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POLICY PERSPECTIVES

The Art of Crisis Management:

The Howard Government Experience, 1996–2007

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PAPER No. 2 *Waterfront crisis: efficiency crisis or union bashing?*

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**John Howard Prime
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THE JOHN HOWARD PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY

The Howard Library was established by UNSW Canberra in 2018. It works to improve public leadership and policy in Australia by:

- preserving and making accessible the papers of and the papers of Howard Government ministers;
- advancing research in, and informing debate about, public leadership and policy;
- curating exhibitions that introduce Australians to leadership and policy challenges in a balanced and non-partisan way through the experiences of the Howard Government (1996–2007); and
- contributing to the civic education of all Australians.

The Howard Library curates a permanent Exhibition at Old Parliament House in Canberra, and has a Reading Room at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) Library.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

Policy Perspectives is a series of occasional papers published by the Howard Library which aims to reflect critically on policy decisions of the Howard Government in order to provide context and perspective for contemporary policy debates, and facilitate discussion among the policy community and the broader Australian public.

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EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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The Howard Government faced several crises in its eleven years in office, from the beginning of the 'war on terror', through the (almost simultaneous) collapse of Australia's second airline, Ansett, to the scandal of the Australian Wheat Board's dealings with Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein and the water-front struggles of Australia's stevedoring companies against union control.

How did the Howard Government respond to the crises it encountered; how did it 'frame' these crises for public understanding and support; what role did the media play in explaining particular crises and critiquing Government's

responses; how were the Government's responses evaluated – by it and its critics – after each crisis had passed; was there a pattern from which we can learn to better inform contemporary government responses to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and those that lie in wait?

These questions were the focus of the presentations and discussion at the John Howard Prime Ministerial Library's 2022 annual conference.

Speakers included former Howard Government ministers, academics, media commentators and crisis management experts.



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WATERFRONT CRISIS: EFFICIENCY CRISIS OR UNION BASHING?

Shaun Carney

SOME CRISES LAND ON GOVERNMENTS UNINVITED – an external event or series of events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and what is referred to in the northern hemisphere as the Great Recession but is better known in Australia as the Global Financial Crisis. And some are all a government's own work. Exhibit A in the latter category is the waterfront dispute of 1996–1998. It was 1) a genuine crisis, the most bitterly fought domestic issue of the Howard era and 2) a domestically created one, wholly inspired and generated by the Howard government, aided and abetted by Patrick Stevedores' Chris Corrigan and the National Farmers Federation (NFF), with an honourable mention for their antagonists, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which escalated the dispute once battle had been joined. The union, by its own lights, had no choice: it was fighting for its life.

It is important to distinguish the waterfront confrontation from many of the other crises of the Howard era because it was fully homegrown, the product of the policy desires of the government's senior personnel. It was not a mistake or something that got out of hand. Breaking the union monopoly on waterfront labour was on the Howard government's 'shopping list' when it was elected in March 1996. There would be no easy way to do it and the government knew that from the outset. Security guards in balaclavas and ferocious-looking dogs – which live on as enduring images from the dispute at its height during the autumn of 1998 – were not on the list. Nor did the list include the union-sponsored pickets – at one crucial stage 4000-strong in Melbourne, almost certainly the biggest picket line in Australian history. But the single-minded drive to introduce or ultimately impose substantial, lasting reforms on our docks definitely was on the government's priority list.

From this distance, and with the performance and attitudes of recent governments in mind, it takes a degree of intellectual readjustment to credit that a government of any political stripe could come to office possessing firmly held policy ambitions that had been gestating within its upper echelons for many years, get to work on implementing them immediately and then not bother to be deterred when the going got exceedingly rough. The

unwillingness to fixate on political angles and look for potential exit strategies is the most striking element. Contrast the Howard government's refusal to step back on its waterfront ambitions with the Rudd Labor government's decision to put defer its proposed emissions trading scheme in 2010 after its Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme legislation was defeated in the Senate. Or the Abbott Coalition government's modification of, or retreat on, several tough measures in its first budget. Or the Morrison government's descent into policy stasis and ceaseless wedge politics after its unexpected 2019 election win, chiefly in order to keep itself politically alive.

