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Howard Government Retrospective IV

“The Desire for Change: 2004-2007”

Articles by Professor Tom Frame
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The Fourth Howard Government: Initial Appraisals and Assessments

Tom Frame

It was not until the second half of 2001, when it looked destined for a third election victory, that the Howard Government became the subject of more extended assessments by academics, journalists and commentators. Most were well beyond disapproving; they were hostile. Led by Robert Manne, the Coalition's critics attacked not only the Government's policies but its conduct of national affairs, alleging that it was mean-spirited and untrustworthy, indifferent to the demands of human dignity and disdainful of the conventions that had undergirded Australia's place in the world. The detractors, many of whom were labelled 'Howard haters', wrote articles and published books that dominated the reading lists of Australian political studies courses from 2001 to 2004. Most of these titles are canvassed within my introductory chapter to *Trials and Transformations, the Howard Government, Volume 3, 2001-2004*.¹

The Fourth Howard Government has not been subjected to close consideration other than in explanations of its defeat in November 2007. I have argued elsewhere that the four Howard Governments need to be considered separately. Each had a mood and a mindset of its own, professing different objectives and facing different opposition. Interpreting the election loss has tended to overshadow analyses of what was achieved in terms of public administration and national affairs in the period when John Howard became the second longest serving Australian prime minister. The following survey looks at what was written about the Howard Government during the latter part of its fourth term in office and in the aftermath of its defeat.

The first volume professing some sympathy, if not support, for the Howard Government appeared in March 2006 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Coalition's election victory. *The Howard Factor: A Decade that Transformed a Nation* consisted mainly of medium-length (4,000-word) essays written by journalists working at *The Australian*.² Edited by Nick Cater, the book was intended to address what was considered the biased political commentary of the previous decade. Unlike earlier works which were intended to hinder the re-election of the Coalition in 2001 and in 2004, *The Howard Factor* could claim to be more even-handed and less polemical. It was not published during an election campaign and included contributors who were not associated with the Coalition nor necessarily sympathetic to its policies.

Cater claimed that 'no newspaper is better equipped for the task of producing a work of this nature than *The Australian*'.³ The idea for the book originated with Dennis Shanahan, the newspaper's Canberra-based political editor, who 'persevered with his proposal until he got the answer he wanted, then he worked tirelessly to ensure that it became a reality'.⁴ The cover blurb explained that

John Howard's federal election victory over Paul Keating in 1996 was the start of a quiet revolution that changed Australia forever. His critics told us he was a white-picket-fence conservative, Little Johnnie, Lazarus with a triple bypass. Instead, Howard has driven a decade of reform, reinventing conservative politics and redefining the national debate. In this long-overdue assessment of the Howard years, some of *The Australian's* leading commentators chart the seismic shift in politics, society, workplaces, culture, the economy, trade and foreign affairs. They describe how Howard has redrawn the political map, turning the conservatives into reformers and forcing the progressives to defend the status quo.

Cater explained that 'apart from a few bilious tracts written by Howard's opponents, there has been only one attempt at a biography and that book, by David Barnett [and Pru Goward], hardly scratches the surface'.⁵ By way of contrast, he noted that 'four books have been written about Mark Latham and one on Kim Beazley, neither of whom has won an election'.⁶ In a combative preface, Cater was critical of Paul Keating's complacency as Prime Minister and asserted that the three Labor leaders who followed him (Beazley, Crean and Latham) were 'enemies of change'. He went even further in contending that 'the conservatives have stolen the mantle of reform and the progressives have become the new conservatives' largely because Howard 'has established a new political orthodoxy'.

This collection is laudatory in places. It marvels at Howard's personal resurgence after public rejection, and the ability of the Government to expose divisions and to exploit the fissures in the opposition parties. There are few direct criticisms of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The approach appears to preference observation over disapproval with comparisons and contrasts softening the assessments of most contributors. For instance, Mike Steketee thought that the Commonwealth Government's reach into the community increased rather than receded under the Coalition, particularly in the areas of welfare, family assistance and workforce participation where reform was inconsistent and achievements were modest. This theme continued in the chapter by George Megalogenis who believed the Howard Government had seriously under-performed on taxation reform (despite the introduction of 'A New Tax System' in 2000 which included a consumption tax) and that by Brad Norington who concluded that the Coalition's industrial relations program was a work-in-progress.

