

JOHN HOWARD

PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

**The Art of Crisis Management:
The Howard Government Experience, 1996–2007**

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PAPER No. 9 *The National Security Committee of Cabinet: Did it
provide a consistent response?*

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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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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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THE NATIONAL SECURITY COMMITTEE OF CABINET: DID IT PROVIDE A CONSISTENT RESPONSE?

Peter Jennings

JOHN HOWARD RECOUNTS IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *Lazarus Rising*, his intention after the 1996 election 'to restore a fully functioning and orderly system of cabinet government, with all of the major decisions of the Government being made by cabinet or its properly functioning committees.' Howard continued, 'As promised, I established a National Security Committee of cabinet, which was to have the task of dealing with all Foreign Affairs and Defence issues. ... It was to prove one of the most successful administrative decisions I took.'¹

Howard's positive assessment of the NSC is striking in the context of an autobiography containing some self-critical reflections about his time in office. The Howard Government's NSC strengthened the Prime Minister's position over Defence policy and international crisis management and has largely set the benchmark for how subsequent governments have approached these issues. At its best the NSC gave the Howard government a flexible mechanism to handle international crises and to steer defence policy decisions, at times against the advice of officials. At its worst the NSC could be subject to group think. In some respects, the Committee took on the personality of Howard as its Chair: it was an orderly, prose driven clearing house for decisions, not given to extravagance or policy adventurism.

Over the life of the Howard Government, I interacted with the NSC in a number of different roles. As Chief of Staff to Defence Minister Ian MacLachlan from March 1996 to October 1998 I was involved in the early stages of the NSC's operations through the 'Sandline Crisis' with Papua New Guinea and some ADF deployments. As a Defence official I was closely involved in supporting the NSC's work on the East Timor stabilisation operations and later, on the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. In 2002–03 I was a member of Howard's Cabinet Policy Unit developing a strategic policy framework for the full Cabinet and observing the operation of the NSC in the lead up to the Iraq war.

A further connection to the NSC I should acknowledge is that I suggested it should be created when writing *A Strong Australia: Rebuilding Australia's Defence*, the policy

statement John Hewson (former Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Liberal Party) took to the March 1993 election. In the *Fightback!* tradition *A Strong Australia* was a 170-page tome. It proposed the creation of a tiny National Security Office aligned to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to 'ensure that briefings for Ministers and Cabinet adequately address Australian security concerns in the broad and not simply from a narrow departmental perspective.' Further, it promised that the Coalition will revamp the Cabinet Security Committee (CSC) and complained that the Hawke and Keating Governments had allowed the committee to fall into disuse. The CSC had not formally met, for example, to authorise the deployment of Australian forces to the Gulf War.²

A Strong Australia was released in a hurry in late 1992 to get ahead of a newspaper story about to reveal its contents. The Shadow Defence Minister, Alexander Downer, lamented he did not get his name in the book such was the haste to get copies ready for the media. However, the Cabinet committee idea stuck and was repeated in the Coalition's 1996 election policy statement, *Australia's Defence*, which said: 'The Security Sub-Committee of Cabinet, which has met over recent years on an irregular and ad hoc basis, will be replaced by a National Security Committee (of Cabinet). The NSC was to be 'the focal point of decision-making on national security.'³

Working with Defence Minister Ian MacLachlan our early impression was that an NSC was needed to put more order into a slightly dysfunctional decision-making system. Defence, for example, had not produced an incoming government brief for MacLachlan and had clearly not spent much time looking at the Coalition's policy statements. One early order of business was to take a series of equipment acquisition proposals to the full cabinet, supported by a folder of paperwork not much more advanced than a manufacturer's glossy brochure. At times it was possible to imagine that the Defence Department was content to run itself. Unlike in later years it seemed that responsiveness to Ministers was patchy. Phone calls to senior officials and ADF leaders were not always quickly returned. On bad days it felt that Ministers were regarded as optional

extras not always essential to departmental processes.