The conduct of the waterfront dispute and its ramifications have been canvassed and analysed extensively,¹ and some of the dispute's practical aspects will be examined and assessed later in this paper. However, when assessing the dispute as a deliberately created crisis, it is important to understand more fully just why the Howard government was so committed to its course of action. The seeds of the waterfront crisis were sown in the 20 years leading up to the government's election to office. John Howard's steady parliamentary ascent began soon after he was elected as the member for Bennelong in 1974. He spent only ten months as a backbencher before being elevated to the front bench by the new leader of the Opposition Malcolm Fraser in March 1975. After the coalition parties won in a landslide in the post-Dismissal election later that year Howard was appointed Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs. Only two years later, aged 38, he took over as Treasurer, the youngest to do so in the nation's history. In April 1982, during the Fraser government's third and final term, he was elected deputy leader of the Liberal Party.

In terms of advancement, his seven-plus years as a minister were times of great success. But Howard disagreed with Fraser on economic policy. Given that he was Fraser's chief economic policymaker, this was no small thing; as Treasurer, he was frustrated. According to Howard, Fraser was a throwback, 'a creature of the Menzies-McEwen period of economic management, when plenty of benign and protective government intervention appeared to work'.² Howard's view was that Fraser's belief that there

was no need to move on from the old model in favour of neoliberal economic settings was wrong-headed. He was not alone inside the government in holding this view and in its final years, the party room formed groups based on this Fraser-Howard economic policy divide. The 'Dries' advocated for neoliberalism, while the 'Wets' hewed closer to the existing settlement that looked benignly on financial controls, centralised wage-fixing, and tariff protection. Howard became an unofficial standard-bearer of the 'Dries' worldview.

After the Fraser government was defeated, the divide continued, with the Melbourne-based moderate and member for Kooyong Andrew Peacock succeeding Fraser as leader and Howard continuing as deputy leader. The tussle for supremacy between the two men lasted for the remainder of the decade. Howard replaced Peacock as leader in September 1985 and lasted until May 1989, when Peacock returned to the Liberal throne, such as it was. While this ideological and personal tussle continued, what was transpiring on the other side of politics was just as troubling. Between March 1983 and March 1996, the Coalition parties lived through a political era that had hitherto been unimaginable for people on both sides of politics. They lost five elections in a row to a Labor Party that for most of its life had been an election-losing machine. In the 1950s and 60s, the ALP lost eight elections on the trot. And when Labor eventually took office under Gough Whitlam in 1972, its government lasted less than three tumultuous years. The experience in 1980s and early 1990s was altogether different.

The Prices and Incomes Accord ('the Accord'), a corporatist arrangement in which the union movement's peak council worked alongside the Hawke and Keating governments on incomes policy, taxation and welfare measures and other economic settings, prompted an earthquake in the Liberal and National parties. It was, in many respects, the non-Labor parties' worst nightmare: a successful, effective Labor government that enjoyed continued popular support and was treated seriously by the mainstream press. It was one thing to lose four times to Hawke, a once-in-a-generation political phenomenon whose charisma seduced most who encountered him, from Arbitration Commission judges to businessmen to voters and world leaders. But it was something else again to lose, at the 1993 election, to the man who ejected the great election-winner Hawke out of the prime ministership, the abrasive and in many ways unknowable Paul Keating.