Essays on 'Hansonism', immigration and indigenous affairs managed to be neither critical nor complimentary, emphasising the pragmatism of the Howard Government's approach rather than offering a critique of its philosophy which often took a back seat. In defence, foreign affairs and security, this particular panel of writers was prepared to award points to the Howard Government before the effects of many policies were known or the consequences of some decisions could be adequately assessed, such as the decision to participate

in the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

In other areas of discussion, the contributors employed quotes from Labor figures to say things they seemed a little disinclined to say for themselves while noting that the Coalition was helped by Simon Crean's lack of appeal in the electorate at the beginning of his time as Opposition Leader and Mark Latham's lack of appeal at the end of his time as Opposition Leader. In essence, it was suggested (rather than argued), that the Coalition was given a good run because Labor was not an effective opposition. The most biting criticism was actually offered not by a journalist but by the controversial cartoonist Bill Leak who claimed that

Howard has reshaped Australia to conform to his own vision. We love the inflated feelings of international self-importance he has given us and we don't seem to care about all the things he has taken away. Happy to live in an economy instead of a society, we might as well also accept that we are all Little Johnnies now. Smaller, meaner and less attractive, we're looking more like monkeys every day.⁷

Perhaps the most enduringly helpful feature of the book was a 100-page inventory prepared by Cater's wife, Rebecca Weisser, of the major news stories relating to the Howard Government that appeared in *The Australian* from March 1996 to December 2005. It was followed by a series of tables measuring Australia's performance against key economic indicators compiled by George Megalogenis, who concluded:

The report card, while mixed, is generally very good. The Howard years have been recession-free, which is a boast no other long-term prime minister can make, not even Howard's hero Robert Menzies. But if you look closely enough, you can see the seeds for the next slow down. They are the imbalances in the household debt and the current account. Sooner or later, our borrowing binge will have to end, and with it the warm buzz of the nation's longest boom.⁸

Most notable of this more even-handed collection was that it took a decade to appear. The Government's polemical detractors were, by way of contrast, never idle.

The left-leaning Scribe published Russ Radcliffe's *Man of Steel: A Cartoon History of the Howard Years* in 2007.⁹ The 'curator' of this collection made no secret of his personal disdain for John Howard and most of his ministers. The introduction begins:

Man of steel or lying rodent? Among the playful metaphors employed by Australia's political cartoonists, variations on these two themes have come to define the parameters of popular opinion about John Howard. Take your pick. I'm sure that the latter is the more passionately held view for, despite his electoral success, Howard is not a politician who has inspired popular devotion – except perhaps among grateful backbenchers who owe him their political careers.¹⁰

According to Radcliffe, Howard is unworthy of any credit because, he claimed, 'domestically, he reaped the benefits that flowed from the Keating reforms; internationally, the war on terror allowed him to adopt a tough, statesman-like pose'. He accused Howard of 'presiding over a nation, that far from being relaxed and comfortable, has been divided and ill at ease.'¹¹ Radcliffe asserted that the 'most dubious legacy' of the Howard years was the 'decline and fall of notions of accountability and responsibility' with 'dishonesty and dissimulation' having no apparent political consequences. The Coalition won in 1996 because the electorate wanted a change; it won in 1998 because Kim Beazley's campaign was 'lacklustre'; it won in 2001 by 'beating up border protection and the 'threat' imposed by refugee boats', it won in 2004 'subliminally conflating international insecurity with domestic issues, particularly interest rates'.¹² The campaign theme – 'Trust' – that carried the Coalition to a fourth election victory was 'shameless' while the electorate was unwilling to gamble on the unpredictable Mark Latham. The electorate was manipulated, timid, anxious or uncaring when it voted for the Coalition. But with the rise of Kevin Rudd, Radcliffe thought 'Howard's final powerwalk into history, eyebrows to the breeze and bottom lip all aquiver, can't be far away'.¹³ Radcliffe was soon granted his wish.

