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# Howard Government Retrospective III

“Trials and Tribulations: 2001-2004”

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## The Third Howard Government: Initial appraisals and assessments

### Professor Tom Frame

There were very few extended treatments of the performance of the first two Howard Governments by either journalists or academics until late mid-2001.<sup>1</sup> Many commentators had long presumed the Coalition would probably lose the first election of the new millennium and measured retrospectives could be compiled when the Howard years had ended. All of the polls in 1999 and 2000 suggested an easy victory for the Kim Beazley-led Opposition at the next election. After the Liberal Party retained the seat of Aston in a July 2001 by-election and subsequent surveys showed support for Labor was ebbing, the Government's opponents beyond parliament found their voice and eager publishers willing to give critical views a wider audience.

The collective description of those producing articles and books as the Government's 'opponents' is intended to be neither an assertion nor an accusation. It was how a range of authors described themselves and their motivations for writing. They were self-declared opponents of John Howard and were antagonistic to his government and the things for which it stood. They wrote with a vehemence not seen during the previous five years. There was no pretence to even-handedness. These were partisan accounts published for overtly polemical purposes. Both the likely re-election of the Howard Government and the campaigning leading to its victory in November 2001 plainly prompted the change of mood. The possibility that the Coalition would secure a third term in office was highly unexpected and, to some writers, a devastating disappointment. Pursuing that success by appealing to racism and descending to populism was an indictment of both the candidates and the electorate although the latter was rarely chided for its poor judgement.

In October 2001 and with election campaigning underway, Guy Rundle, the co-editor of *Arena* magazine, published 'The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction' in the *Quarterly Essay* series published by Black Inc. The back cover blurb praised Rundle's essay as

a brilliant account of John Howard's dominant ideas, his concerted 'dreaming' with its emphasis on unity and national identity that reveals him to be the most reactionary PM we have ever had, the only political leader who would allow ideas like those of One Nation to dominate the mainstream of Australian politics in order to improve his political chances.

The book was promoted as a 'plea for right-thinking people of every political persuasion to resist the call to

prejudice and reaction'. It went beyond reporting; it was commentary.

*The Opportunist* portrays Howard not as the 'ordinary man' but as a 'small man' who could not compete with the real 'common Aussie', Bob Hawke. Rundle contends that anyone could have won the 1996 election against a 'burnt-out and distracted' Paul Keating. Over the ensuing years Howard merely continued his predecessor's macroeconomic program while weakening the left-wing of his own party and dividing the nation. After five years in power and few achievements he could claim for his own, Rundle damned Howard for bringing 'his party to the point where only the bullying of a boatload of stateless people has allowed him the chance to remain in power'.<sup>2</sup> But as prime minister, Howard was willing to 'summon up the worst side of the Australian spirit, forcing your more scrupulous opponents into a position where sooner or later they cannot bear to match you blow-for-blow, and are revealed to the public as the anti-patriotic time-servers they were all along'.<sup>3</sup>

According to Rundle, Howard did not enjoy the loyalty or the affection of his colleagues – he was just a convenient figure for them to have around. Howard departed from the ideological foundations of his party when it suited him and damaged the political institutions for which he claimed to have respect. The twenty-fifth prime minister was not like his Australian Liberal predecessors, he was 'far more Nixonian – more distanced, as a politician, from his own personal political and moral beliefs – than either his opponents or supporters would like to imagine'. The prospect of more John Howard filled Rundle with loathing and despair because it would be achieved on the basis of irrational fears and blind prejudice of the kind he thought had long passed into memory. Perhaps worse, 'the Howard team had provided government that had pleased almost no one, except the CEOs of large businesses'.

In sum, according to Rundle, 'the Howard years have been a fidgety period – dissatisfying, irritating, exasperating. Living in the absence of any clear vision, except to go on and procrastinate, one feels that absence greatly, as the reverse of any vision'. John Howard's great achievement was 'the systematic lowering of others expectations, of establishing that there was less to things than met the eye'. To substantiate his claim, Rundle drew on the opinions of arguably the least well-placed person to comment on John Howard with any objectivity – Paul Keating. Rundle was drafting his critique of John Howard when the planes struck the buildings in New York and Washington. Again, he contended, Howard had turned a tragedy into a travesty by manipulating the outcome to his political advance. As the nation headed to the

polls on 10 November 2001 and irrespective of the result, John Howard's legacy was that 'he secured and cemented, he deepened and entrenched, so much of the worst, rather than the best, of the country he so haphazardly came to lead'.<sup>7</sup> Rundle left no one in any doubt as to his view. Gun control apart, Howard and his government had done nothing right and everything wrong for more than five years.

