

Four days before the stroke that killed **John Cain**, Barry Jones took a picture of his old friend, Victoria's longest-serving Labor premier and a lifelong champion of party reform.

The pair sat together at the launch of a new biography of Maurice Blackburn, at which **Cain** delivered an eloquent speech about the pioneering lawyer and political activist. Jones' snap captures the sharp eyes of a man who, at the age of 88, never stopped thinking about how to make things better.

"He was a remarkable man," Jones said. "He was like an older brother to me and I feel very aggrieved by his death.

"If you had a choice between private benefit and the public interest, the public interest always came first. He was a person of extraordinary discipline, very ethical and when he was committed to something he wouldn't let anything stand in his way."

It seems a quaint epitaph for a politician who led his party back to government after a generation in opposition and pursued a substantial reform agenda that changed how we live and work.

Yet **Cain** was a stickler. He believed good government came from good process. He believed policy always trumped politics. And even at Christmas, his charity never stretched to allowing people to cut corners. **Cain's** former chief of staff Elizabeth Proust recalled an episode one year, as Spring Street was counting down to Christmas, when a box of French champagne arrived at the office courtesy of transport magnate Sir Peter Abeles.

Abeles, a confidante of Kerry Packer and Bob Hawke, was a man not accustomed to his generosity being refused. **Cain** was insistent however, that all 12 bottles of bubbly must be sent back. This caused some consternation, as one of **Cain's** media advisers had already popped the cork on one of them.

"I had to go and buy the replacement bottle before they went back," Ms Proust told The Age. "I didn't tell **John** that bit as he likely would have paid for it himself."

Former Victorian premier **John** Brumby was a young backbencher in the Hawke government when **Cain** was in power in Victoria. He says the greatest measure of **Cain's** time in politics is not big changes we all remember but rather, the many aspects of Victorian and Melbourne life we can't imagine any other way.

Next month, after the Christmas slumber, Melbourne will bounce back to life with the Australian Open, a sporting event which for two weeks, dominates the city. If not for **Cain's** determination to shift the Australian Open from Kooyong's wooden bleachers to a new, modern tennis centre at

what is now known at Melbourne Park, it would have never become a global event. More than likely, it would have been lost.

Jeff Kennett opposed the shift from Kooyong and readily admits he got it wrong. "It is possible that we wouldn't have the Australian Open without his vision at the time and his foresight," he said. "In one sense, that is the most public demonstration of **John Cain's** period in office."

There are plenty of others.

When the **Cain** government came to power, there was a white line still drawn down the middle of the Victorian Racing Club committee room which women were forbidden to cross. Within the first year of his 1982 election win, **Cain** told the VRC that if they wanted to receive any future government funding, they needed to get rid of the line. Amanda Elliott, the first woman to chair the VRC, can laugh about it now but as Brumby said, it wasn't an easy change to make at the time.

Can you imagine Melbourne without being able to grab a drink late at night, shop on a Sunday or promenade along the south bank of the Yarra? Liberalisation of licensing and trading laws and the Southbank development are all legacies of **Cain's** government.

So too is the reduction in the road toll since the creation of the Transport Accident Commission and wholesale changes to occupational health and safety laws. The **Cain** government banned cigarette sponsorship of sporting events and introduced freedom of information laws -- although he privately lamented in recent years how unworkable the FOI regime had become.

Bill Shorten, who worked for the **Cain** government as a young adviser before rising through the union movement to Labor's federal leadership, said **John Cain** would always be remembered as the leader who brought Victorian Labor in from the cold. Former prime minister Paul Keating said **Cain** gave relevance and meaning to Victorian Labor and cleared the path for Bob Hawke's election the following year.

Premier Daniel Andrews on Monday described the former premier as a Labor icon.

"It is a testament to a legacy of a life lived in the service of others, a life lived in accordance with his values, always standing up against unfairness, always standing up against inequity, always seeking to reform to change to make our state better, to make sure that our state is the centre of critical thinking, the centre of reform and change the centre of our nation," he said.

"That was **John's** vision. And in so many ways, he was able to deliver that."