All this unthinkable stuff reverberated through conservative

circles. Howard's first stint as leader prompted the emergence of an ideological movement sometimes referred to in the media as the New Right, that sought to put meat on the bones of the Dries' agenda. Some of its activities focused on union-busting industrial relations policy through the HR Nicholls Society, which included in its number such leading business figures and advocates as Ray Evans from Western Mining Corporation and a young Melbourne barrister Peter Costello. The Accord sparked a radicalisation among several employer and producer groups. Prominent among them was the National Farmers Federation, led by pastoralist and businessman Ian McLachlan, which pushed hard for the Coalition parties to take up the cause of reform of the docks to lower costs and reduce bottlenecks. Within the Liberal Party, the weight of opinion shifted back and forth depending on who was leader. In opposition, the Liberals cycled through leaders, going from Peacock to Howard, back to Howard, on to John Hewson and then Alexander Downer before Howard eventually prevailed. In the early summer months of 1994–95, with all other reasonable alternatives exhausted, he was the last man standing. He took over as the Hawke-Keating era was coming to an end, with a clapped-out government peopled by less than stellar ministers and a tacked-together agenda. Howard's path to the prime minister's chair was strengthened from the moment he returned to the leadership.

Looking for an early win

By the time the old order had been re-established with the Coalition's 1996 landslide victory, the hunger for a policy win – a real, targeted win that could pierce the heart of the labour movement – was profound. But Howard had to choose with great care the issue on which he wanted to get that win. On his return as leader, he had imposed constraints upon himself and the Coalition in order to guarantee that they would emerge triumphant, with the largest possible majority, at the election. Picking up on the public's 'reform fatigue' under Keating, he presented himself as a changed man. A key example of this transformation was his acknowledgement that Labor's landmark universal health scheme *Medicare* – long opposed by the Liberals was popular and entrenched and would be retained by a Howard government. This was a signal that unlike Hewson, who had led the Liberals to a surprise defeat at the previous election by wearing his radicalism proudly, Howard would not be a disruptor across the board.

The Howard government established a low-key style in

most areas. Its moderately reformist workplace relations legislation had to be secured through consultation and negotiation, with Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith working delicately and patiently on a compromise with the Australian Democrats' Cheryl Kernot and Andrew Murray in order to get the changes through the Senate. Its renewed proposal for a broad-based goods and services tax, so deadly for the Coalition at the 1993 election, under Howard's leadership had to be couched in sensitive language before being put to the public again at the next election, likely to be held in 1998. Sweeteners in the form of income tax cuts would have to be attached to the policy package. And there would then have to be negotiations with the Senate cross bench on the way to legislating for the new tax system, should the government be re-elected. This was not unilateralism, it was compromise.

The waterfront dispute could be different, a policy arena where Howard's innate instincts to follow his convictions could be let loose. It would also would not involve parliamentary trade-offs. The necessary legislation that would help that along had already been passed as part of the new workplace laws, allowing for individual employment contracts. Hemmed in by Howard's pre-election promise to make Australians 'comfortable and relaxed' – code for not too much economic reform that would reach into homes or cause voters to question their preconceptions and normative views of Australian society and its history – the government needed to focus its reform impulses.

It was natural that under Howard the waterfront – which had long been a totemic issue for business – would be where he landed. Success would satisfy city corporates, small businesses and the primary industry producers who formed the National Party base. The waterfront policy was in place before the 1996 election. It noted that Melbourne's crane loading rates had not changed under the Hawke government's 1991 waterfront reform package and were substantially below ports overseas. The Coalition policy promised to make Australian ports internationally competitive by ending compulsory unionism and by ensuring that operators would, in Howard's words, 'be given power to manage their own enterprises; the monopoly stranglehold of the MUA was to be terminated'.³

It was driven by the policy desires and personalities of John Howard, Peter Reith, and the Nationals' transport and regional development reformer John Sharp. Reith

was a man in a hurry compared with most politicians. He could never see the point of not taking advantage of incumbency by taking action. As he wrote in his diaries published in 2015, 'anyone can say that they are an activist; the test is what you do about it'.⁴ Within weeks of being sworn in as a minister, Reith was combing through polling about voters' attitudes to the pay and practices of waterfront workers and devising ways to persuade Australians that serious change was necessary. Sharp, as Transport Minister, was also a true believer going back a long way. In 1991, Bob Hawke as prime minister had personally invested heavily in trying – and mostly failing – to bring about transformative change on the docks. At one point, echoing his days as ACTU president, he oversaw a 19-hour

negotiation with the MUA and water-side employers. The resulting reform package, agreed upon by the union and employers, led to a substantial reduction in the waterfront workforce and some changes in work practices, but not enough to make a real difference

in productivity or profitability.

