says **Shorten**.) He and Beale hit it off immediately, becoming engaged after just two weeks and marrying in March 2000. "Why muck around?" says **Shorten**. "If you know, you know." They would like to have children, but so far have lucked out.

At times **Shorten** has appeared to delight in people's fascination with an upcoming Labor star

marrying the daughter of a well-connected Liberal. Indeed, they make a glamorous couple - politically speaking. But **Shorten** is testy nonetheless when questioned about how his relationship can possibly work. "There is something the media never pick up," he told the ABC's Barrie Cassidy. "Why do they assume my wife has her father's politics?"

Julian Beale remembers when his independent-minded daughter came home and told her parents about the new man in her life: "She said, 'He's got a lot going for him but you may not like his politics', and I thought 'Hello!'" But Beale was impressed when he met **Shorten**, and holds him in the highest regard. "The first thing on our minds is that **Bill** looks after our kid, and he's doing a terrific job," he says. "He's got what we Aussies admire - drive, ambition and dedication. He cares for people and he cares that people have a job, often at the expense of short-term gain."

Asked how **Shorten** handles his relationships across the political divide, Beale answers "very well", but believes the question is misleading: "If you heard the arguments I had with my Liberal colleagues, you'd realise there's a great deal in common." School chum Roskam observes: "**Bill** doesn't hate business. He understands that business creates jobs and employs his members."

Nonetheless, **Shorten's** connections confound many because they often seem so contradictory. At the same time as hobnobbing with wealthy businessmen such as his father-in-law, Pratt, Solomon Lew and Lindsay Fox, he represents working class unionists, many on low wages. **Shorten** attacks Coalition policies that, he says, "look after the interests of big business". He is highly critical of banks after a string of corporate collapses. "I've become sceptical about banks - one 26-year-old on a six-figure salary agrees to a loan, another says 'you owe too much' and closes it down," says **Shorten**. And he has had notable run-ins with BlueScope Steel chief executive Kirby Adams over damaging strikes - "He doesn't like me" - and with Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon over threats to send jobs overseas - "I don't want to see the flying kangaroo become the flying panda of China."

If **Shorten's** union tough-guy credentials were in any doubt, he was for some years close to Craig Johnston, the militant union left-winger who served a jail term for leading a violent rampage through a Melbourne workplace. **Shorten** was even part of a delegation on Johnston's behalf - a move he regrets in hindsight - that unsuccessfully urged Victorian Premier Bracks and ACTU secretary Greg Combet to soften their stance on Johnston.

Shorten says it is important to engage people, no matter what differences exist. But he insists his values come from his union heartland. "I look around at the treatment of people at work, so many smart people who - but for their opportunities in life - could be running their companies. So I hate seeing people held back because of their bank account or pedigree or what country they were born in. I hate seeing wasted potential."

WHILE THE FORMER Xavier College boy has enjoyed something of a dream run with the media, not all the publicity has been positive. In February, **Shorten** was caught up in factional brawling in the Victorian ALP as he sought pre-selection in the seat of Maribyrnong, endorsing attempts to oust six MPs including former party leader Simon Crean. Trumpeting a need for Labor "renewal", **Shorten** said: "If you had a team that had lost four grand finals, you wouldn't keep putting up the same team."

Those in the firing line saw it differently. "I hope that my withdrawal will act as a circuit breaker to get this nonsense fixed," spat Bob Sercombe, the Labor member for Maribyrnong, who stepped aside blaming "a series of sleazy deals" when it became clear **Shorten** had the numbers. "You see, this group of candidates, this cabal of candidates running against sitting members, really are essentially led by **Bill Shorten**."

The AWU Victorian and national secretary brushed aside the allegation. Crean, after surviving the attempted political assassination, later aimed his criticisms at Beazley and Labor senator Stephen Conroy, condemning "a rottenness in modern Labor".

Shorten was fortunate to have dodged Crean's bullets. After all, **Shorten** effectively controls the Victorian ALP after becoming its dominant force last December in a factional arrangement that also handed him the party's state presidency.

In Canberra, a line-up of jaded Labor politicians is already awaiting **Shorten's** arrival after the 2007 election, ready to slap him down if the brash young man dares think he can stroll into the party leadership without serving an apprenticeship - or bowing to more seasoned hopefuls such as Kevin Rudd or Julia Gillard.

Shorten detractors are reluctant to out themselves. Even Doug Cameron, a regular sparring partner from the rival left-wing Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, refused point blank to comment for this profile. But the general thrust of critics is that **Shorten** is a big talker, strong on media stunts and rehearsed quotes, but light on substance. They refer to him disparagingly as "the Messiah". Sercombe borrows from Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*: "He's not the Messiah ... he's just a naughty right-wing boy."

