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POLICY PERSPECTIVES

The Art of Crisis Management:

The Howard Government Experience, 1996–2007

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**John Howard Prime
Ministerial Library**

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 PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE: ANTICIPATION, COORDINATION, OR SPIN DOCTORS?

James Walter

AN ENDURING LEGACY OF JOHN HOWARD'S PRIME MINISTERIAL TERM (1996–2007) was the elaboration of systematic prime ministerial government. It was founded on, and extended, institutional changes undertaken by earlier prime ministers. The centrality of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in policy networks was a feature of this development. After 2007, those who had been involved in the Howard administration spoke admiringly of a 'prime ministerial machine' which, handled appropriately, facilitated anticipation of demands, co-ordinated action on policy objectives, and effective communication. They warned, too, of its capacity to 'chew up' anyone who took command without understanding the history of the machine. In this paper I explore the prime ministerial machine in relation to Howard's achievements, and the warning signs of flaws that would confound his successors.

Foundations

The development of the Prime Minister's Office as we understand it today stems from the 1970s and initiatives taken by Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser.¹ It was Gough Whitlam who began the trend. In revitalising the Labor Party after years in opposition, and developing a policy agenda related to contemporary challenges, Whitlam recruited advisers with particular expertise while preparing for office.

He took some of them into government when the time came, intending to shake up the Australian Public Service (APS). The architect of this transition—the elaboration of ministerial private offices, and of the PMO, under Whitlam's auspices—was a public servant, Dr Peter Wilenski. When Labor took office in 1972, Wilenski was appointed as Whitlam's principal private secretary in the PMO.

Wilenski at first conceived the PMO as a policy driver, which, along with an associated policy unit, would give a lead to the public service. It soon became clear to him that this was not feasible, that the APS was where change was to be achieved. He later concentrated upon this, urging the establishment of what became the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration

(RCAGA), headed by Nugget Coombs. Nonetheless, the PMO played a conspicuous part in liaison with the APS, in the promotion of the Labor Government's objectives, and in some of its notable mishaps.²

Malcolm Fraser, though critical of Whitlam's expansion of ministerial staff (which he reduced upon coming to office) was not inclined to abandon the additional resource that the enhanced PMO provided. In conjunction, a Media unit was established to enhance public communication. Fraser's principal private secretary, David Kemp, a Professor of Politics on secondment from Monash University, redesigned the PMO to instil discipline and to differentiate specific policy, media and party liaison functions. Fraser's staffers were arguably less in the news than Whitlam's 'eggheads' had been, but it would be a mistake to underestimate their influence on policy development.³

The Hawke and Keating Labor governments adopted the PMO model that Whitlam and Fraser had instituted and beefed up the media unit Fraser had introduced. Notably, it was under Labor that the careers of senior APS officers became dependent on the good will of government as was implicit in Labor's *Public Service Reform Act 1984* (Cth) and later explicit with Keating's introduction of contract appointments and limited tenure. Howard took this further: his government's *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) gave the prime minister the power to appoint and terminate departmental secretaries.

These changes were paralleled by further enhancement of the PMO. It grew from 17 staff under Hawke to 30 under Keating: Howard would boost it to over 40.⁴ Hawke had enormous self-belief, but also a rare gift for distributed leadership, allowing others to get on with their jobs and promoting collective governance.⁵ During the Hawke and Keating governments, there was relatively smooth collaboration between the PMO and the APS. Meredith Edwards has analysed their joint input into Labor's reform agenda.⁶ Key to this was ensuring that ministerial offices, especially the PMO, were staffed not solely by party insiders and policy activists, but also by able public servants – especially in principal private secretary (PPS) roles.

Consequently, prior to John Howard's ascension to the prime ministership in 1996, there had been steady augmentation of executive power in relation to parliament, the direction of the APS and management of public communication, along with a consolidation of resources in ministerial offices and the PMO. It was a project of both major parties of government. Where balance had been achieved—between independent policy experts, experienced bureaucrats, and party insiders—it had been an effective means of communicating and implementing government objectives. That balance depended upon respect, trust, and collaborative relationships between key agents—departmental secretaries, independent experts, media advisers and ministerial staff—especially as mediated by the principal private secretary to their leader: the minister or prime minister. These were the foundations upon which John Howard's Liberal-National Party Government (1996–2007) relied to achieve an unusually prolonged period of government under a single leader, rivalled only by Robert Menzies (1949–1966).