Soon after the deal was sealed, Sharp as shadow transport minister told the House of Representatives on 7 May, 1991:

At Question Time today we heard the Prime Minister say that he had involved everybody on the waterfront in the negotiations over the past fortnight, and how happy and delighted they were with the deal. However, the Prime Minister forgot to mention the one group that actually pays for it all: the users – the farmers, manufacturers, retailers and consumers who will pay for it.

Howard, then the shadow minister for industrial relations, interjected, 'They're not important!', to which Sharp responded, 'No, they are not important. For goodness' sake, they are not the Government's mates. Its mates are the wharfies, so it will do a good deal for them!'. In this, years before either man would have an opportunity to do anything about it, was the sense of conviction: changes that severely restricted or even wiped out the MUA was unfinished business. Howard in particular was dismissive, writing later that the 'problem under Fraser and Hawke had been that the reform process had been undertaken through the traditional tripartite process of government, employers and unions'.⁵

Although Reith tried holding talks with the MUA and ACTU early on, tripartism was never the government's

The waterfront dispute could be different, a policy arena where Howard's innate instincts to follow his convictions could be let loose.

preferred course. Instead, the search was on for a stevedoring employer who wanted change as much as the government, but who would be there to take up the fight and see it through? Howard had been sceptical because of past experience.

I had grown tired over the years of receiving lectures from business figures about the need for the government to stand up to militant militancy on the waterfront, only to witness those same lecturers running for cover when the possibility of firm action threatened, however temporarily, their companies' livelihoods.⁶

The government hit paydirt in April 1997 when four officers from the Department of Workplace Relations met with a director of the Australian-owned stevedoring company Patrick, John Young, and a partner from the Melbourne office of the law firm, Graeme Smith. The lead departmental officer, Derren Gillespie, noted later that of the two major stevedoring companies, Patrick appeared more amenable to radical change than its chief competitor, P&O Ports. Patrick was considering two options: corporate restructuring and getting rid of its entire workforce. 'The restructuring option would entail the use of new corporate arrangements to possibly separate the labour elements of stevedoring operations from the infrastructure-hardware component,' Gillespie wrote in his notes of the meeting.⁷ Patrick was uncertain about this path for legal and financial reasons. As it turned out, the company managed to blend the two options over the following twelve months. But importantly, here was the company that Howard, more than anyone else in the government, had been looking for. Gillespie prepared a briefing paper and recommended an interventionist approach.

The interventionist approach undoubtedly entails substantial risks and would almost inevitably involve a major waterfront stoppage, in which the government will be actively involved and which will in the short term impose high economic cost ... There is no doubt that if the government decides to go down this track, it would be imperative to achieve as swift a victory as possible.⁸

Howard signed off on the interventionist strategy in a letter to John Sharp on 21 April 1997. Copies went to Peter Reith, the Treasurer Peter Costello, and the Finance Minister John Fahey. The government's path, decades in the making, was set. Chris Corrigan's Patrick fully embraced the cause. The government judged that one

company would be enough to break the MUA. But Sharp would not be there for the fight; in late 1997, he resigned as a minister amid a controversy over the filling-in of travel allowance forms – he was subsequently exonerated of any wrongdoing – and from then carriage of the issue fell exclusively to Reith.

Getting past the obstacles

The government's key problem when the battle was truly joined, was that it was not itself a direct stakeholder in the stevedoring business. No matter how radical and far-reaching its goals, it was limited in what it could do directly to determine the outcome of a confrontation between the stevedoring companies and the members of the MUA. The government could encourage. It could defend. It could advise. It could act as a banker. Once Patrick had set itself on a path of ridding itself of its unionised workforce, replacing it with new non-unionised employees, the government stumped up soft loans to finance the redundancy payments. But it could not directly run the dispute, a substantial obstacle that left it exposed.