The defeat of the Coalition at the November 2007 election promoted a number of works that were, perhaps inevitably, more descriptive than analytical. The *Quarterly Essay* commissioned Judith Brett's *Exit Right: The Unravelling of John Howard* in December 2007.¹⁴ In being drafted within days of the Coalition's defeat, it was a speculative assessment of events whose causes and consequences could not yet be even-handedly or even reasonably assessed given the political dust had not yet begun to settle. More substantial accounts were produced by Peter van Onselen and Philip Senior who published *Howard's End: The Unravelling of a Government* in August 2008 and Peter Hartcher whose *To The Bitter End: The Dramatic Story Behind The Fall Of John Howard And The Rise Of Kevin Rudd* appeared in May 2009.¹⁵ Both books were focused on the 2007 election campaign and its immediate aftermath. Neither book looked in depth at the Fourth Howard Government nor intended to provide an overall assessment of Coalition rule.

In addition to his collaborative work with Senior, van Onselen also edited a collection of essays, *Liberals and Power: the Road Ahead*, in November 2008.¹⁶ He promoted the view that the Liberal Party lacked vision because it was without values, and that prolonged estrangement from public office was likely. Van Onselen repeated what had become routine criticism that Howard 'did not prepare his party for life after his departure' leaving behind a political movement 'at its lowest ebb intellectually and competitively'. After allowing Robert Manne and Tony Abbott to present what were contrastingly critical and celebratory perspectives with conclusions that were not unexpected, George Brandis – never a close Howard supporter – offered a thoughtful and nuanced appraisal of his former leader's political philosophy. Although he treats the four Howard

Governments as a unity and notes that Howard was ‘a bundle of contradictions’ (implying that most people are not, when I would contend they are), Brandis thought that Howard was ‘most disappointing when he allowed his social conservatism to get in the way of his Party’s traditional commitment to individualism’.¹⁷ His final comment is heavily laden with contemporary significance: ‘A great government though it was, the Howard Government would have been a greater government still if it had been more consistently true to the Liberal Party’s liberal values’.¹⁸

Other works drew comparisons between the incoming Howard Government in 1996 and the newly elected Rudd Government in 2007. Norman Abjorensen claimed in 2008 that ‘Rudd’s first year could not have been more different from Howard’s’.¹⁹

Generally, the Rudd government has been seen as sound, cautious and unspectacular (very much like the prime minister himself). Interestingly, this first detailed review of Rudd Labor comes as the Howard years are being put under the microscope on ABC television, which means that a useful comparison can be made of the first Howard government (1996–98) and Rudd’s first year. Quite simply, Howard’s government got off to a terrible start; Rudd’s, by contrast, has so far been untroubled.²⁰

The principal deficiency in Abjorensen’s account is not that he was too harsh on Howard but that he was too generous to Rudd.

The election of the Rudd Government did not prompt a substantial recasting of George Megalogenis’ assessment of the Howard Government, *The Longest Decade*, between the publication of the first edition in May 2006 and the second in May 2008.²¹ Megalogenis explained his approach when introducing the revised edition:

This book looks at Keating and Howard together as part of a bigger Australian story, with a bias towards their terms in the Lodge ... I want to tell two intertwined stories, the political and cultural, and pose the question that taunts our age: how did the Keating-Howard economy take us from growth to greed?

He interviewed both Keating and Howard extensively and invited them to criticise one another. Megalogenis tried to be even-handed with the back-cover blurb asserting it was a ‘non-partisan analysis of the forces shaping Australia today’. He claimed that: ‘treasurer Keating cleaned up the mess that treasurer Howard had made of the economy at the start of the 1980s; Howard as prime minister was given a mandate to repair the society that had been divided by his predecessor, Keating, in the 1990s’. He also notes there was a good deal of consistency in their approach and that both ‘changed Australia; yet, for each reform they imposed, the nation snapped back, forcing them to adapt before dismissing them both’.²² Although there is some merit in making Keating and Howard synonymous with the principal tensions that persist in Australian politics, his approach

draws attention away from the achievements of their governments. The preceding two decades certainly featured a battle of strong-willed men engaged in a vigorous struggle for supremacy but the focus was often on power and not on policy. Howard has been more willing to concede than Keating that there was substantial commonality in their visions for the nation’s future.