The NSC - as Howard structured it - gave more focus and directed the attention of senior ministers and officials to policy work. Howard as prime minister chaired the meetings, with the Deputy Prime Minister, Treasurer, ministers for Defence and Foreign Affairs and Attorney General attending. The particular benefit of the NSC was that officials attended meetings and could participate in discussions, unlike the full cabinet, where only ministers participate. NSC became a vehicle to educate ministers on the complexities of defence and security and defined the work agenda of officials.

The first year of Howard's government was tough. Several ministers resigned or were sacked over (by today's standards) relatively minor infractions of the Ministerial Guidelines. It takes time for a new government to find its feet. To my mind a breakthrough moment for Howard came with the 'Sandline' crisis in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Frustrated with the inability of the PNG Defence Force to quell a secessionist movement on Bougainville, Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan signed a contract with British mercenaries to bring some Russian attack helicopters, weapons and mercenaries to the island. By March of 1997 a giant Antonov aircraft was transiting through Kuala Lumpur with the equipment destined for PNG.

Australia had been following developments from around February. The challenge was to stop the weapons arriving and to persuade Chan to consider 'reasonable alternatives' to deliver a settlement on Bougainville. The NSC sat in regular crisis meetings to determine a course of action. Chan came to Sydney for talks with Howard where some tough potential Australian measures including cutting aid funding were set out. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer visited Port Moresby as did senior Australian officials, again presenting reasonable alternative options.

NSC determined to divert the Antonov to RAAF Base Tindal on March 27 1997, and considered rules of engagement that might be used to force the aircraft to land if necessary. Over a complex and fast changing situation Howard used the NSC to shape a whole of government response, create new policy options, and persuade PNG's pressured leaders to cooperate. *The Australian's* Greg Sheridan wrote at the time:

Throughout the past month the crisis with PNG has been handled primarily by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and Howard himself, chairing the Cabinet's National Security

Committee. The NSC has become an important institution in the Howard Government. ... It meets frequently and has met several times to consider the PNG crisis. Whether because of Howard's threats, his emissaries' persuasiveness or the unravelling situation in the streets of Port Moresby, Chan on Thursday night changed his mind and announced the suspension of the contract with Sandline.⁴

With MacLachlan, I later inspected the two Soviet-era attack and two transport helicopters at RAAF Base Tindal, along with large quantities of ammunition. They were badly dilapidated after years of use in Sierra Leone but still functioning. Had they got to Bougainville a massacre would have ensued. My recollection is that Howard and his ministers were relieved. They had found how to operate the levers of national power in Canberra. The functioning of the NSC was a key to that outcome.

The NSC also had a way of surprising Ministers and officials, and not always on the upside. In February 1998 the NSC discussed options for providing military support to a US-led Operation Desert Thunder to provide a military presence in Kuwait, overflying southern Iraq during negotiations between the UN and Baghdad over weapons of mass destruction. I recall Howard's quiet astonishment at being briefed by the Chief of Defence Force that combat aircraft could not be deployed because they lacked the right level of electronic warfare self-protection systems. This was the beginning of Howard's realisation that the ADF was significantly under-equipped for modern warfare. Years of fitting platforms 'for but not with' weapons and sensors had hollowed out the force.

Then it was Defence's turn to be surprised when the NSC agreed to deploy a squadron of the Special Air Service Regiment to act as a rescue force if Iraq shot down a coalition aircraft. This was clearly an 'option' Defence thought would not be taken up. I received a phone call from an angry Deputy Secretary, asking if the [expletive deleted] NSC didn't realise these forces could be killed or wounded. That risk was very much part of the Committee's thinking. A lesson here is that politicians and officials can make assumptions about each other's views that are often incorrect. NSC is an important means to test these assumptions.