The government was hamstrung by some of the unorthodox methods Patrick used, such as its ill-fated establishment of a training base for a replacement workforce in Dubai in late 1997. The notion that such a thing could be kept secret was folly. Corrigan initially denied knowledge of it before admitting later that this was not true. The government was inevitably drawn into this web of half-truths. As a key player and the initiator, it needed to know a lot, but how much? If it was acting in the public interest, which it believed it was, and providing hundreds of millions of dollars in public money should it not have known everything?

The government was also taking a gamble in how the courts would view this attempt at reform. Patrick attempted to dispose of its unionised employees by surreptitiously offloading them to four separate companies that were then declared bankrupt. The ACTU fought this in the courts, as it had to, because if this had been allowed to pass, the same technique could have been used right across the workforce. Ultimately, the Federal Court of Australia and the High Court of Australia denied the government and the employers a comprehensive win. Essentially, the courts called it a draw, enabling the MUA to survive as the chief union representing waterside labour but giving the stevedoring businesses – Patrick and P&O – the opportunity to achieve greater productivity. Just how much direct economic benefit it produced compared with the

psychological satisfaction it gave members and backers of the Coalition parties is not easily quantified but it is fair to say there was upside in both parts of that equation.

Following the victory of the Australian Labor Party under the leadership of Anthony Albanese in 2022, ending another period in which the Liberal and National parties held office, we can compare three Coalition governments – Fraser, Howard and Abbott/Turnbull/Morrison. Of that troika, the Howard government is the outlier. Four terms, possessing at the beginning clear ideas about what it wanted to do rather than undo. In its first term, it implemented new budgetary processes and guidelines, new workplace laws, rearranged education funding to accelerate and underpin a fundamental shift towards private schools, set about selling the idea of a broad-based consumption tax, and, as we know, went to extraordinary lengths to create change on the waterfront, getting half of what it was after. Add to that its creation of laws in response to the Port Arthur massacre that ensured Australian society would never develop an American-style gun culture. The political dividend was that the ‘conviction’ tag stuck to the government, and Howard, in particular, for most of its remaining time in office. This was so despite the fact that in its third and fourth terms the government experienced problems on a range of fronts: its pursuit of further reform; budgetary discipline; settling on a firm climate change policy; and the failure to seek an electoral mandate for what came to be known as *WorkChoices* at the 2004 election.

The outlier PM

By contrast, the two other Coalition governments were born chiefly out of pure oppositionism and a heightened sense of political crisis within the Labor governments they were fighting in 1975 and 2013. They were highly effective in securing office, both vanquishing two-term Labor governments. But once installed, their policy goals – the value-based systems and policy architecture they wanted to create – were far from clear. These governments both endured for three terms and were characterised by Liberal leadership challenges. In Malcolm Fraser’s case, he was able to fend off an assault by Andrew Peacock. But Tony Abbott was unable to survive a challenge from Malcolm Turnbull, and Turnbull was forced to make way for Scott Morrison. While what the Howard government wanted to do involved serious risk, it also involved conviction: a commitment to do something disruptive and meaningful

on an issue that reflected the worldview of the government’s leading figures – a manifestation of their reason for being in politics. When members of a government of either persuasion say they are serving ‘the national interest’, this is generally what they mean.

Was the waterfront dispute an efficiency crisis, or was it union bashing? Surely it was a combination of the two – a fortuitous issue in which the government’s natural ideological anti-union inclinations converged with the need to fix a practical problem when other possible ways forward had seemingly been exhausted. That said, there were obvious efficiency improvements once the dispute had passed, so the government was justified in driving for change.

Was the waterfront dispute an efficiency crisis, or was it union bashing?

But for all the improvements the crisis produced, the government did not score an unalloyed win. The MUA survived; it still represents most waterside and maritime workers. Greg Combet, who

in his role as ACTU assistant secretary co-ordinated the union movement’s response to the dispute, later judged that the winners had been the MUA and Corrigan, who wound up with a highly profitable business.⁹ And Combet was able to deploy campaigning techniques he learned during the dispute to devastating effect several years later to defeat Howard’s *WorkChoices* workplace laws.