Just as Rundle's essay appeared in the bookshops, the La Trobe University academic, Professor Robert Manne, published a collection of newspaper articles and columns under the title, *The Barren Years: John Howard and Australian Political Culture*. Manne had already decided that Howard was the most destructive prime minister the nation had ever endured. Ignoring the historic and contemporary examples of Alfred Deakin and Malcolm Fraser, Howard looked to Menzies 'the most influential cultural conservative within the Australian liberal tradition'. He damned Howard for failing to present alternatives to multiculturalism, deepening links with Asia, an Australian republic and Aboriginal reconciliation. He chided the government for not supporting the universities and not esteeming the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (the ABC), two institutions he said were 'central to liberal civilisation in Australia'. Manne claimed that by the end of the second Howard Government, discussion of issues vital to the nation's future were 'affected by the souring of the public mood and the peculiar atmosphere created by right-wing newspaper columnists and radio-talk back hosts'. These were, of course, the people the prime minister had used to communicate with the Australian people. Manne also damned the Howard Government's approach to the Centenary of Australian Federation as being 'humourless, conventional and very dull'.

The first five years of the Howard government were simply 'the barren years', a time characterised by 'the closing of minds, the hardening of hearts'. No doubt looking at the imminent Federal election and the 'more likely than not' possibility that Labor would be governing nationally and in every state, he expressed his 'hope that before too long, with a change in national political leadership, a more liberal, generous and humane political culture will return'. Manne also predicted that One Nation preferences would 'deliver government to the ALP'. It was possible that these preferences might flow to the Coalition and create the environment that would make Tony Abbott 'the most plausible next leader of an administration increasingly reliant for its electoral fortunes on the good opinion of Senator Pauline Hanson and her team'. Given his strong views, Manne was very likely to write again if the Coalition were returned to power.

Shortly after the 2001 election, David Solomon invited six leading journalists to assess both the campaign and its immediate outcome for *Howard's Race: Winning the Unwinnable Election*. Three

contributors were from the Brisbane's *Courier Mail*, one each from Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* and the *Adelaide Advertiser*, and one was from News Limited's Canberra bureau. These were journalists writing for newspapers that were usually well disposed to the Coalition. Their brief was to explain why John Howard won the 'extraordinary' 2001 federal election. In their opening chapter, Peter Charlton and David Solomon contend that Labor lost because Beazley was 'unable to persuade voters to make their decision on the basis of domestic politics such as health, education and employment' while Howard won because 'he was able to campaign on leadership and border protection, mainly because in late August a Norwegian container ship rescued a boatload of asylum seekers and tried to land them on Christmas Island'.<sup>8</sup>

Malcolm Farr attributed the 2001 election victory to hard work and big spending. It was all the more notable because Howard was one of 'few leaders to survive the introduction of an indirect tax'.<sup>9</sup> Dennis Atkins thought that 'Beazley did not perform as well as many knew he could during the 1998-2001 period. His media discipline was not sharp enough'. This was apparently part of a wider malaise: 'the chaotic nature of much of Beazley's political style can be traced to his own lack of focus, something not even the disciplinarians Stephen Smith and John Faulkner could check during the campaign itself'.<sup>10</sup>

Indiscipline also led to signs the Australian Democrats were imploding. Phillip Coorey explained that by 2001 the Democrats had lost support from their members for allowing a modified GST to pass the Senate and then suffered from debilitating infighting that eventually delivered the party's leadership to Natasha Stott Despoja. While she was personally popular with a segment of the electorate, her emphasis on domestic policy and 'Change Politics' had little appeal with a public that was concerned about the influx of boatpeople and 'was in no mood to change anything'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Peter Charlton thought that Labor was mistaken about the electorate's general acceptance of the GST and the interest of voters in seeing it abolished. The GST was both less important and less unpopular with voters than Labor imagined. The tax had been efficiently introduced and did not constitute a reason, polls suggested, for changing the government.<sup>11</sup>

The most fulsome condemnation of the Coalition's campaign strategy was Peter Charlton's chapter, '*Tampa*: the triumph of politics', in which he accused Howard of seeing in the arrival of MV *Tampa* off Christmas Island 'a perfect opportunity to exhibit a clear policy difference between the Coalition and Labor, a difference that a ruthless and wily politician might be able to exploit'. He went on to allege that Howard used *Tampa* to 'wedge' the Opposition whose members professed a range of views reflecting a vastly different constituency on what was now being called 'border

protection'. While the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 might have overshadowed *Tampa*, they amplified the message.