The build-up of resources around leaders reflected historical changes affecting not only Australia, but most liberal democracies. The late twentieth century was the age of dealignment, in which class loyalties, party membership and partisan affiliation declined. Parties instead turned to communications professionals and expert advisers rather than party members to sustain their activities. Party leaders and their 'messaging' became more prominent, not only in campaigning, but in everyday politics. Success was '... now seen to revolve around the choice of leaders rather than the choice of policies or programmes, while the formation of those policies or programmes became the prerogative of the party leadership rather than the party membership'.⁷

The leader's responsibility for the Coalition's fortunes

Howard was eager to take up that prerogative, with a clear set of policies and programmes. His political courage in pursuing objectives was soon apparent in his drive for gun law reform, against some resistance within the Coalition, after the Port Arthur massacre of 1996.⁸ It was a harbinger of the determination with which he would pursue his agenda. He aimed to ensure balanced budgets and to overturn the prevailing tenets of industrial relations, reducing union power and deregulating the labour market. Labour market flexibility would, he believed, engender productivity, driving growth, prosperity, jobs and choice.

He would use all the augmented institutional resources at his command to this end, and demonstrated remarkable policy consistency.⁹ He was also acutely aware that campaigning, and leadership, had been accentuated by party change, saying in 1996 that 'for many years now, election campaigns have been very presidential, and I knew from that moment on, most of the responsibility for the Coalition's fortunes would rest with me'.¹⁰

Howard instituted 'the permanent campaign'.¹¹ He prefaced each policy announcement with a statement of the values it served and its part in his broader mission. He consolidated the 'government' media units, which had emerged from Whitlam onwards, to ensure PMO oversight of all aspects of publicity. Howard drew on polling advice for insights into mobilising underlying attitudes or shifting opinions, and was well served by Lynton Crosby, from the party organisation, and party pollster and analyst Mark Textor.¹² Finally, like Menzies in distrusting print journalists, Howard focused on radio as a primary medium of dissemination.¹³ Not only did this allow direct address to an audience, but also his comments were transcribed and distributed to the Press Gallery. Journalists raising questions were referred by the PMO to those transcripts. This encouraged blanket coverage without the cross-examination of interviews and press conferences, which were indulged increasingly sparingly.¹⁴

Howard's hands on control of communication had two purposes: to ensure that the public were aware of his agenda and why it served their interests; and to expedite clear direction of the APS and its agencies. In relation to the former, eventually he could rightly claim whether people liked him or not, they knew what he stood for. With respect to the latter, it facilitated anticipation and coordination among those charged with developing and implementing policy. The success of this enterprise depended upon three things: management of the party; cabinet discipline and coordination of the PMO and the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet (PM&C).

Management of party, cabinet and government business

Howard knew that philosophical direction was a necessary but not sufficient condition to hold the party together. He ensured that the party machine worked for him by establishing close relationships between the PMO and the federal secretariat of the Liberal Party. Tony Eggleton, long term federal director, had served a succession of Liberal

prime ministers, and now Eggleton worked with him. He established similar closeness with Eggleton's successors, Andrew Robb, Lynton Crosby and Brian Loughnane, involving them in strategy and heeding their advice. Robb and Crosby were integral to the communication and refinement of his message, in teaching him how to capture public opinion.

In the parliamentary party, he remained visible and accessible to his backbenchers. He reminded his ministers of the importance of visiting electorates, even marginal seats, as he never ceased to do. It was a way to refresh information. As Paul Kelly observed, 'He is the most domestically travelled Prime Minister in the nation's history, in the regions and in the cities, and is proud of his local knowledge'.¹⁵ This won the loyalty of MPs, demonstrated good faith to the party base, and connected with constituents. Management of party sentiment, ability in working with the party organisation and the generation of loyalty led even his critics to concede that finally he 'owned' the party.¹⁶

Action of course depended upon cabinet. Howard was both committed to and respectful of cabinet government. 'I was determined that the system would function properly and productively', he said. 'The key was to restore a fully functioning and orderly system of cabinet government, with all the major decisions ... being made by cabinet or its properly functioning committees'.¹⁷ After his election, Howard established a cabinet policy unit (CPU), whose head was to be cabinet secretary. Adjacent to his office, and run initially by his adviser, Michael L'Estrange, it was a transfer of the management of cabinet business from PM&C to Howard's own strategists. It facilitated two streams of advice—departmental and political—enabling Howard to determine the balance but ensuring political control of policy. L'Estrange's successor, Paul McClintock, said that:

Howard described it as the 'link point between the office and the bureaucracy'. Neither totally inside one or the other. We certainly didn't see ourselves as part of the PMO ... But we weren't part of the bureaucracy either. We were the go-to people from both ends.¹⁸

Yet decisions went back through cabinet, where Howard's behaviour ensured a calm deliberative process. In Paul Kelly's view Howard became one of the most effective post-war practitioners of cabinet government, running ideas through the party room and into cabinet, insisting on cabinet debate, focussing presentations, listening

to views but then locking his colleagues into cabinet determinations and achieving a dominance that deterred dissidents and leaks.¹⁹ His cabinet was the most unified since that of Menzies.

If the CPU was the link-point between the PMO and PM&C, the relationship between the leading figure in the PMO—now designated Chief of Staff (COS)—and PM&C remained integral. Anne Tiernan has stressed the importance of this, noting that the relationship was not initially smooth but that Howard learned quickly from early mistakes:

... the organisational foundations for the Howard Government's success were laid in the period that followed the 'travel rorts' controversy of September 1997 ... Changes instituted by [a] new Chief of Staff (later Senator) Arthur Sinodinos laid the foundations of the unusually stable and highly effective advisory system that supported John Howard for most of his long tenure.²⁰

Sinodinos was a partisan loyalist, but also an experienced public servant. He brought to bear political understanding, appreciation of the prime minister's objectives and bureaucratic experience in achieving order in the PMO and facilitating the networks necessary for policy development. The CPU relieved the PMO of responsibility for long term planning to concentrate on political and tactical imperatives, yet policy objectives remained primary.

In this, the stable relationships fostered by Sinodinos were crucial. Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary of PM&C (2002–2007) said:

There would probably have been no day when I was not in touch with one of the policy advisers in the prime minister's office ... And I would have regular contact in person or by telephone with the prime minister ... It was a strong relationship. A lot of the relationship was about policy and Arthur ... well, I think he was quite exceptional ... because he liked policy. And he was interested.

Shergold added that Howard,

was very clear in understanding the difference between Arthur's role and my role. He would conscientiously remind others in his office, more junior policy advisers or particularly the media advisors of that role.²¹

Ideally, policy development and implementation would be collaborative. But the intention behind the development of

the PMO was clear: it was to be an office with the capacity not only to engage with, but to direct the public service, and an unrivalled ability to dictate the government's story.

The PMO and the prime ministerial machine: handle with care

Howard expanded upon the logic of what his predecessors had initiated. In doing so, he clarified the potential of prime ministerial government and the existence of a prime ministerial machine, with the PMO at its core. Those involved were aware of this. Cabinet Secretary McClintock reflected:

The office amplifies the prime minister. So, if the prime minister is in strife, he amplifies that, makes it worse. If the prime minister is on top of the job, it amplifies it. It makes that control more effective ... And the truth is also people's expectations and the media ... the leader is assessed and re-assessed all the time ... the fortunes of the government rise and fall on that one individual. And the power of the office, to some extent, also reflects the fact that they all know that.²²

Further, said Alan Rose, after lengthy service in senior APS roles:

If a prime minister comes in and doesn't understand the history of the machine ... they're inheriting, they're at a grave disadvantage and are likely to be chewed up by it ... Outside of the government, outside of the prime minister's office—the media, the lobbies—all have grown to have a particular understanding of what the prime minister is capable of. I don't mean personally but what ... his or her machine is capable of, what they're responsible for and what they should be doing. It's not so much the character of the individual but the office and what the office has become that dictates the way it works ... Now John Howard commanded it superbly. He knew what he was getting ... he commanded it ... He took it on in a particular way and ran it in his way.²³

Yet there were inherent flaws in the ministerial staffing system, and the PMO, which had been there from their inception under Whitlam and Fraser. An enhanced capacity for direction and control was not matched by systematic constraints on, or transparent scrutiny and accountability for ministerial staff. Adverse potential had been held

in check because there had been a balance between partisan advisers and bureaucratic professionals: namely, the practice by prime ministers of retaining experienced public servants in key roles within the PMO. Bureaucratic networks were known, the inherent APS concern for a professional ethic was understood, cooperative endeavour and mutual trust could develop. This was evident during the Hawke and Keating administrations and for the most part under Howard.