There were other shortcomings in the government’s approach. Its deployment of class warfare tactics to sway public opinion ultimately flopped. By attempting to drum up public outrage over the high wages earned by wharfies, the government found itself grasping at smoke. The campaign worked initially but once the dispute reached its zenith, public attitudes switched in favour of the watersiders on the time-honoured Australian attitude of ‘half your luck!’. This same impulse worked in the Coalition’s favour during the 2019 election campaign when it ran hard – and successfully – on Labor’s intention to curtail franking credits and negative gearing, benefits that did not flow to most Australians.

Similarly, the government’s resort to spin, such as Peter Reith’s office telling gullible journalists that the High Court judgement was a win and not a split-the-difference result, and backgrounding from other sources against the members of the Federal Court chiefly because they did not find in the government’s favour took away from the legitimate gains the government had made.¹⁰ Spin is not a way to promote good governance or maintain the public’s trust. The government also was not always reliable in telling the public what it knew and how closely

it was working with Patrick and other key players. To a degree it did have the tiger by the tail once it threw its weight behind Patrick because Patrick, as the employer, had to take the running. But that did not automatically mean the government was completely in the dark. Reith tended towards finely worded, legalistic answers to legitimate questions about the government's prior knowledge of the Dubai exercise. On the night that Corrigan sacked his workers and locked them out in April 1998, Reith issued a statement simultaneously with Patrick's own announcement. He then held a press conference – this was close to midnight – and the legislation guaranteeing the redundancy money, which had already been approved by Cabinet, was ready to go the next day. That implied a substantial degree of information sharing.

But for Howard, none of this mattered. In his memoirs, he described waterfront reform as 'one of the great achievements of the government.' Importantly for him, it made up for the economic policy disappointments he and other Liberals had experienced in his early years as a minister between 1975 and 1983: 'It kept faith with that vast army of people who supported the government and who had felt the Fraser government had failed the reform test.'¹¹ Reith, who left politics in 2004, also judged that the exercise was worthwhile, given that previously 'no government in living memory had achieved any substantial reform'.¹² The crisis exacted a heavy toll on Reith. Before it, he had been considered a possible future leader, a rival of Peter Costello. But the dispute's controversies marked his leadership card and dimmed his future prospects. He later reflected on the political consequences of his experience, writing that he had always expected to be isolated, and this was how it had turned out. 'While I had the full support of the prime minister, there were very few other public supporters among my colleagues. In fact, there was a deafening silence from nearly all my senior colleagues ... Apart from Howard, and (Alexander) Downer, who was often overseas, (Senator) Amanda Vanstone was the only minister who was fighting in my corner.'¹³ Nonetheless, he had no regrets. 'For the people who want to do something in politics, there's no such thing as easy reform. That's why not many can lay claim to be true reformers.'¹⁴

Early in 2022, as he began the election year campaign, Anthony Albanese attracted scorn from some quarters when he referred to John Howard's observation that the hard work of economic reform is never finished. The suggestion was that he was trying to model himself as some sort of political descendant of Howard. This was untrue; he was merely endorsing Howard's aphoristic contribution.

Soon after, the following article was published in the business section of *The Australian* newspaper.

The nation's ports are close to breaking point with surging stevedore charges, rising union power and poor transport links, adding to business costs and fuelling inflation. Dozens of the nation's biggest port users from miners, grain exporters, steel makers and key importers from builders to food producers have hit out at the dysfunction in ports which is adding to higher prices and undermining the nation's recovery ...¹⁵

Surely this underscored the wisdom of Howard – and Albanese's – truism. Most things that are old eventually become new again. Even the boldest reforms will eventually need refurbishment or replacement. It is likely that we will know the nation is heading for another national waterfront dispute if, sometime in the future, reports like that move from the business section to the political pages. The great unknown is whether Australia's leaders of tomorrow will have the wherewithal to keep going should the dispute become a crisis.

