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Howard Government Retrospective I

"1996"

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Introduction

Perspectives and Polemics: Assessing the Howard Government

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To say that something is being ‘consigned to history’ might infer that an object has no contemporary relevance or continuing significance; that it is best forgotten and wisely struck from memory; and, that its slide from the present to the past ought to be welcomed. Consigning something to history is analogous in many instances to saying ‘good riddance’ to an unwanted object unworthy of lament. But there is a positive sense in something being ‘consigned to history’. There is the inference that something has been placed beyond the uncertainty and confusion of the present; that it ought to be treated with dignity and respect because it provides a context in which the future might be anticipated; that its shape and substance can be more closely and conscientiously examined than before. In most Western societies, history is respected and revered, preserved and presented as a treasured storehouse of insights and wisdom, promise and possibility. Although the claim that those who are ignorant of history are likely to repeat its mistakes is met with some scepticism because students of history sometimes replicate its tragedies, there is no doubt that commentary immediately

after an event will never stand as the final word. Dispassionate historical analysis takes time and the benefits ought to be savoured.

The Howard Government is now being consigned to history. I base this statement on four observations. First, the Howard Government was elected more two decades ago and defeated nearly a decade ago. The passage of time has allowed the dust to settle making the genuine successes and actual failures of the Coalition a little easier to discern. Only some of what appeared to matter between 1996 and 2007 now matters. Decisions that were hailed as triumphs and policies derided as failures are now free from the forces that obscured their character and the immediacy that concealed their significance. The introduction of the GST, for instance, did not produce the range of adverse outcomes forecast by pundits. Although supporting the new tax in the Senate contributed to the demise of the Australian Democrats, the party’s leader Meg Lees continues to believe the country needed a consumption tax. The passage of time has made it possible for historians to apply the principles of their discipline to the place of the Howard Government in the nation’s life.

Second, the Howard Government is no longer the ‘previous Coalition Government’ against which the performance of subsequent governments is compared. The performance of the Rudd and Gillard Governments was routinely compared with the achievements of the Howard Government. These contrasts may have been unfair and the conclusions drawn inaccurate but they were still made. Commentators noted the buoyancy of the economy during the Coalition’s rule under John Howard and Peter Costello (1996-2007) with its health under Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan (2007-10), and then Julia Gillard and Wayne Swan (2010-13), and finally (and briefly) Kevin Rudd and Chris Bowen (2013). But after the Liberal Party’s decision to substitute Malcolm Turnbull for Tony Abbott as leader in September 2015, the Turnbull Government has been more frequently compared with the Abbott Government, with Coalition parliamentarians

regretting the leadership spill emphasising the contrasts. In the same way that the Coalition could criticise the Keating Government by comparing it to the performance of the Hawke Government, thereby effectively consigning the Whitlam Government to history, the continuing tension between Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull has effectively hastened the eclipse of the Howard Government's significance as a political yardstick and allowed more measured and less polemical historical assessment.

Third, the publication of first-hand accounts of the Howard Government has considerably enlarged the source materials upon which historians must necessarily rely to make judgements and draw conclusions. John Howard has been the subject of biographies by David Barnett with Pru Goward published in 1997¹ and by Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen published in 2007.² Notably, the first appeared not long after John Howard became Prime Minister; the second not long before he became a former Prime Minister. John Howard produced his own very substantial account, *Lazarus Rising: A Personal and Political Autobiography*, in October 2010. Memoirs and diaries from senior ministers have been produced or published by Peter Costello,³ Tony Abbott⁴ and Peter Reith.⁵ In each instance, these works are explanations or clarifications of decisions and events that the participants expect historians to take into account when assessing the Howard Government. They are better treated as historical resources rather than as histories in their own right.

Fourth, the official records relating to the Howard Government's first year in office will be made available to researchers on 1 January 2019. This might seem an odd moment – 23 years after the Coalition was elected in March 1996. Under amendments to the Archives Act 1983 approved by the Federal Parliament in May 2010, the closed period for Commonwealth records will be gradually reduced from 30 years to 20 years by 1 January 2021. As a function of the reduced waiting time, records from 1996 will be available in 2019. It is, of course, very difficult for historians to produce critical and comprehensive assessments of the Howard Government without access to official records which will disclose confidential advice, guidance and the warnings that were provided to the Government, the timing of particular announcements or the basis for certain decisions, and the names and motivations

of those members and senators who agreed or disagreed privately with policy options. Official records may also hint at controversies that were avoided, scandals that were concealed and disagreements that were subdued. Reducing the closed period also increases the opportunity for researchers to conduct interviews with surviving participants based on primary source materials. With the release of official records not far away, historians will be able to assemble the best picture possible of the Howard Government.