With the end of the Rudd Government’s political ‘honeymoon’, and it possibly lasted longer than most new governments enjoy owing to Rudd’s initial popularity and the electorate’s high hopes for his success, leading Coalition ministers offered their own treatment of the Howard years in the context of where and how they felt Labor was ‘squandering’ the Coalition’s legacy. These treatments were highly generalised. In 2008, Peter Costello produced a memoir in collaboration with his father-in-law, Peter Coleman.²³ Its commentary transcended the Howard years, outlining the former Treasurer’s views on a range of policies in addition to his views on the Liberal leadership and the succession that wasn’t. *The Costello Memoirs* have not been widely quoted in general assessments of the Coalition’s time in office.

In 2009 Tony Abbott published *Battlelines*. It was a snapshot of how the world looked to one former Howard Government minister prior to his elevation to the Opposition leadership in December of that year.²⁴ Much of his commentary on the Howard Government had appeared in van Onselen’s edited collection the previous year. Abbott assessed 1996–2007 in the context of explaining what his party needed to become in seeking re-election which seemed a remote prospect when the book appeared. *Battlelines* moved from the past, to the present and the future – sometimes in the same sentence – with greater interest in the latter years of the Howard Government when Abbott served as a senior minister. He dealt with the entire period of the Howard Government from the vantage point of 2009 when claiming that the Labor Party was still mimicking the Coalition on many policy fronts. Keating had, of course, said the same thing of the first Howard Government. But Abbott was critical of the extant literature.

If Labor is mostly considered the ‘sexy’ side of politics, one reason is the overwhelming preponderance of books by Labor politicians or about them. In the eleven months he was opposition leader, there were two biographies of Kevin Rudd. By contrast, until the last year of his prime ministership, there was only one biography of John Howard. The relative scarcity of books about the conservative side of politics could prompt the conclusion that we have little worth saying. Most of the people describing conservative politics in Australia are unsympathetic to it – even the more perceptive academic writers, such as Judith Brett.²⁵

While this might have been a fair assessment of biographies, it was less true of general assessments of the previous 20 years. Indeed, by 2009, much more had been written of the Howard Government than of the Hawke and Keating Governments combined – an

observation that still stands.

To highlight the enduring differences between Labor and Coalition national governments, a triumvirate associated with *Quadrant* magazine, Keith Windschuttle, David Martin Jones and Ray Evans, edited a series of essays entitled *The Howard Era*.²⁶ Published in 2009 and acknowledging the wisdom of hindsight, the editors were candid about their intentions:

Given that the Labor party and its epigone treat Australian political history and foreign policy since Gough Whitlam's administration as their personal fiefdom, there is a pressing need for commentators of a realist or conservative disposition to define the enduring legacy of the Howard era, trace the evolution of the Howard government over time, its successes and failures, as well as identifying the principles that informed its practice.

The editors were concerned about the 'self-appointed academic guardians of Australia's progressive future' to explain away the philosophical credentials of the Howard Government, reducing these years 'to some temporary and inconvenient aberration on the road to a post-Western, multicultural utopia.' Windschuttle and his colleagues praise the Howard Government's achievements before claiming it

became complacent in power, lost sight of the principles that had ensured its early success and captured popular hearts and minds. As it tergiversated over policies as varied as emissions trading, workplace reform and the socialisation of the Australian mind, so it lost its authoritative voice.

This was also the first volume to canvass previous works on the Howard Government. It noted the emergence of commentaries from 'across a political spectrum from extreme loathing to measured admiration'. An example was Margo Kingston's two works, *Not Happy, John* and the follow-up, *Still Not Happy, John* which were published in 2004 and 2007.²⁷ They were described by David Martin Jones as 'little more than politically correct rants against both Howard and the nescient constituencies that returned him at successive elections.' He argued that 'such works evince the paranoia that embraces great swathes of the Australian commentariat rather than any attempt at informed insight or empirical assessment'. Jones thought that Manne's *The Howard Years* was 'equally acerbic but somewhat more measured'.²⁸ This was a curious summation. Was he implying the collection was polemically biased but not to an excessive or egregious degree? Or that it was damning but not did seek to demean its subjects?