The reality of the Coalition's political campaign is plain to see. It began with demonising people seeking refugee status in this country. It continued with harsh and oppressive conditions in detention centres. It thrived on media blackouts and selective briefings to friendly journalists.

Charlton contended that the Coalition had appealed to a hard-line, authoritarian, racist element in the community making the 2001 election a very low point in the nation's history. The government had appealed to the electorate's basest political sentiment and deserved censure. Just as reprehensible was the government's deliberate focus on the war in Afghanistan, which was not much more than a sideshow, and its appropriation of the Australian Defence Force and the nation's military heritage. The aim was to make John Howard look statesmanlike although more Defence assets were being used to stop the flow of refugees than had been deployed to the Middle East to overwhelm the Taliban.

The election campaign itself was, Malcolm Farr argued, focussed on Howard and his strength and steadiness as a leader in contrast to Kim Beazley who waffled and lacked resolve. The Coalition would depict Labor as a party unsure of its convictions and unreliable when it came to border protection and national security. Curiously, Beazley was judged to have done better in the televised debates but those polled said these contests would not make much difference to how they intended to vote. The Liberal campaign was, in Farr's judgement, 'disciplined and united' although there were two problematic areas. The first was Howard's response to questions about the future of Telstra and whether he would retire during the life of the next parliament and allow Peter Costello to succeed him. Costello had floated the possibility that the government might sell its majority stakeholding in Telstra which angered voters in regional and rural areas. The rumoured succession was an easy target for Labor which had known from bitter experience that the Hawke-Keating succession tension was a powerful distraction from policy. Howard had said in July 2000 that he would consider his future when he turned 64. He was now 62. Farr thought it was noteworthy that 14 per cent of voters had not made up their minds when they left home to vote on 10 November 2001. The previous eight months of intense political drama had not made much difference. Farr concluded: 'this tardiness leaves professional campaign organisers, those in charge of attracting the attention of voters, shaking their heads in distress'.<sup>13</sup> The imputation was that emotion influenced the election outcome and, as usual, a good measure of self-interest as well.

Dennis Atkins claimed the Opposition's campaign was thrown into disarray by 'September 11' and that

it never recovered the initiative. *Tampa* had seen the momentum drift towards the government and 9/11 confirmed it. The electorate forgot the government had been labelled 'mean and tricky' by one of its own supporters and that ten months ago it was trailing heavily in the polls. Although its domestic performance had not improved and everyday problems remained, Atkins observed that Labor was unable to remind voters of what they appeared to dislike about Howard and the Coalition not that long ago. A campaign to scare the electorate into thinking the Coalition would increase the GST and include food made little real difference. Labor campaign strategists, including former New South Wales Premier Neville Wran, said Beazley was still an unknown quantity in the eastern states and he had failed to capture the popular imagination. He was seen as a good man but lacking drive and determination. Atkins ended his chapter by explaining that the character of Labor's loss in 2001 would make it difficult for Labor to win in 2004. Party officials had apparently started some polling on Beazley's likely replacement, Simon Crean, before the loss and noted the new leader 'had some serious image problems, especially among women. But senior campaign workers believe Crean's problems are mostly superficial and can be addressed'.<sup>14</sup> Atkins was told by his Labor sources:

[Crean] needs to demonstrate that he can kill his own, like [British Labour leader Tony] Blair did. The mob love it when you kill your own. Crean can do it by being tough and consultative. Watch him and watch two others – Blair and [Queensland Premier Peter] Beattie. If Crean can adopt some of the style and substance of Blair and Beattie he's got a fighting chance.<sup>15</sup>

The 2001 election meant different things to the National Party, explained Christine Jackman. The Nationals leader and Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, had campaigned strongly and was credited with regaining much of the electoral ground seized by One Nation in 1998. Anderson had been faced with rural and regional community anger over the uncertain fate of Telstra and the implications of Ansett Airlines' collapse in September. While Jackman admired Anderson's total commitment to the campaign, she noted that the Nationals had lost seats to the Liberals and to independents and that its standing in parliament and in the cabinet had not improved. The Liberals now had twice as many regional and rural seats as the Nationals whose lower house parliamentary representation was nearly half of its 1984 peak of 21. The main consequence of the 2001 election for the Nationals were calls for the renewal of its party organisation, the professionalism of its administration and financing, and the overhaul of its campaigning. The main issue identified by Anderson and his deputy Mark Vaile was the need for the federal organisation to have a greater role in selecting candidates. She felt that 'a more pressing question is whether the Liberal

Party will continue to find room for the Nationals in the Coalition, should the disproportion between the two parties' seat count continue to grow'.<sup>16</sup>

The three chapters dealing with the other players in the 2001 election could virtually be summarised in one sentence: the Australian Democrats led by Natasha Stott Despoja did poorly, the Greens led by Bob Brown gained ground, the Independents (Bob Katter, Peter Andren and Tony Windsor) did well and One Nation ebbed towards obscurity although Pauline Hanson personally outpolled the Nationals' stalwart Ron Boswell.