In assessing the years 1996-2007, researchers also need to be self-aware and conscious of that well-known taxonomy that suggests the historical record passes through at least three well-defined stages. In the first stage, history is written by the victors or survivors, largely from published sources, within a framework of 'conventional wisdom' shared by the participant writers. In the second stage, the conventional paradigm handed down from the participant writers is challenged, often a priori, by a later generation of non-participant writers. In the third stage, non-participant writers not only challenge the received paradigm, but perceive the evidence (and the questions to be asked of it) in entirely different ways from earlier generations of participant writers.

The rise and fall of the Howard Government has already been described by a handful of active participants including journalists (who made the news as much as they reported it), public servants and cabinet ministers. These are essentially personal accounts of what was seen, heard and done although the publication of political memoirs relies upon familiarity with matters that, in some instances, remain the subject of confidentiality or security provisions. Most of these works appeared in the aftermath of the Coalition's electoral defeat in November 2007. In my view, the transition through the first stage of the taxonomy is now largely complete.

The history of the Howard Government is presently located between the first and second stages. Because it held power for nearly twelve years, it is possible to approach the early years in a different way to the later years, especially as the release of official documents will allow researchers access to previously unavailable material. The ability to conduct primary archival research will mark the beginning of the third stage of the taxonomy. It appears as though the second phase will probably be the shortest

in duration although it has been the subject of much more terse political commentary than measured historical assessment.

Most appraisals of the Howard Government are better termed 'commentary' than history. Although some commentaries deal with matters of historic significance, commentary is not history. The handling of sources, the weighing of evidence, the devising of conclusions reflect well established disciplinary rules. I would argue that most appraisals are commentary because they either lack perspective or reflect bias – either for or against the actions and achievements of the Howard Government. Some assessments of the Coalition between 1996-2007 were limited by the inability of commentators to stand back from unfolding events. Other assessments were shaped by the commentator's political sympathies. Because commentators are obliged to go beyond reporting into the realm of critique, assessments invariably reflect personal values and ideological commitments. It is difficult, of course, to evaluate the significance of a decision or an event when the consequences, intended and unintended, are unknown and remain matters of speculation. And there are commentators who are unable to transcend their private beliefs in the cause of impartiality.

When, then, is a matter of purely historical significance? Perhaps never. The past is always enlisted to serve the present and to shape the future in some way – reasonably or otherwise. For instance, the Whitlam years are not merely historical relics given that political scientists continue to talk about 'Whitlamism' as a distinct approach to the business of national government. When it comes to examining politics and politicians in an adversarial setting, assessments are always liable to contain a polemical element. Historians have their own political philosophies quite apart from any partisan sympathies. When writing a biography of Harold Holt, I found myself wanting to explain in contemporary terms why Holt's approach to Cabinet decision-making and public sector

finance was more democratic and more effective than those of his principal political opponents, the Labor leader Arthur Calwell and the DLP Senate leader Vince Gair. I could not avoid explaining why Holt's approach was, in my judgement, to be preferred as a matter of abiding principle. My point is simply that assessments of the Howard Government ought to become less partisan and less political given the passage of time.

To date, the Howard Government has been the subject of two kinds of commentary. The first are essentially political tracts written to be part of contemporary political discourse in the hope of producing a political outcome. Although these works focussed on the past and offered something resembling historical analysis, they were and are not history. The second were analytical works from scholars representing a range of academic disciplines. They were primarily interpretative, focussed on public policy and sought to provide an informed perspective for political debate although the writers professed no avowed political intention, that is, they were outwardly indifferent to electoral outcomes.

As expected, the Howard Government was the focus of closest attention when first elected (1996), when finally defeated (2007) and in 2001 when intense political controversy prompted substantial critical commentary. Analysis has waned since its defeat and, other than the appearance of Peter Reith's papers in 2015, has not been the subject of close or continuing consideration over the past five years in the form of a major monograph or collection of essays. Much of the Howard Government's performance has yet to be described let alone made the focus of detailed analysis. With the release of the first official papers in the near future, the time is right for scholars of Australian political history to reassess the Howard Government and to determine its proper place in the national narrative.

(Endnotes)

- 1 David Barnett and Pru Goward, John Howard: Prime Minister, Viking, Melbourne, 1997.
- 2 Peter van Onselen and Wayne Errington, John Winston Howard, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2007.
- 3 Peter Costello and Peter Coleman, The Costello Memoirs, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008.
- 4 Tony Abbott, Battlegrounds, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2009.
- 5 Peter Reith, The Reith Papers, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2015.

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