The contributors listed the Coalition's successes and the failures, outlined any mitigating factors before concluding with a similar judgement: one balance the Coalition did reasonably well across most areas of public administration. The editors worked hard to ensure the authors avoided hubris or 'cheap shots' at commentators whose forecasts had proved to be inaccurate. There

were times, the contributors noted, when Howard personally or the Government collectively was weak or frightened, misguided or opportunistic, confused or conflicted. In some areas of policy, particularly those with well-defined measures of effectiveness, the Coalition deserved to be judged harshly for reckless action or fickle attitudes that hindered growth or squandered opportunities. On a few issues, the Government clearly failed to impress some of the more conservative commentators who are scathing of Howard and his ministers caving in either to sectional interests or special pleading.

Although this collection also lacks a closing summary that might have provided a balance sheet of the Howard Government's performance, there is nothing to suggest the contributors felt the need to redress an imbalance in the extant scholarship by veering deliberately in the opposite direction. These chapters are critical and, in some respects, condemnatory. But they attempt to give credit where it is due and, in this sense, they are responding to earlier works that found nothing of merit in anything the Howard Government did or tried to do.

There were no further substantial assessments of the Howard Government until *The Reith Papers* were published in 2015.²⁹ This book was significant in that it provided a contemporaneous commentary on the first five years of Coalition rule with reflections written more than a decade after the events covered in the papers. The diaries were actually notebooks (that numbered more than 120) in which Reith recorded the proceedings of the meetings he attended, drafted preparatory notes for coming meetings, weighed the pros and cons of any proposed policy or action, reflected on people he met and places he visited, and outlined his evolving views on a range of subjects. He kept these notes thinking 'one day I might write a regular column', which he later did. He did not plan to 'publish my journal entries in memoir form' but was encouraged by former Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer, to publish 'on the grounds that Coalition MPs don't write enough about what really happened on the inside during those years'. Faced with the quandary of what to include from the notebooks more than a decade after they were produced, Reith explained:

At times, I was surprised by my comments and I have wrestled with the issue of making public some personal comments. But in the end I decided I couldn't write a memoir based on diary entries if I excised the bits that some people may not appreciate.³⁰

The Reith notebooks and diaries have since been donated to the Howard Library at UNSW Canberra. They are a treasure trove of insights into Australian political life between 1996 and 2001.

Most assessments of the Fourth Howard Government published between 2006 and 2009 dwell on two things. First, the Coalition's final term in office was neither better nor worse than the second or third terms. It was certainly

better than the first if measured in political leadership and policy competence. It was not a bad government. In fact, it was an effective one in many areas of public administration. Although there are very few treatments of the Fourth Howard Government that are not at least tinged by interpretations of the November 2007 election result, none of the more moderate commentators thought its performance justified its removal from office.

Second, these same commentators thought the Coalition's final term in office also revealed that the government was losing touch with the electorate and lacked the capacity for internal renewal. The Labor Party, once Kevin Rudd replaced Kim Beazley as leader, looked and sounded more caring and compassionate while professing a resolute commitment to preserving the rate of economic growth and providing the kind of political stability that had made the Howard Government appealing to voters. Put simply, the electorate had had enough of the Coalition by 2007 and voters were clearly in the mood for change. Nothing the Howard Government had done in 2006 or was doing in 2007 was working in terms of opinion polls. It is doubtful that a late change to Peter Costello as prime minister would have changed the electorate's mind. Kevin Rudd, the self-professed fiscal conservative, would combine sensible management

of the economy with socially progressive policies. He promised a number of symbolic gestures, such as ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on the environment and offering a national apology to the 'Stolen Generation', that were designed to make the Coalition look reactionary and the Prime Minister heartless.

Published accounts of the Fourth Howard Government all come to a very similar conclusion. When campaigning began in October 2007, time was up for the Coalition. It could not rely on the electorate's enduring antipathy to Paul Keating nor on its residual fears of what Labor might do to the economy. The voters had simply stopped listening to John Howard. They knew he would not see out a fifth term, anyway. There were, many thought, few apparent risks in giving the other side an opportunity to run the country. Whether the Coalition's alleged inability to expose and exploit the fatal flaws in Kevin Rudd's character that led his own colleagues to turn against him in June 2010, and its failure to display genuine interest in organisational renewal after John Howard rebuffed Peter Costello's invitations to retire, ought to be considered criticisms specifically of the Fourth Howard Government are questions this conference might consider.