The final chapter, 'Election race or race election?', relied heavily on the views of former Liberal leader John Hewson who wondered in an opinion piece published eight days before the election whether the result would be a victory of prejudice over policy. Hewson accused Howard of exploiting *Tampa*, playing the race card and lacking a 'genuine passion for policy'. The collection's editor, David Solomon, quoted the conservative English magazine, *The Economist*, which damned the Coalition for failing to embrace multiculturalism and promoting xenophobia. To show balance, he also quoted Lynton Crosby's election post-mortem at the National Press Club in which the Party's Federal Director complained that 'many commentators are falling for the ALP's line that our victory was due only to the MV *Tampa* and the issue of illegal migrants. This is wrong. It denies the Government's position in successive opinion polls prior to the *Tampa*'. Crosby said that *Tampa* had only a reinforcing effect in the minds of voters who had already noted the differences between the two parties. Solomon was unconvinced: *Tampa* was the definitive event of the campaign because it made immigration a key issue upon which voters would need to exercise a choice. He cited polling that showed 10 per cent of those who voted for the Coalition did so because of its stand on boatpeople. He thought the Coalition had bought its way out of electoral difficulty with policies that could be characterised as either sensible or opportunistic, depending on whether the observer was a beneficiary.

As a consequence of the election, John Howard was returned to power and would probably become the second longest serving prime minister, surpassing Bob Hawke and Malcolm Fraser during the life of the new parliament, unless he retired to give Peter Costello some time to consolidate his position before the next poll expected in 2004. Kim Beazley sent himself to the backbench and, as expected, Simon Crean was elected Labor leader unopposed. The new parliament saw some new faces in Cabinet, such as Kay Patterson and Brendan Nelson, and on the Labor front bench, such as Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. The Government would turn its attention to industrial relations and its unfulfilled agenda and Labor would re-examine its position on a number of contentious issues. In sum, Solomon was deeply unimpressed by the election.

There were

relatively few domestic policy initiatives announced by the Coalition during the campaign. There were no particular legislative proposals for which it could reasonably claim to have a mandate. It will face a Senate where the minor parties are likely to compete in their hostility towards its policies. This is the legacy of an election fought primarily on an issue of little material relevance to Australia's development as a nation.

By mid-2003, the Howard Government's opponents were focussing their attacks on the Coalition's credibility especially after the March 2003 invasion of Iraq had not uncovered any weapons of mass destruction (WMD). An example was Andrew Pegler's *John Howard's Little Book of Truth*.<sup>17</sup> This attempt at a satirical work contained brief commentaries, quotes and cartoons. The author was assisted by 'resources' from a number of websites and the office of Michael Danby, the Federal Labor member for Melbourne Ports. Pegler described himself as a 'plain English editor' who worked with organisations in need of clear prose. His political affiliations were not disclosed and the reader is not given any insight into his competence to comment as a political commentator. Pegler's approach was to compare and contrast what appeared to be inconsistent and conflicting public statements to demonstrate that Howard and his ministers were self-interested liars who were bereft of any integrity. The tone is intentionally ironic and deliberately insulting. It begins with Howard's declaration: 'My government will always seek to be truthful and open with the Australian public'; and ends with the prime minister's lament: 'Increasingly honesty is being swamped by cynical election campaigns based on fear, or the big scare, or the massive lie'. The intervening chapters interpret the events of the previous few years through the lens of contested truthfulness: the 'children overboard' affair, the introduction of the GST, the war in Iraq, the sinking of Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel (SIEV) X, and ministerial misconduct. Many of the cartoons are sexually crude and personally offensive. The cover depicts John Howard with a 'Pinocchio nose' dangling from strings giving the impression that he is a puppet being manipulated by unseen actors.

In the second half of 2003, two books appeared critiquing the Howard Government's immigration and border protection policies. In March of that year, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson published *Dark Victory*, a work they described as

the secret history of John Howard's campaign against boat people that began with the Tampa and ended ten weeks later – after deaths and disappearances, violent confrontations in the Indian Ocean and international uproar – with the Australian people giving the (Prime Minister) his third, most daring election victory.