The East Timor crisis starting in 1999 best exemplified the role of the NSC as a crisis management mechanism, but a critical precursor to the crisis - a letter from John Howard to Indonesian President BJ Habibie sent in November 1998

– illustrates the limits of even well-managed bureaucratic processes. Howard considered that Habibie's replacement of President Suharto and apparent willingness to consider an autonomy package for East Timor created a possibility to resolve a long-standing conflict between Indonesia and Timorese separatists. A resolution to decades of bloody fighting in East Timor would remove a major impediment to better relations between Canberra and Jakarta and help Indonesia's standing internationally.

Howard's letter to Habibie, described by Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fisher as 'the most important letter ever written during the coalition government's period of office, leading to the creation of East Timor, never went to Cabinet.'⁵ The letter proposed to Habibie that he consider 'a review mechanism' providing

a means of addressing the East Timorese desire for an act of self-determination in a manner which avoids an early and final decision on the future status of the province.⁶

Howard's model was the New Caledonia Matignon Accords, which provided a ten-year preparation for an independence vote. The mercurial Habibie reacted to the letter by instituting steps to a referendum in East Timor on independence in August 1999.

In his autobiography Howard points to an NSC discussion on Timor's status on 1 December 1998 but the contents of the letter, in particular the idea for an act of self-determination, were developed by Howard in discussion with Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Key departments like Defence were not consulted. Did this amount to a failure of process?

Howard notes that the Canberra consensus firmly supported the status quo, with East Timor remaining incorporated in the Indonesian Republic: 'It was not thought appropriate to question Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor.'⁷ Had the letter been part of standard NSC processes it is likely the bureaucracy would have recommended against sending it. It was clearly a major departure in Australian foreign policy and its reception in Jakarta was not without risk, including the possibility of conflict if Indonesia or pro-Indonesian elements in Timor opposed an Australian stabilisation mission. That said, the letter produced better outcomes for an independent Timor Leste, ended the international opprobrium over Jakarta's occupation and has since allowed for generally better bilateral relations between Canberra and Jakarta.

My conclusion is that the NSC, perhaps like all policy clearing houses, works best with incremental policy change. Major shifts in policy tend to come from reactions to strategic shocks or indeed from a Prime Minister with a small inner circle looking to make formative change.

With Habibie locked on a path to an East Timor referendum in August 1999, the NSC in March that year 'ordered that the 1st Brigade, based in Darwin, be brought to a state of readiness in June', a decision Howard described as 'prescient'.⁸ In the build up to, and during the deployment of the INTERFET stabilisation force in September 1999, NSC established a 'battle rhythm' of meeting twice a day, once early in the morning and again in the evening to assess developments. Defence and the wider bureaucracy organised itself around this procedure, servicing the governments information requirements and building the international coalition, securing UN endorsement and Japanese funding for the mission.

Supporting the NSC in crisis management mode was demanding, but a comfortable enough process that government departments could adapt to meet. Government agencies love predictable engagement with Ministers. The practices established during the early months of the East Timor crises were repeated for later military operations in Solomon Islands, Iraq, Afghanistan, redeployments to Timor Leste and many disaster response activities in the Indo-Pacific. The NSC works well to position the Prime Minister as the 'first among equals' at the table, and therefore the personal work habits, quirks and interests of the Prime Minister give shape to the success or failure of the NSC's processes. As an orderly person with a calm demeanour and a substantial appetite for work, Howard worked well with the NSC system, and his Prime Ministership benefited from it.

In Defence crisis management, things can and do go wrong. The ADF chafed at times at the NSC's intent to reach right into the tactical heart of military operations. This is not how the 'operational art' was (indeed still is) taught at Staff College. The military hope is that government will give them a desired end state and then leave the commanders to shape the operation. I doubt that a war has ever been fought that way by democratic states. The reality is that the Prime Minister and Ministers want to know the minute-by-minute action of operations. Managing that relationship and sustaining a rapid flow of accurate information is central to the NSC's success.