However, there were telling instances where Howard's pragmatism, capacity to control the prime ministerial machine and acute sense of what the public would accept were interrupted by episodes of crisis management which provoked concern about misinformation, PMO overreach, a reluctance by senior officials to tell the Prime Minister what he needed to hear, and failures of coordination. Two illustrative examples were the 'children overboard' affair of 2001, and the closeted decision-making leading to the Australian commitment to the war in Iraq in 2003.

In 2001, to manage what it saw as a crisis in maintaining 'sovereign borders' in the face of sea-borne incursions by asylum seekers avoiding controlled entry, the government developed the 'Pacific solution': provision for the navy to intercept sea-faring asylum seekers and to transport them to offshore centres where they would be held until their claims were processed. Two months later, shortly before the 2001 election, ministers Phillip Ruddock (Immigration), Peter Reith (Defence) and Howard, acting on incomplete information and images, announced that asylum seekers whose boat was intercepted by the navy, had thrown their children into the sea in the hope that rescue would secure passage to Australia. In reality, as the boat was sinking, navy personnel had leapt into the sea to rescue children and others. Yet the difficulty of reconciling contradictory accounts of who knew what and when in the heat of a campaign ensured that a more accurate picture did not emerge until after the election. Some believed this to be deliberate obfuscation.²⁴

Equally contentious, was Howard's solo post 9/11 pledge, in a time of geopolitical turmoil, to stand with America against its enemies. Hence the government's subsequent commitment to the Iraq war, despite adverse public opinion and insufficient intelligence as to the alleged trigger for invasion: Saddam Hussein's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). There was a lack of forward thinking, with no serious anticipation about the restoration of functioning institutions after the invasion. Decisions were restricted to an inner circle, though later

strongly supported by cabinet. It was apparent that countervailing advice was not welcome, and that neither the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) nor Defence conveyed reservations about the available intelligence or the Iraq strategy to government.²⁵

The extensive discussion provoked by each of these examples revealed a common pattern.²⁶ There were serial failures of senior public servants to tell Howard and his ministers when they were wrong, influenced by the PMO and other ministerial staff. Senior officials' efforts to find evidence to support the government's story in relation to 'children overboard' and Iraq's alleged WMD capacities, for example, were identified. This persistence convinced observers that public service 'responsiveness' had gone so far as to inhibit officials from telling government other than what it wanted to hear.²⁷ Ministerial staff were significant influencers, not simply cooperating with officials, but improperly attempting to direct them and to control or 'spin' the dissemination of information. Anne Tiernan's and Patrick Weller's studies of 'children overboard' showed staffers to have intervened in departmental processes and mediated between the political and administrative domains. They demanded information directly from departmental officers. Their emphasis on what ministers wanted stifled due attention to the public interest or the integrity of processes. Then they suppressed inconvenient detail in communicating with the media, and possibly with their political masters.²⁸

Howard and his ministers took refuge in 'plausible deniability'—when inconvenient details emerged, they maintained that advisers (both public servants and personal staffers) did not pass on crucial information. Such incidents did not of themselves precipitate the defeat of the Howard government. But they did serve to highlight the incipient flaws in the prime ministerial machine that Howard had, in other respects, controlled remarkably effectively. Would others prove equally able in managing the machine, or would they be 'chewed up' by it?

Revolving door prime ministerships: From Kevin Rudd to Scott Morrison

Howard's success hinged upon six factors, but the key to their productive articulation was an identifiable mission, consistency and the web of connections between his PMO and PM&C in enabling command of the prime ministerial machine. These factors, and the points where PMO and PM&C leverage was predictable, were:

- A sense of purpose; clarity of objectives (key ideas were developed in opposition, but advisers and then the PMO and the APS/PM&C were key to their practical application).
- Translation of the above into realistic policy projects, capable of implementation subject to proficient administration (both personal advisers and APS officials refined and co-ordinated policy development, and administrative efficiency depended on productive relationships between leading figures in the PMO and PM&C: the potential flaw, disputation between political and policy streams).
- Determination, and political courage when necessary (witness gun law reform and, later, the fraught introduction of the Goods and Services Tax).
- Effective communication, to staff, public servants, stakeholders and through the media to the electorate (Howard's own ability and media savvy was much enhanced by specialists in the PMO, the party organization and polling agencies: the potential flaws, PMO control of the dissemination of information, partial, misleading data and 'spin', loyalists telling their principal what they think he wants rather than what he needs to know).
- Unifying and carrying the party (parliamentary, and extra-parliamentary) with you (Howard exercised cabinet discipline, kept his backbench happy, worked closely with party officials, and ceaselessly visited party branches to spread the message and hear their concerns).
- Winning the vote (here the APS is factored out, but staffers and their media networks are essential in the 'permanent campaign', are core players in the campaign proper, and continually scrutinise polling data: precipitate drops in indicators of electoral support threaten a leader's survival).