The people of Australia were not blamed for casting their votes as they did; Howard was condemned for the manner in which he secured them.

Marr and Wilkinson were critical of an overly compliant public service, an Opposition fearful of the electorate, political naivety among senior Defence Force officers and the manoeuvring of spin-doctors. The back cover blurb accused the Howard Government of very serious crimes.

They put lives at risk. They twisted the law.  
They drew the military into the heart of an election campaign. They muzzled the press.  
They misused intelligence services, defied the United Nations, antagonised Indonesia and bribed poverty stricken Pacific states. They closed Australia to refugees – and won a mighty election victory.

In November 2003, Father Frank Brennan published *Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem* and contended that ‘the arrival of the Tampa was an event waiting 25 years to happen’. Brennan distinguished himself from other refugee advocates in acknowledging ‘the very difficult challenges that confront governments in this field ... Not everyone who crosses a border uninvited and claims asylum is a refugee ... Governments running an orderly migration program are entitled to insist on measures to facilitate their removal’.<sup>18</sup> Brennan’s critique was much less polemical but no less pointed: the Howard Government had acted in a manner contrary to international convention, that it had damaged Australia’s international reputation, the obligations Australia had accepted by signing covenants had been ignored and the nation’s borders had been closed to vulnerable people entitled to seek relief from oppression and tyranny. He characterised Australia’s response to the arrival of *Tampa* specifically and the presence of boat people generally as a massive over-reaction with far too much invested in so small a problem, by world standards. While Brennan’s assessment was careful to avoid the political partisanship of most other works appearing at that time, he left readers in no doubt that he deplored the Howard Government’s immigration policies and despaired of its attempts to turn asylum seekers into campaign fodder.

As the *Tampa* controversy continued to attract the attention of commentators, Australian participation in the invasion of Iraq provided the impetus for renewed criticism of the Howard Government. As one of three nations to commit forces to an operation that did not have explicit United Nations’ sanction, the failure to detect the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that were the basis for a pre-emptive strike that involved the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia demanded an explanation. Alison Broinowski’s *Howard’s War* appeared in August 2003, five months after the invasion. She claimed that it was ‘perhaps the worst-justified war in Australia’s history, not only because it was against Australia’s interests, but

because the reasons given for it were false. It was, first and last, Howard’s War’. Writing before the Iraqi insurgency gained momentum and thinking the war had been ‘won’, Broinowski was critical of the Coalition and John Howard in particular for making Australia ‘a target for further terrorism’, fracturing Australia’s relations with regional neighbours and diminishing the international standing of the United Nations. She accused the prime minister of not revealing his ‘real reasons’ for committing Australia to war in Iraq and for failing to accept responsibility for the damage inflicted on Iraq after no WMD were found. She concluded that Australia went to war because the United States did and, in so doing, John Howard had sought President George W Bush’s approbation and left Australia’s foreign policy looking ‘indistinguishable’ from the United States.

Three months after Broinowski’s book appeared, Raimond Gaita published a collection of essays with the title *Why the War was Wrong* with contributors well known for their hostility towards the Coalition including Robert Manne, Guy Rundle and Mark McKenna.<sup>19</sup> Writing in September 2003, Gaita thought it was ‘still too early to know with what mixture of innocent ignorance, culpable ignorance, self-deception, distortion of intelligence documents and outright lies the leaders of the [military] coalition presented their case’.<sup>20</sup> His introduction was deliberately personal in attacking John Howard for mendacity, contempt for the electorate, hubris and for being ‘intoxicated by the prestige of his friendship with the president of the world’s only superpower’.<sup>21</sup> The contributors conclude that the invasion was unjust and unlawful; that the lives of Iraqi civilians were devalued and the norms of international diplomacy were ignored; that the enormous death toll could not and did not offset whatever strategic and security gains were ever on offer. John Howard was accused of rewriting history when he claimed the invasion liberated the Iraqi people from a dictator as if that had been the reason for deploying Australian troops when he insisted before the invasion that the possession and potential use of WMD was the only reason for commencing hostilities with Iraq. One of the contributors, the moral philosopher Peter Coghlan, called on Howard and his Government to resign.<sup>22</sup> Mark McKenna castigated Howard for promoting and participating in ‘welcome home’ parades for Australian military personnel, ‘generally basking in the reflected glow of the diggers’ glory’ in the hope of securing domestic political capital. These parades ‘became a means of eradicating criticism of the Iraq war, marginalising political opposition and drafting the country to vote for the diggers’ mate – John Howard’.<sup>23</sup> His attacks on Howard were scathing and personal. This collection would have been enriched by a contribution from an observer known to be sympathetic to John Howard but able to decipher mixed messages on Iraq and to make judgements about Howard and the Coalition that would not be readily dismissed as routine political dissent.