Howard's management of the Iraq and Afghanistan

deployments following 9/11 enabled the NSC to slip back into a rhythm of meetings and decisions that provided sound management of these operations, particularly in their early years. In his autobiography Howard is unambiguous that the key decision for Australia immediately after 9/11 was the extent to which we would support the United States through the ANZUS alliance. I did not then and still do not think that we had an option not to be militarily involved and still expect Washington to actively support an alliance with Australia.

Howard's aims for the Australian deployments initially set achievable goals which allowed our forces to return to home relatively early in the fighting. A collective failure of the NSC and the wider national security system was not to anticipate that a coalition entering both countries would likely have to face a long and disastrously costly occupation. To my recollection that risk was not seriously contemplated, nor briefed to government by Defence and the intelligence agencies. There was a deep interest in intelligence reporting about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, which ultimately was not attuned to Saddam Hussein's bizarre choice to deny international verification of what was soon discovered, that there was no significant chemical or biological programs and nothing on nuclear weapons. Why did Saddam refuse to come clean about the absence of such weapons? In my view he was gambling that potentially possessing WMD might deter an attack, not least from Iran and possibly even from the United States. But the international Coalition's obsession about whether Saddam possessed WMD got in the way of what should have been a more considered assessment of the long-term consequences of occupation.

NSC was also interested in how long it would take to defeat Saddam's military, a question answered in three weeks in March 2003. As for the longer haul, Australia and the wider coalition suffered from a failure of strategic imagination. The NSC needed more access to contrary voices. Here is another lesson about decision-making machinery for military operations: a successfully running machine doesn't function well with discordant inputs. The Government wanted to deliver their alliance objectives and Defence wanted to shape a deliverable set of operational activities which could be seen to underpin the government's objectives. These intents shape NSC discussions about the decisions needed for the day – the levers governments can pull. In this context there is little room for dissenting voices arguing for alternate propositions, yet precisely that type of input is needed to, at least, test the risk of groupthink dominating the discussion.

Another weakness of national decision making on Defence operations is that, once forces are deployed, options for sharp departures from current policy lines are very limited. In Afghanistan, for example, and well beyond the life of the Howard Government, NSC struggled to find meaningful strategic purposes for the deployed forces. A primary driver was alliance cohesion and a secondary concern about Afghanistan as an incubator for Islamist terrorism was legitimate. But how did those objectives connect to reconstruction in Oruzgan Province, or counterinsurgency, or counterterrorism? And notwithstanding substantial diplomatic effort, Australia struggled to shape broader coalition strategic objectives in Washington and NATO Headquarters in Brussels.

For all of the evident international failings of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, Howard achieved his key strategic objective, which was to build a closer alliance relationship with the United States. In 2022 that is an even more critical strategic objective. The NSC was the central mechanism enabling Howard to steer that objective. Nothing can escape the fact that Australia paid a heavy price for these conflicts in terms of lives lost and people injured, but the Australian Defence Force emerged a stronger and more competent military as a result and had become more adept at working with and for governments.

It is briefly worth mentioning the role of the NSC in non-crisis management. Under Howard the Committee became the essential decision-making body for Defence policy development like the 2000 Defence White Paper and for military capability and acquisition decisions. While Howard took major issues, like the White Paper, to full cabinet for endorsement, NSC was where the detailed work was done to think through strategic issues and make decisions trading off capability and cost.

This was valuable training for Howard, and his senior ministers, many of whom spent years in their portfolios and built a formidable practical expertise that was certainly the equal of the Secretaries, agency heads and senior ADF personnel who attended the NSC. Having worked through the Timor experience and the White Paper development that followed it, Howard never felt the need to produce another Defence White Paper: he had thought through the issues.