After 2007, Australia entered an era of 'disposable leaders'.²⁹ Until 2019, there was little synchronisation between the tenure of prime ministers and the rise and fall of Labor and Coalition governments. Instead, incumbents were serially removed from office by their colleagues. The national and international contingencies of our historical moment—financial crises, energy turmoil and the pandemic—played their part. Yet in facing these challenges, I argue that each failed on one or more elements in managing what were now the expectations of prime ministerial government, elements that had a history stretching back to the 1970s but that were clarified by Howard's prime ministerial machine.

Rudd, Gillard, Rudd

Kevin Rudd won a commanding victory for the Labor Party in 2007. He had gained advancement in his party by demonstrating his capacity in media performance, which promised delivery of the vote, and now it had paid off. He assumed office with popularity ratings that matched those of Bob Hawke. Rudd spoke of big ideas, moral challenges, and new beginnings, but reassured voters anxious about change by representing himself as even more economically responsible than Howard. He conveyed a sense of purpose and was manifestly a master of effective communication. He and a small team of senior ministers and public servants were credited with saving Australia from the worst effects of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Then, after little more than two years, he was overthrown by his party Caucus.

What cruelled his leadership was: 'a string of dysfunctional relationships within the PMO and between the wider government and bureaucracy, and between the prime minister and the Labor Party, cabinet and, fatally, Caucus as a whole. A common source of these failed relationships was Rudd's refusal to devolve power'.³⁰ When, having designated climate change a great moral challenge, Rudd walked away from the battle to gain support for his legislation, his popularity plummeted. Opponents, convinced that he no longer had the capacity to win the impending 2010 election, successfully mobilised against him, generating a spill of the leadership, which installed Julia Gillard as party leader and prime minister. Effective communication, big ideas and a sense of purpose were not enough when initiatives did not generate policy resolution, Rudd had been increasingly immured in the PMO and estranged from PM&C; political courage failed, him destroying his strongest card (capacity to win the vote); and he had alienated the party.

Gillard won the 2010 election, after negotiating support from the Greens to sustain a minority government. In some respects, she showed considerable capacity for leadership. She was a proficient administrator, a policy realist and the closer on many of the initiatives that Rudd had failed to complete, including an emissions trading scheme. She was disciplined, maintained self-control under enormous pressure, had the confidence of her staff and was highly regarded by her departmental secretary, Terry Moran. Her PMO did not overstep boundaries, and she was attentive to policy briefs from the APS. She was an adept negotiator and managed the successful passage

of more legislation than any of her successors to date have done. Her tragedy was that Labor was not in office long enough for this to be bedded down, allowing the succeeding Coalition government to dismantle much of it. Though her Caucus was riven by supporters of Rudd, she maintained majority support despite a series of internal challenges until near the end of her elected term. But then, as the 2013 election loomed, and the polls ran strongly against Labor (while Rudd's popularity revived), Caucus deposed Gillard and turned back to Rudd to 'save the furniture'. It was to no avail.

Gillard carried the baggage of the coup against Rudd, 'Nice girls don't carry knives.'³¹ Despite a small bounce in the polls when she assumed leadership and scraped back to power (in minority government), there was a residual scepticism that benefited the opposition. Moreover, she faced, in then Liberal leader Tony Abbott, a tribal warrior who allowed no quarter, and unremitting antagonism from some elements of the media, which compounded Abbott's assault. Few could doubt her political courage given the adversity she confronted, but she faced a storm that prevented her gaining political capital despite achievement against the odds.³² Her chief failing was that she could not meet the expectation that a prime minister is spokesperson in chief for her government. Stoicism counted for little when she could not muster the rhetoric to counter what was thrown against her, could not demolish the proposition that her carbon trading scheme was a tax, and could not explain why the inevitability of negotiation and compromise necessary to sustaining minority government did not amount to sacrificing principles.

