A mildly critical perspective on a gently critical retrospective: Assessing the Hawke Government


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I must confess to having become very ill-tempered by the time I’d read the opening pages of this book. First, there was Hawke’s Foreword. Within ten lines he had launched a tirade at his government’s critics—specifically, David Day, a contributor to the volume. Day, a leading historian, acclaimed biographer of John Curtin (1999) and Ben Chifley (2001), and author of about half a dozen other major works of Australian history would, of course, know nothing about the Australian Labor Party—so the ex-Prime Minister rightly berates him as a purveyor of ‘fanciful nonsense’. Day, says Hawke, ‘sets himself forth as a guardian of Labor virginity … he is quite wrong … economic reform was not the enemy of social progress, but the necessary condition for it’ (p. v).

Naturally, I lacked the patience to wait until page 399 to find out what had provoked Hawke’s abuse, so I quickly turned to Day’s ‘fanciful nonsense’ in an effort to dispel my puzzlement over why the author of the book’s Foreword found it necessary to vent his spleen in this way. My puzzlement, however, increased when I read Day’s debatable, but only mildly critical, account of the place of the Hawke Government in Australian history. Hawke sought to bring about ‘a radical transformation’ in order that Australia ‘could meet the increasing economic challenges that it was being forced to face’ (p. 399). He aimed to ‘restore Labor’s credibility as a party of government’ (p. 399) after the trauma of the Whitlam years. In particular, Day writes, Hawke wanted to revive ‘Labor’s tattered reputation for economic management without worrying overly much about fulfilling Labor’s wider agenda’ (p. 402). The Prime Minister, according to Day, drew ‘on his own understanding of the Labor tradition to justify his cautious approach’ (p. 402). The problem of stagflation meant that old Keynesian policies of the kind applied by Curtin and Chifley in the 1940s, and Whitlam in the 1970s, would no longer work, and Labor’s new approach was, in large part, a response to this reality. The government placed greater emphasis on achieving economic growth—increasing the size of the economic ‘cake’, rather than bothering too much about how to divide up ‘the existing cake’ (p. 403). Day recognises the government’s achievements, yet also its limitations. Gradually, Labor voters became disillusioned. Once ‘sustained in their attachment to the Labor Party by the idea that it was there to defend their interests and that it stood for a fairer and more caring society than the conservatives’, these people were ‘understandably … no longer so sure’ (p. 407).

I don’t know whether there is a book editor’s Code of Ethics but, if so, I imagine that ‘Thou shalt not permit abuse of contributors in the Foreword, even when author of said Foreword is thin-skinned former Prime Minister’ would probably be an uncontroversial inclusion. Nevertheless, in their Introduction our editors are hardly less defensive than their leader, and certainly no less celebratory: ‘the pace of change and the dramatically globalised environment in which Labor had to govern destabilised and disappointed some Labor supporters’. Fortunately, however, ‘The people … kept supporting the Hawke approach’ (p. 2).

Well, sort of. By 1990, less than forty per cent of ‘The people’ were still prepared to give Labor their primary vote, even if about half were still willing to direct their preferences to the ALP. When you consider that the Coalition was prepared to go to the 1990 election without a health policy, this preference for the ALP was quite understandable.

If consumers were provided with a choice of only two brands of toothpaste in their local supermarket, *Whiteteeth* and *Fluoridemaster*, and slightly more than half preferred *Whiteteeth* despite the fact that both brands ruined your gums, you wouldn’t necessarily say that ‘The people support the *Whiteteeth* approach’—especially if there were rumours circulating that *Fluoridemaster* contained strychnine rather than fluoride. And while some
Anyway, the editors, having analysed ‘the weight of evidence, the outcomes, and the overall judgement of contributors to this book … find that the Hawke Government’s management of economic reform has been vindicated’ (p. 2). Phew! That’s a relief. It would have been dreadful to have assembled such a glittering cast of ex-Hawke Government Ministers, former or current Labor staffers, and ALP and union officials—alongside the academics, public servants, NGO activists, and journalists—and to have concluded that it was a miserable failure. All the same, it’s not clear how many of Australia’s million or so unemployed of the early 1990s were asked for their views. I’ve checked with my sister and she wasn’t, but she’s a forgiving soul and, like Ralph Willis in his chapter on the economy, would perhaps in any case be willing to absolve the government from most of the responsibility for the recession and blame the Reserve Bank instead.

The editors’ finding in favour of the Hawke Government was perhaps not surprising as they started out ‘with the intention of compiling a positive, though not uncritical retrospective of this dynamic and effective period of government’ (p. 2). In the event, Ryan and Bramston have generously decided to include criticisms of the Hawke Government so that ‘all strands of opinion in the current political debate’ are represented, ‘outdated though they seem to us’ (p. 2).