Mostly, NSC ministers accepted Defence advice on capability. A notable exception was the decision, led by Defence Minister Brendon Nelson in 2006, to acquire Super Hornet aircraft as a bridging capability to sustain the Air Force

fighter capability after the retirement of the F-111 strike bomber and the planned arrival of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. That decision, to put it mildly, came as something of a surprise to Defence, which had resolutely been backing the F-35 to arrive on time. Nelson's judgement was that Defence was working with a 'conspiracy of optimism' about likely time frame for the F-35's arrival:

From a defence perspective – understandably, I could sense that the Minister was not someone who should be allowed to 'interfere'. He was possibly even an obstacle to be overcome. My advisors and I then took the entire plan apart piece by piece in my office. We looked at every year out to 2018. The risk of an air capability gap was not only real – in my non-expert opinion it was highly likely.

Nelson briefed Howard who told him to 'work up' a proposal for Cabinet for a Super Hornet acquisition. Nelson reflected on the moment some years later:

It was lonely at this time. There was no enthusiasm in Defence for moving from the 'plan'. However, I was convinced that the stakes were too high not to do so. The final decision was made in March 2007 to invest \$6.6 billion on 24 Super Hornets and infrastructure.⁹

Speaking of the Minister's relationship with the Defence Organisation, Nelson judged that:

This relationship needs to be a compact of mutual commitment and responsibility. In most cases I took up the cause of the ADF and the department with everything I could muster, accepting their advice and running with it.

But Nelson's time as Defence Minister will in part be remembered because of his exercise of judgement to press for the Super Hornet capability against the prevailing Defence viewpoint. Like Howard's letter to Habibie the Super Hornet decision was the result of the Prime Minister working with a small inner circle of Ministers and advisers, rather than taking Departmental advice through the NSC.

Under John Howard the NSC became the key instrument for managing Brendon Nelson's 'compact of mutual commitment and responsibility' between the Government and the wider national security community. Since 2007 successive Prime Ministers have chosen the same management structure. NSCs in my view come to reflect the work habits and styles of their Chair, the Prime Minister. The system is far from flawless, but it enables an effective engagement of political leadership and administrative

expertise. Not surprisingly Howard and his Ministers grew more effective crisis managers as they gained experience and more shrewd decision makers on Defence strategy and capability acquisition.

Howard's judgement in his autobiography was that

The consistency and discipline the Howard Government displayed regarding Foreign Policy and Defence was due overwhelmingly to the effective way in which this committee operated.¹⁰

On balance I share that judgement, reflecting that committees are only as consistent and disciplined as their members.

Reacting to this paper at the John Howard Prime Ministerial Library June 2022 Conference, Howard observed that the NSC in his judgement worked well because it 'held everybody together'. He noted that there were only three or four occasions when he felt the need to hold ministers-only meetings and that it was 'valuable to have high calibre officials' to inform discussions.

The NSC has now operated for more than twenty-five years and has been chaired by seven successive Prime Ministers. It has clearly become one of the most significant Cabinet Committees and has been used to structure a significant number of military operations and crisis management situations. NSC decisions have shaped Defence White Papers produced in 2000, 2009, 2013 and 2016. The Committee has agreed literally hundreds of billions of dollars in defence equipment projects.

Overwhelmingly, the NSC has been a successful instrument of Government. Yet the Howard government experience is such that innovative and dramatic changes of policy and creative responses to complex geopolitical problems are more often the product of Prime Ministers working with a small inner circle of advisers. Big policy changes tend not to emerge from standard cabinet processes. The NSC has been at its best managing the routine of defence equipment decision making or attending to the daily battle rhythm of operational deployments and crisis management. At its worst, the NSC might at times have encouraged policy timidity and group think – often marked by Ministers saying they intend to follow military or Defence advice. As a clearing house of steady state policy, the NSC has an enviable reputation, but sweeping policy change is more the provenance of individual leaders taking creative but risky decisions, rather than to be found in the incremental work of government committees.