Abbott, Turnbull, Morrison

Tony Abbot led the Coalition back into government in 2013. He benefited from constantly referencing Labor's civil war, and campaigned on Coalition staples—security, capping immigration, stopping asylum seeker boats, ending Labor's economic irresponsibility—but especially on ending the 'carbon tax'. He was regarded as having almost single-handedly destroyed the Labor government, but his speciality was three-word slogans of denunciation rather than a purposeful direction for his administration. He had produced a manifesto in *Battlelines* (2009), but no coherent program followed.³³ He entered office with a low popularity rating.

Once in power, Abbott demolished Labor's initiatives, introduced a poorly received austerity budget, dithered

about reduced immigration and federal reform, proved politically timid on issues that he had advanced in his book, and made idiosyncratic ‘Captain’s calls’ that bemused many. Socially conservative, he regarded the right-wing among his supporters as the party base. This pushed him to positions at odds with majority opinion. His poll ratings continued to slide. Within the party, there was the habitual worry: could he deliver the vote? Dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the degree to which Abbott relied upon his PMO for support and direction, and especially his reliance on his COS, Peta Credlin. Eventually, in 2015, Malcolm Turnbull, a more moderate Liberal with high popularity ratings, challenged Abbott and won. Abbott provides, alongside Rudd, a case study of how retreat into the PMO can destroy an administration.³⁴

Turnbull becoming prime minister was a telling reversal. Abbott had displaced him as party leader in 2009 when Turnbull began negotiating with Rudd on an emissions trading scheme. His return seemed the restoration of a small ‘l’ liberal order. But his party was more interested in a restoration of its electoral fortunes. The paradox was that such popularity relied upon Turnbull’s effective communication of promises that were more progressive than those of Abbott and hence closer to majority opinion. Yet some in the Coalition could not stomach such an agenda. Consequently, Turnbull could not carry the party with him. Intra-party impediments to delivering much that he had undertaken eroded that crucial vote winning capacity. Eventually, when a signature policy ambition—the National Energy Guarantee—collapsed in discord, he was challenged by Peter Dutton. Yet in the ensuing spill of positions, Scott Morrison managed to manoeuvre through the middle to snatch the leadership, becoming prime minister in August 2018.³⁵

In the ensuing election of 2019, Morrison seemed the answer to the Coalition’s problems. He proved a formidable one-man-band in campaigning, able to overturn Labor’s apparent polling lead by representing its ambitious policy agenda as economically irresponsible and to capitalise on public ambivalence about its leader, Bill Shorten, by representing him as ‘the Bill you can’t afford’. It was an exercise honed through focus-group and polling research—an extraordinarily effective negative campaign.³⁶ That it was so centred on Morrison himself rather than a government team (just as Rudd’s 2007 campaign had been) was indicative of problems that soon became acute.

That Morrison was outcomes driven, hard-working and had committed allies and supporters within his party was

undeniable. Yet his success in earlier portfolios depended on application to a particular brief; he was unable to adapt to the team building and collective management demanded of a prime minister. Obsessed with controlling the daily theatre of politics, managing perceptions rather than considering what must be done, Morrison failed to anticipate the big challenges. When they arrived, there was hesitancy, inadequate planning and backlash from a disheartened public.

Yet Morrison was conscious of the potential of the prime ministerial machine. He installed as Secretary of PM&C, Philip Gaetjens—a distinguished public servant, but one inevitably seen as a partisan appointment given previous lengthy employment by Peter Costello and Morrison himself. In parallel, staff in the PMO, obliged to cater to his penchant for secrecy and spin, increased. Having ensured both an APS and a PMO geared to respond to his wishes, Morrison’s enterprise was undermined by the lack of any guiding purpose for government.³⁷ Even John Howard finally, ruefully, conceded that, ‘The absence of a program for the future ... the absence of some kind of manifesto, hurt us very badly’.³⁸