It’s unclear precisely which particular criticisms the editors regard as ‘outdated’: that is, if they don’t regard any criticism as superfluous. Do they include the chapter by Patrick Dodson, Martin Mowbray and Warren Snowden, which understandably draws attention to the ALP’s failure to deliver on either national land rights or a treaty in the 1980s? Another candidate is Tony Moore’s account of the Hawke Government’s tendency to do deals with the leaders of interest groups and social movements (he calls it ‘elite pluralism’) in a manner that led many citizens to feel disfranchised and excluded from the decision-making process. Perhaps the editors are worried by Moore’s claim that the movement away from Whitlamite social democratic universalism in welfare provision to the targeting of the disadvantaged produced taxpayer resentment—downward envy—and the kind of backlash against special interests that helped propel the Howard Coalition to power?

Or is it Barry Jones’s chapter that is wrong-headed? Jones was a member of the government and is naturally prepared to defend its achievements. But he can also see serious deficiencies in its approach to government that have created some very difficult problems for the party in the long-term. Labor was able to float the dollar, allow foreign banks into the country and reduce protection because of Hawke’s influence with the unions, and the support of the Opposition and media. Yet in the absence of much public or parliamentary debate about these policy directions, voters ‘felt left out of the loop’ (p. 415). So, apparently, did ministers: when Jones asked Michael Duffy, after an economic policy announcement, ‘How did that happen?’ Duffy gave a kind of upside-down version of the famous Pat Kennelly quip about having the numbers. ‘It’s purely a matter of numbers’, said Duffy. ‘There’s four of them and only 23 of us’ (p. 412).

Jones is also concerned by the redefinition of politics as administration, the increasing role of the bureaucracy in policy formulation, the reduction of parliament’s significance, the declining role of debate within the ALP itself in influencing policy outcomes, the alienation of Labor loyalists from party processes, the related problem of the entrenchment of factionalism, the nationally debilitating commodification of education and research and a general failure to provide what Gary Gray calls ‘after-sales service’ (p. 423) for its voters. These failures led to the accumulation of grievance and, eventually, to the humiliation of 1996. ‘Are there any core beliefs we would never abandon?’ (p. 425), he asks.

As far as I can see, no clear answers to this question emerge from the Hawke years, or from this book. ‘Fuck the past’, Hawke once told his staff,

Or the past will fuck you. The past is both an inspiration and a dragon to slay. We have been about dragon-slaying. No tinkering, no cuddly blankets. We take the best of Labor traditions and we also change tack. We take the best from the past, but if it’s an anchor chain, cut it (p. 432).

This is all very well, but when a party leadership is increasingly remote from its own rank and file, the question of what is best from the past and what is rubbish is liable to be left pretty much in the
Barry Jones’s question remains: ‘Are there any core beliefs we would never abandon?’

In a recent issue of *Australian Fabian News* Wayne Swan commented that ‘Theoretical fashions come and go … but through all this, the values of the Australian Labor Party have been constant’ (2003, p. 10). It would be tempting simply to ignore vapour of this kind, except that it is the kind of justification used by party power-brokers, whether in government or opposition, to do whatever they like. Hawke and Keating both mastered the rhetoric in the 1980s—Hawke gives it another run in this book—and those who would hope to emulate them learned the lesson well. But Jones’s question remains: ‘Are there any core beliefs we would never abandon?’ Swan’s article provided an answer of sorts:

There remains a belief that no matter the circumstances of your birth or your coming to Australia, that an active government will intervene to ensure everyone gets a go, that those who are vulnerable will be given a chance. At the core of the Labor belief is a moral view that every individual is intrinsically worthy and has a contribution to make to the common wealth of our nation (2003, p. 10).

John Howard and Cardinal Pell would not disagree, but neither seems likely to join the ALP any time soon.

The decision to include criticism was a very wise one on the part of the editors because it has saved them from producing what might have been very dull propaganda. I said I began this book feeling ill-tempered. By its conclusion, I was able to see its value and achievement. It will certainly be a useful compendium of information on the Hawke era, but it also contributes to our understanding of the government and its larger-than-life leader. Bramston himself is insightful on Hawke’s leadership style, judiciously drawing on psychobiographical techniques without becoming bogged down in amateur psychology. Neal Blewett provides an elegant scholarly account of the Hawke Cabinet. Brian Howe writes with authority and without rancour on the Hawke Government’s achievements in social policy. (Peter Walsh, of course, was rather less generous about Howe and his works in his *Confessions of a Failed Finance Minister*). Kim Beazley and John Kerin are workmanlike in their essays on foreign affairs and defence in the one case, and primary industry in the other. Susan Ryan usefully surveys Labor’s achievements in women’s policy and John Button is, as usual, informative on employment and industry policy. He’s by no means unwilling to point to weaknesses in government policy. ‘Labour adjustment packages and retraining programs’, he comments, are not much use in places—such as country towns—‘where there is no alternative source of employment’ (p. 168). Efforts to encourage investment in the regions were patchy and ‘Australia lacked the structural adjustment mechanisms of a country such as Sweden’ (p. 168)—a reminder that something of Australian social democrats’ partiality to Swedish models survived the 1980s. There are worthwhile contributions on health (by Stephen Duckett) and education (by Jim McMorrow). Julian Disney, on social welfare, becomes tedious in his complaints about ‘extremists’ (= Peter Walsh?) in the government.