Delivering the **John Cain** Foundation lecture a month ago, Terry Moran noted that the **Cain** government was generally remembered for the circumstances of its demise. The \$1.7 billion collapse of Tricontinental and the State Bank were seismic events, following the 1987 stock market crash, which plunged the state into deep economic malaise.

Brumby said **Cain** was confronted by the perfect economic storm. Kennett agreed he "just got swamped" but said that within the Party, **Cain's** leadership was buffeted by another force. "The real issue that brought him down was the influence of the trade movement," he said.

For the **Cain** family, the cost of internal party ruptures was frustratingly familiar.

John Cain was a second generation Victorian leader. His father **John Snr** was Victoria's Labor premier at the time of the 1955 split, the ideological schism which ended his government, cruelled Labor's future state electoral chances and made Victoria a dead weight for the federal Labor Party to carry.

Against the backdrop of that internecine conflict, **John Cain jnr** and a group of young Party thinkers - future federal ministers Barry Jones and **John Button**, **Cain's** trusted deputy Evan Walker, future Victorian governor Richard McGarvie, future Family Court chief justice Alistair Nicholson and others - started meeting to map a way back from the ALP's self-imposed political exile.

Jones said **Cain** was the leader of their reform movement, known as "The Participants." They understood Labor's greatest barrier to returning to government was the men who had taken control of it after the split; a hard-left, hard-loathing, dogmatic group who, like Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, was seemingly more interested in keeping control of the party than making it electable.

"We very much committed to getting things right; to now engaging in power plays, to opening up processes, to working towards a better kind of society," Jones said.

Writer James Button said his earliest memory of **Cain** was watching him disappear into his father's smoke-filled study with their fellow conspirators. "There was this sense that there were big intrigues afoot and the biggest intrigue of all was how to make the Labor Party electable in Victoria," he said.

As political takeovers go, it was a long, slow putsch. The Participants began meeting in the early 60s. **Cain** was first elected to state parliament in 1976 and secured the leadership in 1981. Kennett said that by the time of the 1982 election, the Bolte-Thompson government had run out of puff and there was an unmistakable aura around **John Cain**. "You could feel it, you could eat it," he said. "The election result was no surprise."

He came in with a big majority and a lack of hubris. One of his first decisions was to name the newly opened Victorian Arts Centre after the Liberal premier who'd commissioned it, Dick Hamer, and to invite Hamer to attend the opening.

The eight years that followed left a profound impact on the state. In taking power **Cain** reframed Labor's electoral fortunes and, perhaps more importantly, changed the way it went about government.

James Button said **Cain** believed policy advice should come from government departments and political advisers were of secondary importance. His advisers tended to be chosen from the public service, rather than the Party, and he saw the factional system as an enemy of good government.

"The whole thing for **John** was the relationship between the government and the public service," Button said. "You need to be wary of idolizing the past but I do think there was greater opportunity for ideas to flourish." Jones described it as a devotion to rational process. "The tragedy

now is that politics always comes first," he said.

Steve Bracks said **Cain** established a template for other Labor premiers to follow. Since the 1982 election, Labor has been in government in Victoria for all but 11 years. "It was really his legacy, which has set up Labor Victoria ever since."

Cain was not so convinced.

After he quit politics, **John Cain** taught at Melbourne University on an honorary basis. He sat on boards for the MCG Trust and the State Library of Victoria. He mentored politicians. He also made clear his views to anyone who asked about how government could be doing a better job.

"He was troubled by a lot of things within the AFP," said Button, who regularly discussed politics with **Cain** over lunch. "He was passionate about creating a more active, open, democratic party. That was something he felt very strongly about, right to the end of his life."

When **John** Button died, **Cain** delivered a eulogy. Amid the tribute to his great friend, he urged those in the audience to do more to reform the Party he'd left behind.

A state memorial will be held for **John Cain** next year.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Chip Le Grand, Simone Fox Koob and Royce Millar, 'Reformer lauded for virtue', *Age, The* (online), 24 Dec 2019
1 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AUNB&docref=news/178038F63A1FC2C0>>

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