There is no attempt to explain or to understand what the Government tried to do and why; the overarching aim is to criticise and condemn. The final summing-up included judgements on the political efficacy and the moral character of the actions taken by the government. There are many objections that could be made to both works from a philosophical and political perspective. But these authors do not seem to acknowledge that another view is possible or even valid while there is the assumption by the contributors of a higher moral ground that effectively relegates any criticisms to the realm of literary pettiness or amoral pragmatism. I, too, believe the decision to invade Iraq was deeply flawed and led to enormous human suffering. The subsequent occupation led to enduring instability within Iraq and in neighbouring countries (most notably from Turkey to Syria) apart from the enmity that was felt towards Australia in nations that were previously well disposed. But it is simplistic to contend that John Howard authorised the invasion because he courted personal favour with President Bush and mistaken to assert he was able to persuade the substantial defence and security machinery of the Commonwealth Government to oblige his whims. Responsibility for the invasion of Iraq and the mismanagement of the aftermath does rest with John Howard and those who shared in the burden of decision-making. Accountability for the advice and the assessments that supported Australia's decision to join a coalition with the United States and the United Kingdom for the invasion of Iraq needed to be distributed very broadly as the 2004 report by former diplomat and intelligence chief Philip Flood made clear.<sup>24</sup>

As expected, Robert Manne loudly lamented the re-election of the Howard Government in 2001 and had no reason to change his mind when editing a collection of essays critical of the Howard Government twelve months into its third term. Becoming acquainted with the work of 'intellectuals, academics and journalists who have been able to give voice to this growing sense of unease', Manne invited them to analyse 'with rigour and depth, the moral and policy failures of the Howard Government in the areas of their particular expertise'. The resulting volume, *The Howard Years*, included chapters by Judith Brett, Mick Dodson, Julian Disney, Ian Lowe and Tony Kevin. The contributors were associated in different ways with the opposition parties or movements while Brett's academic writings were characteristically critical of the Liberal Party. They intended to show how the 'most conservative leader the Liberal Party has ever had, has re-made and divided the nation'.

Promoted as 'an indispensable first reckoning with what the Howard years have meant for Australia', Manne's preface claimed that 'a sizable minority' of Australians believed that the Howard Government was 'the most backward-looking and mean-spirited government of Australia's post-war years'. He had

encountered 'considerable numbers of people at large public meetings who are both disturbed and perplexed by the ruthless and unprincipled behaviour of their country's government'. Manne conceded that many Australians approved of the prime minister and supported his Government's policies. They were, as the election result had shown, in the majority. Were they deluded by Howard's deceitful public pronouncements? Were they denying he had done anything wrong or were they dutifully acknowledging the man responsible for increasing their personal affluence at the expense of the common good? What did Manne have to say about the misled majority?

After noting with some surprise that this collection was 'strangely enough, the first reasonably systematic and broad-ranging assessment of the impact on Australia of the Howard years', he hoped that it would help 'supporters of the Howard government who wish to learn more about the nature of some of their fellow citizens' criticisms'. Acquainted with evidence of Howard's lies and the Coalition's treachery but aided by Manne's purportedly apolitical commentary, they would abandon the Coalition. Although the essays were uniformly critical of the Howard Government and urged the rejection of the Coalition at the next poll, Manne assured his readers there was 'no party line' to be found in the pages of his book. While assessments of this kind usually include positive and negative appraisals with credit given where it was due, Manne was critical of virtually every aspect of the Government's performance.

Reaching back to the election that brought the Coalition to power, Manne thought the Liberal Opposition conspired with the Labor Government to keep the 1996 budget deficit a secret because it 'did not wish to disclose to the public before the election the cuts in public expenditure which a projected budget deficit would necessitate'.<sup>25</sup> In effect, the budget 'black hole' was exploited to wage an ideological war on the universities, the ABC, the Australian Public Service and a number of troublesome federal agencies including the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission. He was damning of the government for the extent of its privatisation program because assets were being liquidated to cover liabilities. He left history to judge whether the government debt reduction strategy and labour market deregulation were good things.

