

Fox, Nasser take a back seat as elite toast achievements

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THE air was thick with anecdotes and memories of past glories on Wednesday night as business, political and union leaders gathered in Melbourne to honour Jac Nasser and Lindsay Fox.

Paul Keating, for his part, recalled the divisive — and electorally sensitive — politics of car industry reform, warning Tony Abbott in a humorous aside that he should be careful to be on the right side of it.

The poignancy of Keating's commentary was not lost on anyone, with Labor recently spinning taxpayer subsidies to the car industry in the form of government "co-investment".

The Coalition, on the other hand, talks of slashing \$500 mil-

lion from industry assistance. When it was his turn to speak, the Opposition Leader drew applause with a good-natured backhander — Labor could talk about its record on tariffs, but there would be no carbon tax on car exports under a Coalition government.

The frisson of political tension was all in good spirits and added to the American-Australian Association's celebration of the lives of transport billionaire Fox and BHP Billiton chairman (and former global head of Ford and Ford Australia) Nasser.

US ambassador to Australia Jeff Bleich set the tone with a story about driving with renowned car enthusiast (or should that be petrol head?) Fox.

Bleich said that neither he, nor his security detail, had anticipated Fox's passion for extreme speed; so much so that when the car finally stopped and Bleich's minders got out, they kissed the ground with relief at having survived the experience.

The ambassador handed over to Fox's longtime mate and former ACTU secretary Bill Kelty, who recalled a US road trip with

the magnate and a few other friends. When they pulled up at a tollroad booth and the attendant commented on the song they were singing, Fox told her he knew a better one and promptly launched into the Star Spangled Banner.

As Fox and the attendant completed a full rendition of the US national anthem, Kelty and others frantically tried to divert a growing line of frustrated drivers to other booths.

While Fox's life story is the stuff of legend, Nasser's journey from Amyoun in north Lebanon, where his father was a bus driver, is less familiar but no less compelling. He revealed last night that he made two applications for his first job — one to BHP, the other to Ford.

BHP came back first and he accepted, until he was told late in the piece that the job would not be in Melbourne, as he had originally thought.

It was then that Ford belatedly offered him a position in his home city, and he quickly threw in his lot with the carmaker.

Keating said last night that he

identified Nasser, when he was head of Ford Australia from 1990-93, as someone his government could work with to lift productivity in the car industry, giving it a better chance of long-term survival.

"While he had a job to do to make the company tick, he always had a great feel for the workforce," the ex-prime minister said. "He was never one of those winner-take-all executives. He had a bigger view about society as a whole.

"I think that is what marks our great leaders."

Keating said the effective rate of protection for the car industry in the early 1980s was 96 per cent, with the entire domestic production run only 500,000 units compared with one million today.

"That's why we had all these jalopies running around for years, because we couldn't turn them over," he said.

"So I was taking (car tariffs) down to 15 per cent, and all of a sudden John Hewson said he was going to take them to zero."

Keating said he spotted "a chink of light" that could perhaps help reverse Labor's disastrous

polling, and he "crawled straight through it".

Hewson was dubbed Captain Zero, and voters were warned that he would "wipe Victoria out".

"During Jac's period as CEO of Ford Australia, I saw my first scramble up the slippery pole of Australian national politics, and turned 26 per cent (voter support) into 45 per cent. And the rest is history (Labor won the 1993 election)," Keating said.

Addressing Abbott, he said: "There's a lesson in this, Tony, about motor cars. Be wary about zero tariffs."

Nasser said wryly that he was "pleased to note that I kept you as prime minister for somewhat longer". He complimented Keating for his vision and commitment to "progressive change".

Abbott responded to Keating's "helpful" warning about car industry policy with his own carbon-tax quip.

He concluded by lauding the contribution of Fox and Nasser.

"Happy is the country that has produced such men," Abbott said.

"Truly, this too is the home of the brave."