The public soured. The Coalition lost the 2022 election. Soon after, the startling revelation of Morrison’s adoption of ministerial powers in five additional portfolios, of which, in four cases, neither Cabinet, the serving minister nor the relevant department was made aware, underlined Morrison’s preoccupation with power and raised serious questions of propriety. A press conference in which he claimed to have assumed emergency powers needed as a back-up during the pandemic persuaded few. Morrison implicated his staff, saying ‘people in the department and the people in my office ... were directly responsible for managing these specific things’.³⁹ The Solicitor General concluded that Morrison’s self-appointments were not illegal, but that their secrecy precluded transparent accountability and so was not consistent with the principle of responsible government.⁴⁰ By now, the rage in the Liberal Party against Morrison was palpable, and even senior figures, including Howard and the new party leader Dutton, conceded his action was wrong. It was a defining instance of McClintock’s observation a decade earlier that if the prime minister is not on top of the job, ‘[the office] amplifies that, makes it worse’.⁴¹

Conclusion

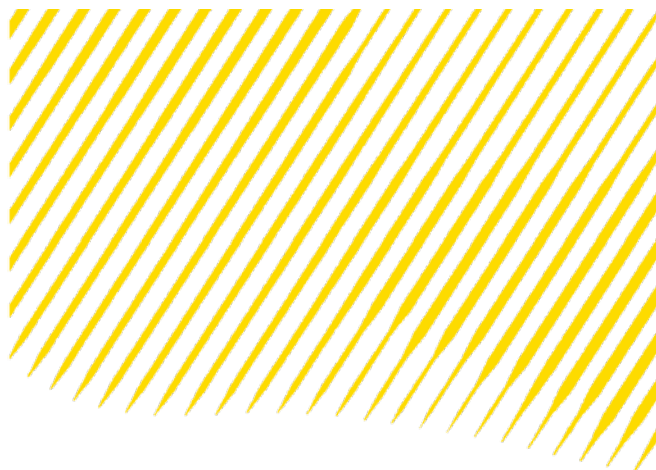
John Howard, along with Bob Hawke, was one of the most effective prime ministers since Robert Menzies. Both benefited from the augmentation of executive resources initiated by Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser. Where Hawke encouraged distributed leadership allowing diverse talents to flourish within his ministry, Howard perfected the art of prime ministerial government, using his PMO, command of PM&C and Cabinet discipline to pursue a reform agenda. Both Hawke and Howard conveyed determination and a shared sense of purpose, with effective communication.

Successors have struggled with their inheritance. Kevin Rudd had lofty ambitions and was a masterful communicator, initially generating great popularity. But he was a persistent centraliser who operated with a small inner circle, remained over-reliant on his PMO, alienated the APS and finally lost the confidence of his colleagues. Julia Gillard was an effective administrator, won the loyalty of her staff and the confidence of the APS, demonstrated considerable talent as a negotiator, and achieved legislative success. In better circumstances, she may have succeeded in establishing distributed leadership. But she failed as communicator-in-chief for her government.

Tony Abbott was a political warrior who thrived in opposition but failed in government. Insufficiently engaged with the APS, immured in his PMO, seen as over-reliant on his COS, Peta Credlin, insufficiently consultative and eccentric in his choices, the prime ministerial machine stuttered until Malcolm Turnbull was installed in his stead. Turnbull, like Rudd, was full of ideas, established a credible PMO and began to build effective relations with the APS, especially in co-operative development of policy. But he was incapable of unifying the party behind his agenda.

Scott Morrison was, as were they all, a person ambitious to exercise power. But for him, this seemed to be all. His agenda was piecemeal and inconsequential until the pandemic demanded a more applied discipline and deference to expertise. Even then, there were failures of planning and coordination that provoked public backlash. His department was seen as politicised, the APS as hobbled, and his PMO as defensive, secretive and addicted to spin. The startling revelation of Morrison's 'secret ministries', especially if facilitated by the PMO and PM&C as Morrison indicated, convinces me that here, despite its potential to amplify a good leader, Morrison's misunderstanding of how to harness the prime ministerial machine to a cause

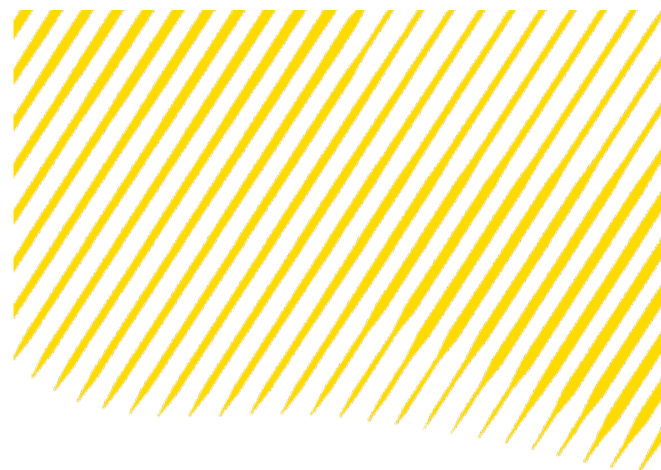
allowed its inherent flaws to flourish. The 2022 election result suggests that many people share such impressions, but also hope that Labor's promise of transparent, consensual leadership will be realised. That remains to be seen.