- 1 Tom Frame (ed.), 'Setting the scene', *Trials and Transformations, the Howard Government, Volume 3, 2001-2004*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2019, pp. 1-12.
- 2 Nick Cater (ed.), *The Howard Factor: A Decade that Transformed a Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2006.
- 3 Cater, *The Howard Factor*, p. 348.
- 4 Cater, *The Howard Factor*, p. 348.
- 5 David Barnett and Pru Goward, *John Howard: Prime Minister*, Viking, Melbourne, 1997.
- 6 Cater, *The Howard Factor*, p. xi.
- 7 Leak, *The Howard Factor*, p. 200.
- 8 Megalogenis, *The Howard Factor*, p. 317.
- 9 Russ Radcliffe, *Man of Steel: a Cartoon History of the Howard Years*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2007.
- 10 Radcliffe, *Man of Steel*, p. 1.
- 11 Radcliffe, *Man of Steel*, p. 2.
- 12 Radcliffe, *Man of Steel*, p. 3.
- 13 Radcliffe, *Man of Steel*, p. 4.
- 14 Judith Brett, *Exit Right: The Unravelling of John Howard*, Quarterly Essay 28, Scribe, Melbourne, December 2007.
- 15 Peter van Onselen & Philip Senior, *Howard's End: The Unravelling of a Government*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008; Peter Hartcher, *To The Bitter End: The Dramatic Story Behind The Fall Of John Howard And The Rise Of Kevin Rudd*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2009.
- 16 Peter van Onselen (ed.), *Liberals and Power: the Road Ahead*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008.
- 17 George Brandis, 'John Howard and the Australian Liberal Tradition', in van Onselen (ed.), *Liberals & Power*, p. 79.
- 18 Brandis, 'John Howard and the Liberal Tradition', p. 79.
- 19 Norman Abjorensen, 'First Termers', 28 November 2008, www.insidestory.org.au/first-termers; see also Abjorensen, *John Howard and the Conservative Tradition*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2008.
- 20 insidestory.org.au/first-termers
- 21 George Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2006 (updated 2008). The other major survey of the 1990s and 2000s – Paul Kelly's *The March of the Patriots: The Struggle for Modern Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2009 – concludes with the November 2001 election.
- 22 George Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, 2008, p. 2.
- 23 Peter Costello with Peter Coleman, *The Costello Memoirs*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Melbourne, 2008.
- 24 Tony Abbott, *Battlelines*, MUP, Melbourne, 2009.
- 25 Abbott, *Battlelines*, p. xi.
- 26 Keith Windschuttle, David Martin Jones and Ray Evans (eds), *The Howard Era*, Quadrant Books, Sydney, 2009.
- 27 Margo Kingston, *Not Happy, John: Defending Our Democracy*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2004; Margo Kingston, *Still Not Happy, John*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2007.
- 28 David Martin Jones, *The Howard Era*, p. 3.
- 29 Peter Reith, *The Reith Papers*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2015.
- 30 Reith, *The Reith Papers*, p. 3.

2007: a view from the electorate of Forde

Kay Elson

As a proud member of the 'Class of 96', I was privileged to serve throughout the duration of the Howard Government. The people of my working-class electorate of Forde epitomised the 'Howard battlers' – from the struggling but aspiring suburbs in Logan City to the regional townships on the outskirts of the Scenic Rim with farms and ageing communities facing real and protracted economic challenges. Nearly a year before the 2007 election I made the personal decision that I would not be seeking another term. This meant that I had both an insider's perspective on the way our government operated in its final term and, by working closely with my local Liberal candidate, an observer's perspective on how the 2007 campaign was conducted.

While there was an 'it's time' element within the electorate, I believe it is fair to say that the roots of our demise in 2007 were actually sown in our somewhat unexpected 2004 victory. First, Labor learnt the lesson of courting defeat with an inexperienced and erratic leader (Mark Latham) who made the electorate feel less than 'relaxed and comfortable'. So much so that by 2007 they packaged Kevin Rudd as John Howard 2.0 – a younger, cooler version but still 'an economic conservative'. Second, having won a third 'unexpected' victory we complacently went in to the 2007 election recycling the same prototype campaign that had previously produced results. It was apparent at the time that 2007 called for a much more creative and innovative approach. Third, gaining a majority in the Senate in 2004 meant that as a government we no longer had the pressing political imperative of winning our policy arguments with the weight of public opinion. We 'had the numbers' and it fundamentally changed how the government had operated since 1996.