Endnotes

- 1 Tom Frame (ed.), *Back From the Brink, 1997–2001 – The Howard Government, Volume II*, New South, Sydney, 2018, Chapter 10, Shaun Carney, 'The waterfront dispute: high-risk industrial relations reform'. See also Helen Trinca and Anne Davies, *Waterfront – the Battle That Changed Australia*, Doubleday, Sydney, 2000; and Paul Kelly, *The March of the Patriots*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2009.
- 2 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2010, p. 135.
- 3 Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 288
- 4 Peter Reith, *The Reith Diaries*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2015, p. 167
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- 6 Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 290.
- 7 Trinca and Davies, *Waterfront*, p. 36
- 8 Trinca and Davies, *Waterfront*, p. 37
- 9 Kelly, *The March of the Patriots*, p. 387.
- 10 Trinca and Davies, *Waterfront*, p. 249.
- 11 Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 387.
- 12 Reith, *The Reith Diaries*, p. 200.
- 13 Reith, *The Reith Diaries*, p. 200.
- 14 Reith, *The Reith Diaries*, p. 201.
- 15 Eric Johnston, 'Australian ports "close to breaking point" as costs surge', *The Australian*, 17 March 2022.

The Howard Library Annual Conference Series

The Liberal-National Party Coalition led by John Howard won office on 2 March 1996 and continued to hold power until 3 December 2007 (after losing the election held on 24 November 2007). UNSW Canberra is hosting a series of retrospective conferences to assess the performance of the Howard Government. Each event provides the basis for collections of essays contributed by principal participants, key public servants, leading commentators and notable scholars drawing on documents in the John Howard Collection held at the Australian Defence Force Academy Library and other papers managed by the Howard Library at Provisional (Old) Parliament House. This series has become the authoritative treatment of the Howard years.

Contributors are asked to focus critically on the Coalition's policies and performance to reveal the Government's shortcomings and failures. This commitment to a candid critique attracts the attention of the press and current-serving politicians, affording the volumes a substantial public profile at the time of their release. UNSW Press is the series publisher.

The first conference covered the 1996 election, the Coalition's readiness for office, the main policy decisions and practical challenges of the first year of the Howard Government, including gun control and ministerial responsibility.

The second conference dealt with the second and third years of the Coalition's first term in office (1997-98) and most of its second term (1998-2001). It canvasses the High Court's Wik decision and native title, the Patricks waterfront dispute, the constitutional convention, the Coalition's near defeat at the 1998 poll, the Government's response to post-independence violence in Timor-Leste and the introduction of the GST.

The third conference focused on the controversial events leading to the 2001 election including the MV *Tampa* crisis, the collapse of Ansett Airlines, the '9/11' terrorist attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan. It looked at the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, the outbreak of the 'history wars', managing the environment and health care, the challenges faced by the Labor Opposition and the rise of Mark Latham.

The fourth conference was concerned with the period October 2004 to November 2007 and examined the Coalition's control of the Senate, the advent of Work Choices, the progress of Indigenous Reconciliation and the Northern Territory intervention, and the election that saw the Coalition lose office and the Prime Minister his seat in parliament.



Our 2022 conference focused on crisis management and assessed the Howard Government's responses to the crises it encountered in its eleven years in office. From the beginning of the 'war on terror', through the (almost simultaneous) collapse of Australia's second airline, to the scandal of the Australian Wheat Board's dealings with Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein and the waterfront struggles of Australia's stevedoring companies against union control. How did it 'frame' these crises for public understanding and support; what role did the media play in explaining particular crises and critiquing Government's responses; how were the Government's responses evaluated – by it and its critics - after each crisis had passed; was there a pattern from which we can learn to better inform contemporary government responses to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and those that lie in wait? The ensuing papers aim to critically reflect on those policy decisions of the Howard Government in order to provide context and perspective for contemporary policy debates and facilitate discussion among the policy community and the broader Australian public.

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- III Trials and Transformations, 2001-2004 (released 2019)
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- V The Art of Coalition: The Howard Government Experience, 1996-2007 (released 2022)



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