Endnotes

- 1 In describing here the development of the Prime Ministers' office between the 1970s and the mid-1990s, I draw on my previous works, *The Ministers' Minds: personal advisers in national government*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986; 'Ministers, minders and public servants: changing parameters of responsibility in Australia', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2006, pp. 22–27; and 'Whitlam's transformation of the prime ministerial office, its precursors and all that followed' in Jenny Hocking (ed.) *Making Modern Australia: The Whitlam Government's 21st Century Agenda*, Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, pp. 242–269.
- 2 See Paul Strangio, Paul 't Hart and James Walter, *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership, 1949–2016*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2017, pp.109–114.
- 3 See Strangio et al., *The Pivot of Power*, pp. 135–140.
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- 5 Strangio et al., *The Pivot of Power*, pp. 146–174.
- 6 See Meredith Edwards with Cosmo Howard and Robin Miller, *Social Policy, Public Policy: From Problem to Practice*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001.
- 7 Richard Katz and Peter Mair, 'Changing models of party organization and party democracy: the emergence of the cartel party', *Party Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, p. 7.
- 8 Philip Alpers and Zareh Ghazarian, 'The "perfect storm" of gun control: From policy inertia to world leader', in Joannah Luetjens, Michael Mintrom and Paul 't Hart, eds, *Successful Public Policy: Lessons from Australia and New Zealand*, Canberra, ANU Press, 2019, pp. 207–234.
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- 11 Peter van Onselen and Wayne Errington, 'The democratic state as a marketing tool: the permanent campaign in Australia', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 45, no.1, 2007, pp. 78–94.
- 12 In 2001, Lynton Crosby and Mark Textor established a commercial consultancy but continued to work for the party throughout Howard's term and beyond.
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- 15 Paul Kelly, *Re-thinking Australian Governance: The Howard Legacy*, Cunningham Lecture 2005, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Canberra, 2005, p. 10.
- 16 Guy Rundle, *The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction*, Quarterly Essay No. 3, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2001.
- 17 Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 237.
- 18 Paul McClintock, interview with James Walter, 2 February 2012.
- 19 Kelly, *Re-thinking Australian Governance*, pp. 3–4
- 20 Anne Tiernan, 'Staffing the the PM's office – a key to national leadership', in Tom Frame, ed., *Back From the Brink, 1997–2001: The Howard Government, Vol II*, Sydney, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2019, p. 64.
- 21 Both remarks from Dr Peter Shergold, interview with James Walter, 22 February 2012.
- 22 McLintock interview, 2 February 2012.
- 23 Alan Rose, interview with James Walter, 3 February 2012
- 24 See Patrick Weller, *Don't Tell the Prime Minister*, Melbourne, Scribe Books, 2002.
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- 26 See Weller, *Don't Tell the Prime Minister*, for a detailed exposition of the pattern.
- 27 Kelly, *Re-thinking Australian Governance*, pp. 5–7; Andrew Podger, 'What Really Happens: Department Secretary Appointments, Contracts and Performance Pay in the Australian Public Service', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2007, pp. 143–146; Michael Keating, 'In the Wake of "A Certain Maritime Incident": Ministerial Advisers, Departments and Accountability', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 2003, vol. 62, no 3, pp. 92–97.
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- 31 The opening, and since much cited, sentence in Michelle Grattan, 'Finessing a flagrant backflip', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 June, 2010, [Finessing a flagrant backflip \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au), accessed 26 August 2022.
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- 33 See Tony Abbott, *Battlelines*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009.
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- 40 ‘Scott Morrison’s secret ministries – what we learned from the Solicitor General’s advice’, *ABC News*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-23/scott-morrison-secret-ministries-solicitor-general-investigation/101360028>, accessed 23 August 2022.
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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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- I The Ascent to Power, 1996 (released 2017)
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