I will address each consideration in more detail but a few points need to be made clear. The public were not 'waiting with a baseball bat' for John Howard, as they had been for Keating, but rather, they were waiting sheepishly to hand him the proverbial gold watch and send him into the retirement they had heard so much speculation about in the media. The 2007 election was not about voting out a government that had not performed or delivered. On the contrary, John Howard had been such an exemplary leader and delivered so much that he had made government seem almost easy. Debt paid back, tick. Budget in surplus, tick. Borders controlled, tick. Too easy. Anyone could do it. In fact, there is an argument to be made that the apparent ease with which John Howard had carried the Prime Ministership and the overall success of our government was a catalyst for the revolving door of PMs that was to come: when each successive PM could not deliver similar (or even close) results, it was characterised as a personal failing, rather than a case of unrealistic expectations. I am not arguing for a minute that there were not personal failings aplenty in those PMs who followed! But I think the public have now been shocked straight that government, and

especially economic management, is not simple and easy. It is a testament to John Howard, Peter Costello and the wider Howard Government that the Australia people ever believed it was.

Pre-2004 the Howard Government had a history of seemingly impossible policy achievement, despite (or perhaps because of) not having control in the Senate. Privatising Telstra, reforming the tax system and introducing the GST, legislating Work for the Dole, stricter gun laws, offshore processing of illegal boat arrivals, tougher national security in the wake of 9/11, and IR reform of the waterfront. All achieved by, as was often described by the Prime Minister, 'bringing the Australian people along'. Explaining why change was needed, building our case, selling our positive message and making the point at every opportunity. Winning public sentiment was crucial to applying the pressure to get the votes from either Labor or the cross bench in the Senate.

After 2004 that political imperative no longer existed. Whether consciously or not, the way we had conducted government shifted. Public consensus was nice, but no longer imperative. We stopped bringing people along – and it was reflected in internal processes and attitudes as well.

WorkChoices was a case in point. Despite a massive media advertising campaign, it was staggering how little material was produced for MPs to distribute in early 2007 to counter the Union campaign. While local MPs were hearing angry words in their electorates, the central campaign provided very little to help rebut the scare campaign, creating a vacuum that Labor happily filled. Instead, so many MPs were told that 'WorkChoices isn't an issue'. In 1998, by contrast, local MPs were listened to and consulted about the problems on the ground surrounding the selling of the GST. In the many months leading up to the 2007 election there was very little urgency or sense that we needed to 'bring people along'.

I will not argue the policy merits – they are either sound or 'over-reach' depending on your point of view. But our political approach to this important reform was indulgent and arrogant. And I do not believe we would have found ourselves in that position if we had needed to convince the Senate, via the public, to legislate crucial industrial relations reform. We would have had to argue our case and ultimately the legislation itself would have been tempered. The public did not understand WorkChoices and, from the outset and in the subsequent early 2007 vacuum, Labor and the unions were the only ones 'explaining it' to them. In my working-class electorate people could not comprehend that the same PM who had been the battlers' champion now wanted to cut their wages. To them, it was proof that the government had lost touch and had been in office too long.

In Canberra, there was also a perceptible shift in the emphasis that the Prime Minister and ministry placed on actively consulting with the backbench. Since 1996, it had been a hallmark of our government and regularly included intimate dinners with backbenchers to sound out the mood in the electorates. The discussions were respectful and robust and were focussed on how to tackle issues that were biting outside Canberra. Those

dinners became fewer and far between. It was harder to meet with ministers and the Prime Minister – minders now took their place as go-betweens. Our government became one further step removed from the Australian people. Of course, it's human nature that complacency creeps in with time – in jobs, relationships and in governments. Our numbers in the Senate just made it worse.

At the same time, in the public arena, there was an apparent crumbling of two of our key strengths – leadership stability and keeping interest rates low. Speculation about a 'succession' was clumsily fed and fuelled by our own MPs in the media. It became a spectacular own goal and undermined the strength and certainty the Prime Minister had always represented, especially post 2001. And, despite exceptional economic management, continuing balanced budgets and the establishment of the Future Fund, the increases in interest rates (six times in two years) put a question mark over our economic management credentials, meaning that our massive poll advantage over Labor on this key issue narrowed dramatically. Leadership uncertainty, interest rate rises and WorkChoices all raised anxiety in the electorate. Australians were no longer as 'relaxed and comfortable'. Of course, in hindsight, it's all relative, given the destructive chaos that was to ensue in the coming decade.

