



Too little knowledge is a dangerous thing

Barry Jones is wrong in his interpretation of the demise of Labor's Knowledge Nation, writes **Dennis Glover**

ONE morning in the week leading up to the release of the report of Kim Beazley's Knowledge Nation taskforce, which Barry Jones chaired, in July 2001, I took the final draft of the document to a graphic artist.

We flicked through the report to get a sense of how the material could be presented — until we reached Barry Jones's notorious "complexity diagram". The layout artist starting laughing. Clearly it failed the bullshit test. I resolved then to do what I knew I had to do: confront Jones, once again, to get the diagram removed.

The diagram and concepts such as the cadastre (knowledge bank) had been bones of contention for some time, and I'd tried already to suggest, gently, to our revered chairman that he take them out to avoid ridicule. He refused and so, to avoid the potential of the report's own chairman refusing to launch it or even denouncing it in public, the diagram and cadastre remained. The rest, as they say, is history.

This little story illustrates why Jones's claim that Beazley scuttled his own Knowledge Nation policy is totally wrong. The fact is, Jones partly scuttled it through his refusal to take our advice.

I can tell you from working closely with Beazley for nearly two years as his education and science adviser that he was incredibly enthusiastic about creating a gleaming knowledge nation. He generously spent time talking with some of Australia's leading scientists and academics.

The highlight was visiting top-performing schools to see what lessons we could learn to help the poorer kids being left behind in the information revolution.

To Beazley and those of us who worked on it, the Knowledge Nation was nothing short of an attempt to redefine what social democracy meant for the knowledge age. It was our light on the hill. Its central contention was that national prosperity and social equality were essentially the same thing, and that to increase both we had to unleash the creative talents of every one of our people. "No one left behind" was our catchcry.

Jones just couldn't be more wrong about Beazley not showing enthusiasm for his policy. Did Beazley perhaps pause from talking about it one evening to suggest we order dinner? Perhaps he was just hungry.

To get a sense of the tragedy of this missed opportunity for Australia and how unreasonable Jones's complaints are, consider this: at the precise moment that the first of the two jets slammed into the World Trade Centre's twin towers on September 11, 2001, Beazley was on his feet making a speech outlining his intention to use his first 100 days in office to start implementing his Knowledge Nation agenda.

Despite our best attempts to get the Knowledge Nation back on the nation's political radar, it just couldn't compete with the biggest event in world history since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

There was one other small news item circulating at that time as well, as I recall. Just a few weeks after launching the Knowledge Nation report — to rapturous front-page stories and editorials, despite Jones's diagram — John Howard turned back the Tampa. Knowledge Nation was quickly off the front pages. Beazley was talking about it, but the people's concerns were elsewhere.

I think Beazley put it pretty well on election night: while he had tried to appeal to the good angels of our nature, Howard had gone for the dark angels and has continued to do so ever since.

Nothing Jones can say can detract from the fact that the centrepiece of Labor's 2001 election campaign was a multi-billion-dollar investment program to create a Knowledge Nation. It contained Beazley's plans to reinvigorate our universities, TAFE's, schools, kindergartens, the ABC and CSIRO, increase research and development spending, and build cutting-edge information and communications technology infrastructure. For Jones to dismiss it as proposing only "modest increases in education spending over five years" and claim it bore no resemblance to the original Knowledge Nation taskforce report is ludicrous.

So the choice at that election was simple: the past through a return to the psychology of White Australia or the future through the harnessing of Australia's famed combination of intelligence and equality. And one of the saddest developments since then has been the failure of so many on the Left to acknowledge the fundamental difference between the parties at that pivotal moment in our nation's recent history. Jones, it pains me to say, has been one of the worst offenders. Under Beazley's leadership, Australia could have gone down a different path.

But there's one redeeming fact to emerge from all this: despite the Tampa, despite September 11 and despite the damage done to Knowledge Nation's launch by Jones's diagram, Beazley nearly pulled off a victory. Why? Our polling suggested it was due to the deep appeal of the idea of the Knowledge Nation. Voters understood that Australia needed it. And the great tragedy now is that our Government has failed to take up the challenge Beazley threw down in 2001.

Perhaps Jones's reopening of this issue can be the catalyst for a new debate about the need to invest in knowledge to create a wealthier and fairer society. If so, he may have unintentionally, but finally, done Beazley, the Labor Party and the



country a big favour.

Dennis Glover was Kim Beazley's adviser on the Knowledge Nation policy in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election and secretary to the Knowledge Nation taskforce.