So where did the "**Shorten** for PM" rumour start? Some say it goes back to his Monash University days, spread by the man himself as he jostled with other egos in Young Labor politics. Says one close supporter: "If you ask me, I think it was **Bill**. I think he started it." According to this view, **Shorten** later encouraged a loyal clique of union insiders to spread the word and make sure it gained currency in the media. **Shorten** deflects such speculation, saying he intends to go to Canberra to do the best for people, not necessarily involving the leadership. "I don't know where it all started," he says. "If a tree falls, did we all hear it?"

What **Shorten** accepts is that he must stand for something to widen his appeal. When Howard introduced his hotly debated workplace legislation last year, **Shorten** was the most prominent voice of union opposition after ACTU secretary Combet. Since then he has taken a risk by speaking out on tax. Contrary to Labor policy, he advocates cutting the top marginal rate for high-income earners to just 30 cents in the dollar. The idea has some support, with **Shorten** claiming removal of "business tax rorts and business welfare" would pay for the cuts. But ALP critics say the policy would leave a gaping \$44 billion hole in revenue and favour the rich.

Shorten is undeterred. He insists the policy is affordable and that opponents ignore the second part of his proposal: to slash rates to 10 cents for low-income earners and 20 cents for the middle. "I think it's legitimate to put out ideas and discuss them," he says. "People are not saving enough for retirement, regional areas need more support, we have an unfair tax system, we are going to need policies for an ageing population and I believe in the power of education, but not all jobs are in

skilled areas." **Shorten** also believes Australia should sell more of its massive uranium stocks on the world market for nuclear power. And while opposing the US-led war in Iraq, he is a firm supporter of the US alliance and a proud member of the America Australia Leadership Dialogue, an elite think tank.

Shorten's main message for Labor was spelt out during the dying days of Mark Latham's leadership in an essay for the ALP-backed Fabian Society. Attacking Latham's 2004 election campaign as "thematically and tactically flawed", he urged the party to embrace "ordinary Australia" by selling its economic credentials and spending less time debating trendy ideas that preached to converted left-wingers. A few days later, at a meeting of the ALP's national executive in Canberra, Latham branded **Shorten** "Little Billy" and said his critique was "absolute horseshit".

Latham continued the payback in his controversial published diaries, calling **Shorten** two-faced for confiding in mid-2004 that he was publicly opposed to Australia signing the US Free Trade Agreement but "that's just for the members", and not signing it could jeopardise the US alliance. **Shorten** disputed Latham's version. He has his own equally damning assessment of the former leader: "He has all the attributes of a dog, except loyalty."

SHORTEN HAS VALUED loyalty since he was a kid growing up in the eastern Melbourne suburb of Murrumbeena. Though a distinctly middle-class suburb on Melbourne's eastern fringe, **Shorten's** upbringing was modest and largely unremarkable. Two things stand out: his highly competitive relationship with his non-identical twin, Robert; and the influence of their mother, Ann, clearly the dominant figure in their lives.

"I'm about five centimetres taller than **Bill** [who is 178cm, which he will hate me bringing up," jokes Robert, now a merchant banker. "In fact, when we're together people still ask, 'Are you really twins?'" While Robert was smarter at maths and science, **Bill** preferred humanities. As the lanky one, Robert was better suited to sport. Both still live in Melbourne, but they don't see much of each other these days because of busy lives. "I work in a pretty conservative field, and so I sometimes do get flak about my 'trade union' brother, but it's easy to laugh that off," says Robert.

Ann **Shorten**, now retired, is a sixth-generation Irish-Australian who started out as a schoolteacher and studied law mid-life, gaining her doctorate and becoming an academic. With her strong Catholic background, she was determined that her boys got the best education possible as the ticket to success.

Ann also paid for private elocution lessons. "I was keen on them having speech lessons quite young - seven or eight," she recalls. "After that the peer group cuts in, you're not the only authority in their lives. I thought the ability to speak well was very important." The lessons appear to have helped **Shorten's** early public speaking experience as he became a champion school debater, qualifying for the Victorian state team.

With his brother, **Shorten** attended Xavier College, the breeding ground of Melbourne's Catholic intelligentsia. He is not a practising Catholic, but the Jesuit teachings have stuck with him. "The Catholic faith - that's my tribe," he says, describing his religious views as "faith meets humanism".

Shorten's father, **Bill** snr, was a remote figure in his sons' lives. A Geordie from Tyneside in north-

east England, he swapped life as a roaming sailor for settling down with his family and a job as manager of Melbourne's dry dock. He spent long hours at work, although he was around the house at weekends, a bit gruff, with a beer and cigarette in either hand. He never got his driver's licence, so ferrying the boys to school events was left to their mother. He left the family home when **Shorten** finished school.