Having the high-profile journalist and television presenter Maxine McKew contesting the Prime Minister in his own seat added to the perception of erosion. This was gleefully reported by an increasingly hostile media that had become bored and had shifted their focus to climate change and more activist issues. The perception of a dying government was not helped by the number of MPs choosing to retire - 12 in the House of Reps and 5 in the Senate (myself included, so I put up my hand for that one). Labor capitalised by portraying Kevin Rudd as a safe pair of hands, capable of doing exactly what John Howard had done for so many years - but with a more caring emphasis on health, education and the environment. How wrong that proved to be! I am still amazed that the 'BS-meter' of the Australian people never clicked in before the election. That it took his own party to turf him out for people to see the real Kevin Rudd remains surprising to this day.

At an organisational level, our federal campaign did not do enough to point out the risk of turning to Labor. In fact, we did the opposite. I believe our campaign slogan, 'Go for Growth' displayed a terrible tin ear. What did that mean to people in my electorate who were worried about their jobs and rising interest rates? Their translation was 'Helping big business cut your pay so they can make bigger profits'. It provided further 'evidence' that our focus wasn't on them, but on money. This actually fed into Labor's WorkChoices scare and their overall narrative. How did that slogan in any way explain the economic risks to a whole generation of young voters with no adult knowledge of how bad the economy was under Keating? 'Go for growth' was incomprehensible at best to

Howard's battlers and elitist and uncaring to those who worried about health, education and the environment. It was a further sign that we were out of touch and it was time to be moved on.

Even putting aside the worst possible positive slogan choice, I believe our 2007 campaign was not nimble, creative or forceful enough to counter the flash of 'Kevin 07' and the cash of the union's scare (by most estimates well over \$30 million). As someone looking in – not a candidate – I saw a rehash of old methodology, old graphics, old campaign tools and old approaches. It looked tired. We looked tired.

In contrast, Kevin Rudd harnessed the beginnings of a new wave of interest in social media activism. The youthful and positive image of young Australians in their 'Kevin 07' t-shirts being engaged and interested was a positive balance to the Unions scare campaign about the real and personal impact of an 'out of touch and out of date' government. Hindsight always provides greater clarity - and history has certainly shown that the vast majority of Australian people now regard Prime Minister Howard and his Government very highly. I am still stopped regularly in local shopping centres by those who recount the Howard years with much admiration. We achieved some tremendous things for our country. In the post Menzies era, there has only been one four-term Government with the same Prime Minister throughout. It is a testament to John Howard's character and political skills that he was able to work so successfully, and also so closely with our National Party colleagues, to keep a steady leadership team in place through some very turbulent times, to introduce tough and necessary policy, and to peak at the right time for four successive elections, if not a fifth.

Some have said that many factors in the 2007 election delivered a perfect storm that helped sweep Kevin Rudd to power. But quite a few of those factors were of our own complacent making. We certainly didn't even attempt a modern and creative re-telling of our successful and inclusive 'For all of us' campaign that helped bring the Australian people along with us for so many years. And the fact the electorate wasn't waiting with baseball bats suggests that, as a party and a government, we could and should have done more. People tend to forget that Labor's victory in 2007 was not the landslide that 1996 was for the Coalition. That said, it felt like it in Queensland where 10 percent swings in some booths were common.

Looking back, there were measures we could have taken as a party organisation and a government to ensure that the Prime Minister was able to decide the timing and circumstances in which his stellar political career came to a close. As a proud member of the 'Class of 96', the 2007 election was a sad final epitaph for what was undoubtedly a strong, caring, inclusive, diverse and productive government that always had the national interest at the front of its mind.

Contact Us

If you would like further information, please contact:

Public Leadership Research Group (PLRG)

Andrew Blyth, Group Manager, PLRG-Howard Library

Telephone: 0466 402 415

Email: a.blyth@adfa.edu.au

448740999



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