Manne claimed that the first Howard Government oscillated between the zealotry that had been John Hewson's downfall and the timidity that had led to the so-called 'Seven Wasted Years' of the Fraser Government. Manne noted that the government's supporters were disappointed and cited Paul Kelly's article 'Howard's Report Card: A Year of Governing Cautiously' as a yardstick of the Coalition's performance. Manne linked the Prime Minister being 'stung' by this criticism to the origins of the waterfront dispute and the decision to introduce a consumption

tax. Manne interprets both as response to criticisms of 1997. He remarked: 'no-one could any longer doubt Howard's political courage. No-one need any longer fear that he would go down in history as a do-nothing prime minister'.<sup>26</sup> But, he concluded, 'the future of Australian politics belonged to the leader who could best attract globalisation's 'losers' without alienating the support of those for whom the new economy and society 'worked'. He went on to chastise Howard's response to Pauline Hanson (journalist Malcolm Farr thought 'Hansonism' was Keating's creation) noting that one in four Queenslanders had voted for her new party One Nation at the June 1998 state election.<sup>27</sup> His more strident criticisms were not focussed on the first Howard Government but on the second.

The Coalition managed to undermine the momentum that had been gathering for Aboriginal reconciliation through its less than fulsome response to the *Bringing them Home* report, mainly the Government's refusal to make a formal apology, and its resistance to several key elements of a formal Declaration being prepared by the Reconciliation Council to be presented to the Government on the centenary of Australian Federation – 1 January 2001. The Government had also demonised asylum seekers and shunned its responsibilities for their humane treatment under international law. Among those the Government branded 'the elites', opposition to the manner in which asylum seekers were being treated had turned into outrage. They believed the government was behaving 'with a level of cruelty and indifference they had once assumed no Australian government ever would. John Howard's Australia was becoming unrecognisable to them'.<sup>28</sup> They were the central pillars in 'Howard's cultural 'rollback' campaign'.<sup>29</sup>

As the Coalition's electoral fortunes continued to plummet in 2001, the Government started to pacify those who were angered by its policies and to assuage those whose personal circumstances were adversely affected by global trends for which the Government was not to blame. Manne remarked: 'in the history of Australian pork-barrelling there have never been so many barrels of so many varieties of pork'.<sup>30</sup> Worse still was its self-serving handling of the *Tampa* controversy. The Government 'manufactured [an] atmosphere of panic' and manage to 'wedge' the Labor Party, alleging it was soft on border protection. Australia's long-term standing as a humanitarian nation was abandoned for the sake of short-term electoral advantage. The 'children overboard' affair was further confirmation of the Government's decadence. Did these events influence the election result? Manne concluded there was 'no serious doubt' that they did.

These events had a large significance according to Manne:

A transition from old-style Australian liberalism to a kind of conservative populism was implicit in Howard's cultural agenda. With *Tampa* it

became explicit. Not only did Howard create a new kind of Liberal Party; a different kind of political culture had been born.<sup>31</sup>

But, Manne noted, Howard had not replaced the Keating vision he had manage to bury. That, claimed Manne, would emerge 'in his third term'.

Ahead of the 2004 Federal election and intended to influence its outcome, former Fairfax journalist Margo Kingston published *Not Happy John!* [A companion volume *Still Not Happy John!* was published in 2007.] Kingston's book was launched by former Federal Court judge and corruption royal commissioner, Tony Fitzgerald QC, and created the impetus for the 'Not happy, John' campaign in the Prime Minister's seat of Bennelong. Based on her web diary hosted initially on the Fairfax website, Kingston accused the Coalition Government of being authoritarian and manipulative, secretive and closed, indifferent to the rule of law and unconcerned with the dignity of parliament. Kingston acknowledged her partisan approach in the introduction. She also made a point of personalising her complaints: John Howard was to blame. His ministers were mere accomplices.

This book contends that John Howard is not a liberal, or a Liberal, or a conservative, or a Conservative. It seeks to show that he's part of an ideological wrecking gang made up of radical-populist economic opportunists, one which long ago decided that robust liberal democracy was an impediment to the real elites – Big Business and Big Media – that sponsor them, rather than an essential complement to and underwriter of market capitalism.<sup>32</sup>

A few pages later she includes the Labor Opposition in a general indictment of political parties for their role in the slow destruction of Australia's democratic system and a looming crisis in government. She reminded her readers that it was Labor's decision to fund election campaigns in 1983 that had shifted the emphasis within political parties from members to money and from policies to fundraising.

Occasional contributors to her web diary also produced several chapters. Kingston and her collaborators argued that members of the media and the public service were complicit in the erosion of civil liberties and what they consider common decency. Kingston's commentary is characterised by raw indignation. Her opinions burst with anger. Unable to find anything positive about the Coalition's performance, she condemns the Howard Government and anyone not critical of its conduct. The book ended with a call to concerned Australians for greater community involvement in politics because John Howard had treated the electorate as 'passive consumers' and not citizens.