Deborah Beale engineered a fateful reconciliation between **Shorten** and his estranged father shortly before their wedding in 2000. **Shorten** had lost contact with **Bill** snr, a sad legacy of his parents' separation. "Deb made me get in touch with him four weeks before the wedding," recalls **Shorten**. "I talked to him several times - it was Deb's idea." He remains immensely grateful: his father died a week later, aged 70.

Shorten coped well when his father walked out, but soon after struck out on his own, taking a share flat in Fitzroy, and studying law. "I couldn't believe it, they pay you to argue," **Shorten** recalls thinking of a legal career. Ann says it was only "by some miracle" that her son passed because he rarely attended classes - he was too busy trying other things. "I spent 12 months in the Army Reserve but quit after realising I wasn't cut out for it," says **Shorten**. He was also active in Young Labor and took a year off to work for Victorian labour minister Neil Pope.

He was then taken under the wing of lawyer **John Cain jnr**, son of the former Victorian Labor premier, who sent him to labour law firm Maurice Blackburn Cashman, where he spent 18 months doing his articles. But unlike Robert, who chose an orthodox job in banking, **Shorten** dumped law in 1994 when offered a traineeship as a union official with the ACTU's Organising Works program. Linfox director **Bill** Kelty, then ACTU secretary, became his new mentor (they are still close), as **Shorten** worked his way up the ranks as an AWU recruiter.

In 1997, aged just 27, and living with future federal Opposition spokeswoman on legal affairs Nicola Roxon, **Shorten** won preselection for the safe Labor seat of Melton in the Victorian parliament. It was a fundamental shift in direction. But when the opportunity arose to take over as secretary of the AWU's "basket case" Victorian branch, he seized that instead. He now dismisses his foray into state politics as "a detour". Roxon, who remains friends with **Shorten**, recalls: "I think he had such a strong and abiding interest in the union that he thought, 'I have to weigh up what I want and what is the best thing'."

The most remarkable achievement of **Shorten's** career, say those who know him, has been to unite his union. By the force of his personality, he has negotiated peace after years of internal bickering over power and finances. He has also stemmed a decline in membership, recruiting jockeys, fruit pickers, even the nation's elite netball players.

One of the most significant people in **Shorten's** career is undoubtedly "Big" **Bill** Ludwig, the ageing Queensland-based patriarch of the AWU. It was Ludwig, after persuasion, who gave **Shorten** a platform far beyond Victoria by agreeing in 2001 to make him the AWU's national secretary - and allowing him to keep the state union job that gives **Shorten** his political power base. "I've supported him every step of the way," says Ludwig. **Shorten** says "Big" **Bill** is another of his mentors, adding: "He's taught me that if you tell the truth, people will come back and talk to you."

As **Shorten's** profile in the union movement has grown, rivalry with the ACTU leadership has

become obvious as he has presented himself as an alternative voice. **Shorten** was notably at loggerheads with Combet over the handling of the Ansett airline collapse. While they are not friends, **Shorten** says: "My relationship with Combet has improved. I think he's doing a good job."

The **Shorten** bandwagon for Canberra has now become a full-time job for the loyal AWU team behind him. The nucleus of **Shorten**'s campaign for PM will be long-time ALP friends David Feeney and Richard Marles, who will likely join him in Canberra as Labor MPs. Another figure behind the scenes will be Brian Burke, the disgraced former West Australian premier since rehabilitated inside the ALP. He declined to be interviewed, but is said to be a key adviser.

When **Shorten** arrives in Canberra, he is expected to use his numbers in the Victorian party to propel himself straight onto Labor's front bench. Rivalry with Kevin Rudd could prove interesting. As for the leadership, it took Bob Hawke three years to get there once in Canberra - yet he had already been famous for a decade as ACTU president.

John Roskam says **Shorten** has "got to manage expectations, and they're huge expectations". Nicola Roxon sounds caution: "It's not so much in the guy's interests to talk it up before he gets to parliament."

While **Shorten** dismisses any suggestion he has exploited the Beaconsfield disaster to benefit his career, he admits it has been a life-changing experience. Previously his national profile was patchy - he was best known in Victoria for battling Esso on behalf of victims of the tragic Longford gas explosion. Beaconsfield has altered that.

Says **Shorten** of Beaconsfield: "This was not only a catastrophe, it was a brave, protracted rescue that captured the imagination of the country." And, as it turns out, one that brought **Bill Shorten** into the light, too.

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