Bill Kelty writes engagingly, as does Bob Hogg. They probably each have a good book in them on these matters. Kelty discusses the Accord and relations between the unions and government. Hogg reviews Labor campaigning and is amusing when he discusses the reactions of Hawke’s advisors to the great man’s suggestion in early 1983 that an advertisement be made with ‘Sir Richard Kirby extolling his virtues’;

Somehow we never managed to track Dick down. Not that we didn’t try, of course. We went outside and looked around. We stopped people in the street and asked, ‘Do you know where Dick is?, and always drew a blank. Rather than make an issue of it, we found a gentle way around what was not a great idea. (p. 106)

The journalistic contributions to this book are patchy. Amanda Buckley is supposedly writing about Hawke’s love affair with the media and electorate: she has a lot to say about the media, very little about electors. Geoff Kitney thinks that ‘The tragedy of the Kirribilli agreement is that it did not incorporate an arbitration process in the event of a failure of one of the parties to honour it’ (p. 438). Now I’m probably one of those nostalgic types that Hawke, Ryan and Bramston don’t like much, but I reckon the tragedy of the Kirribilli agreement lies in its arrogant betrayal of one of the most fundamental principles of Labor democracy: that the party leadership is in the gift of caucus, and caucus alone.

Imagine the following scene. Curtin and Chifley meet at the Hotel Kurrajong in 1944 to discuss the
leadership of the Federal ALP. Essington Lewis, the industrialist, and Albert Monk, ACTU Secretary, are there as witnesses. An agreement is signed. Curtin will retire after the 1946 election and allow Chifley to become Prime Minister.

No, it’s not very plausible, is it? Call me old-fashioned, but in those days, party leaders still had a bit of respect for internal party democracy.

In some ways, the Kirribilli agreement reflects both the reasons for this government’s success, and for its ultimate demise. It was merely another example—if a somewhat dramatic one—of the Hawke Government’s partiality to backroom deals. Its success in these endeavours help explain its longevity.

Yet the government’s way of governing via backroom deals also had its dangers, and may ultimately have helped bring it undone. The chapter by Phillip Toyne and Simon Balderstone on the environment is telling, if unconsciously so, on this point. It rightly points to the government’s substantial record on the environment, yet we also learn that Balderstone moved straight from the Australian Conservation Foundation into the office of the Minister for the Environment, Graham Richardson, in 1987. One minute, you’re an advocate for a social movement in the marketplace of policy and ideas; the next, you have privileged access to a minister as one of his staff members. This practice raises interesting questions about the dangers of social movements being co-opted by government, but equally serious questions about democratic governance.

Although Labor has always had its own twist on the relationship between government and citizen (due to its special relationship with the union movement), governments in democratic, pluralist societies are supposed to be able to adjudicate between various interests and movements. But how can you do that when you have in your office someone who was acting as a spokesperson for one of those interests or movements last week, or even last year? As other chapters in this book suggest, this pattern was not unusual. When combined with the perception, by no means unjust, that Hawke and some of his ministers were rather too close to various rich mates, is it any wonder the Howard Opposition’s claim that Labor had become the captive of special interests gained traction in the mid-1990s? Is it so surprising that Howard’s empty promise to govern for ‘all of us’ had electoral appeal?

In his Foreword, Hawke sums up what he sees as his government’s achievement in this way: ‘our governments, in the best traditions of our party, created a more compassionate society and a more efficient economy at home and a more independent and respected nation abroad’ (vii). This is a reasonable and compelling claim. The Hawke Government was indeed in many respects an impressive performer, and its record of policy achievement is substantial. Yet in 2003, Australia seems to me less compassionate as a society than in 1983, even if its economy is notably more efficient. It is arguably less independent in world affairs, and possibly less respected abroad—at least, outside the United States.

Something has gone badly wrong.

The stock explanation for this troubling outcome would focus on the appalling Howard, but that seems to me simplistic. Several contributors to this volume indicate the complex ways in which particular failures of governance, vision and policy in the Hawke years provided Howard with his chance, and help set up the conservative hegemony of the 1990s.

Moreover, the Hawke Government’s often ‘passionless and managerial’ (p. 435) approach to government poses particular difficulties to Federal Labor today. How do you enthuse a party rank and file and an electorate when all you have is a contestable claim that you’ll manage the country (= economy) better than the other fellows? When Hawke came to office in 1983, he was promising much more: social welfare advances, a national health scheme, the protection of the Franklin River in Tasmania from destruction. Above all, he made a plausible claim that his government would reconstruct and reform a shattered economy, and reconcile a divided nation. Whereas Hawke came to office in 1983 with a somewhat vague, yet attractive vision—and one to which his practice in government did give some reality—Labor will next come to office with … what? Will Labor have anything that is new, anything that will revitalise a bored and cynical electorate, a disillusioned party membership? That’s a big question currently exercising Australian social democracy.

REFERENCES
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