These extended treatments of the Howard Government published between October 2001 and August 2004 interpreted policies and decisions to show the Coalition's perfidy and mendacity, the poverty of its ideas and the perversity of its campaigning. These commentators evidently believed the electorate needed to be 'schooled' in why the Howard Government was so unworthy of power, why it should be ejected from office and why it deserved to be condemned by every right thinking person. It was not clear whether the Coalition promoted the base attitudes detested by these observers or merely provided an opportunity for their expression. The emphasis in these works was less on explaining why the Government may have felt obliged to take certain actions and more on imputing the worst of all possible motives to the Coalition. Condemning Howard and his ministers is the obvious priority and there were no mitigating circumstances.

Most attention was focussed on two areas of policy – immigration and national security. Virtually every other area of public administration was ignored. The nation's economic and trade performance, investment in infrastructure and the continuing reform of firearms legislation counted for nothing. These authors engaged in little more than special pleading inasmuch as they

refused to consider reasonable contrary views. There were no discordant voices in Manne's collection. Either they couldn't be found or he regarded their views as unworthy of inclusion in a collection bearing his name. Manne and others simply confirmed the opinions of those who already disdained the Howard Government while the majority of the electorate remained entirely open to the possibility of re-electing the Coalition at the next poll. Members of the public apparently thought the Howard Government met many of their expectations and fulfilled quite a few of their aspirations. This was not the utterly despicable government that Manne, Rundle and Kingston considered it to be. It is doubtful whether their work made any difference to popular thinking or changed voters' minds. Despite accusing these commentators of being biased at worst and jaundiced at best, the Coalition's supporters and those who could see the Howard Government's strengths as well as its weaknesses were surprisingly mute. It would not be until the tenth anniversary of the Howard Government's election in 1996 that the first counter-collection of essays would appear. If the Howard Government was interested in propaganda and stifling debate, it did a very poor job of containing its adversaries and encouraging its advocates.



- <sup>1</sup> The collection edited by Chris Aulich and Roger Wettenhall, *Howard's Second and Third Governments*, was reviewed in the previous conference booklet and in my appendix to the *Back from the Brink, 1998-2001: the Howard Government Volume II* published by UNSW Press and released to coincide with this conference. It is a serious scholarly work with the greatest claim to impartiality and even-handedness.
- <sup>2</sup> Guy Rundle, *The Opportunist*, p. 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Rundle, *The Opportunist*, p. 8.
- <sup>4</sup> Rundle, *The Opportunist*, p. 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Rundle, *The Opportunist*, p. 54.
- <sup>6</sup> Rundle, *The Opportunist*, p. 54.
- <sup>7</sup> Rundle, *The Opportunist*, p. 62.
- <sup>8</sup> David Solomon, *Howard's Race: Winning the Unwinnable Election*, p. 7
- <sup>9</sup> Malcolm Farr in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 20.
- <sup>10</sup> Atkins in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 31.
- <sup>11</sup> Coorey in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 49.
- <sup>12</sup> Peter Charlton in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 78.
- <sup>13</sup> Farr in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 143.
- <sup>14</sup> Atkins in in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 156.
- <sup>15</sup> Atkins in in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 156.
- <sup>16</sup> Christine Jackman in Atkins in in Solomon, *Howard's Race*, p. 173.
- <sup>17</sup> Andrew Pegler, *John Howard's Little Book of Truth*, Hardie Grant Books, 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> Frank Brennan, *Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem*, p. ix.
- <sup>19</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Why the War was Wrong*,
- <sup>20</sup> Gaita, *Why the War was Wrong*, p. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Gaita, *Why the War was Wrong*, p. 7.
- <sup>22</sup> Gaita, *Why the War was Wrong*, p. 115.
- <sup>23</sup> Gaita, *Why the War was Wrong*, p. 183.
- <sup>24</sup> <https://fas.org/irp/world/australia/flood.pdf>
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Manne (ed.), *The Howard Years*, p. 8.
- <sup>26</sup> Manne, *The Howard Years*, p. 21.
- <sup>27</sup> Manne, *The Howard Years*, p. 21.
- <sup>28</sup> Manne, *The Howard Years*, p. 35.
- <sup>29</sup> Manne, *The Howard Years*, p. 37.
- <sup>30</sup> Manne, *The Howard Years*, p. 37.
- <sup>31</sup> Manne, *The Howard Years*, p. 44.
- <sup>32</sup> Margot Kingston, *Not Happy John!*, Penguin, Sydney, 2004, p. 5.

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