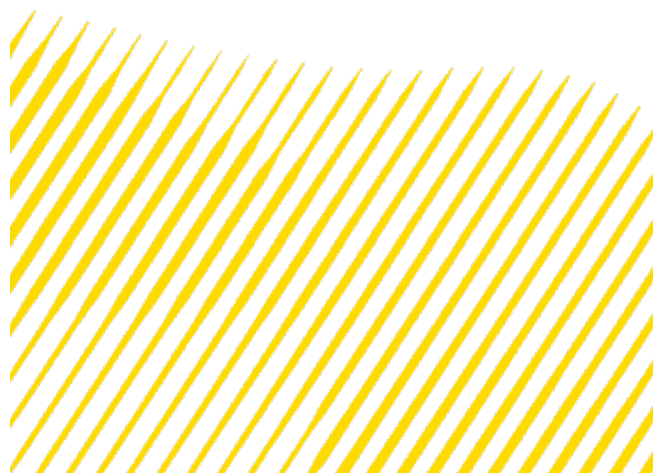
One NSC moment worth reflecting on was the decision taken on 18 April 2000 to create the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). The now-declassified Cabinet Decision sets out the rationale for this decision:

There are two key reasons to establish an independent institute to study strategic policy. The first is to encourage development of alternative sources of advice to Government on key strategic and defence policy issues. The principles of contestability have been central to our Government's philosophy and practice of public administration, but these principles have not been effectively implemented in relation to defence and strategic policy, despite the vital national interests and significant sums of money that are at stake. The Government has found in relation to the COLLINS Class Submarines project for instance, and more recently in relation to White Paper process, that there are almost no sources of alternative information or analysis on key issues in defence policy, including the critical questions of our capability needs and how they can best be satisfied. The ASPI will be charged with providing an alternative source of expertise on such issues. Second, public debate of defence policy is inhibited by a poor understanding of the choices and issues involved. The ASPI will be tasked to contribute an informed and independent voice to public discussion on these issues.¹¹

It is a mature government, confident in its own policy processes, that takes steps to create an independent organisation to provide 'alternative information or analysis' of policy issues. I do not know if John Howard consciously made the connection between the creation of the NSC – an orderly clearing house for national security policy – and ASPI, a public body designed to provide contestability in policy analysis. I think Howard was aware of the risks of too much policy incrementalism and group think in national security policy making. ASPI was his solution: a mechanism to challenge whatever policy settings might be dominating Canberra's imagination. By creating these two bodies Howard was not simply making 'administrative decisions' as he claims in his autobiography. He was also shaping how Australia has debated and thought-through difficult national security issues over the last several decades.

Endnotes

- 1 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising: A personal and political autobiography* (Harper Collins, 2010) p. 237–238.
- 2 Liberal National Coalition, *A Strong Australia: Rebuilding Australia's Defences*. (Canberra, October 1992) p. 130–32. A PDF is available here: <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22library/partypol/1145624%22>.
- 3 Liberal National Coalition, *Australia's Defence* (1996) p. 4. (Author's collection.)
- 4 Greg Sheridan, 'Why peace must take priority', *The Weekend Australian* 22 March 1997, p. 21.
- 5 Tim Fischer, quoted by the ABC, *The Howard Years – Episode 2: Whatever it Takes*. Series first aired November-December 2008. Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhdGvN_JQbs.
- 6 The letter is available as an appendix in: David Connery, *Crisis Policymaking: Australia and East Timor Crisis of 1999*. (ANU, E-Press, 2010). <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p501/html/appendix.xhtml?referer=&page=13#toc-anchor>.
- 7 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising*. *Op.cit.* p. 337.
- 8 *Ibid.* p. 342.
- 9 Brendan Nelson, Address to the 2017 Chief of Airforce Symposium - political perspective. Canberra, 3 March 2017. <https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/speeches/2017-chief-airforce-symposium>.
- 10 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising*. *Op.cit.* p. 238.
- 11 Cabinet memorandum JH00/0131 – Establishment of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute – Decision, 18 April 2000. <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/NAAMedia/ShowImage.aspx?B=202981504&T=PDF>.



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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