

# JOHN HOWARD

## PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY

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# POLICY PERSPECTIVES

**The Art of Crisis Management:**

**The Howard Government Experience, 1996–2007**

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**PAPER No. 1** *A crisis of the Australian system.*

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## THE JOHN HOWARD PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY

The Howard Library was established by UNSW Canberra in 2018. It works to improve public leadership and policy in Australia by:

- preserving and making accessible the papers of and the papers of Howard Government ministers;
- advancing research in, and informing debate about, public leadership and policy;
- curating exhibitions that introduce Australians to leadership and policy challenges in a balanced and non-partisan way through the experiences of the Howard Government (1996–2007); and
- contributing to the civic education of all Australians.

The Howard Library curates a permanent Exhibition at Old Parliament House in Canberra, and has a Reading Room at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) Library.

## POLICY PERSPECTIVES

*Policy Perspectives* is a series of occasional papers published by the Howard Library which aims to reflect critically on policy decisions of the Howard Government in order to provide context and perspective for contemporary policy debates, and facilitate discussion among the policy community and the broader Australian public.

## DISCLAIMER

The opinions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Howard Library or the institutions to which the authors are attached.

## EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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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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# A CRISIS OF THE AUSTRALIAN SYSTEM

Paul Kelly

**NO GOVERNMENT CAN SUCCEED IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD WITHOUT A CAPABILITY IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT.** If a prime minister doesn't possess this quality, then failure is guaranteed. There is no alternative. We live in an age of mounting crisis. Consider the situation of recent years – Australia has faced a global pandemic, a recession, energy attrition and geo-strategic crisis centred around China and Russia. The world is more unpredictable and inter-dependent. Crisis is occurring more frequently and that won't change. Crisis management is more important than ever. And there is no fixed rule book to manage crisis. It is a truism that government should be prepared but the reality is that each crisis is different. This is not like the annual budget process. There is no natural generic response – crisis management demands innovation, flexibility and judgment since each crisis is unique. These three propositions govern the narrative accounts in this paper.

I suspect the Howard Government might be seen as a transition point in relation to crisis. It faced many crises. Indeed, I believe it is defined, to a large extent, by its crisis-management. The Howard era may be seen as that time when the tempo of politics shifted gears and crisis management became a far more prominent task in a rapidly changing world.

I want to be clear what I am discussing and what I am not discussing. I have long argued that Australian politics over the past 15 years has entered what I call a crisis of the system – we are not delivering the national interest policies the country needs and that this is a function of our changing culture, the decline of voter loyalty to the two-party system, technological changes, the power of the negative, the rise of single issue causes and logjam in the parliament. That is about the daily business of politics and policy.

However, that is not the subject of this paper. My subject is about management of specific crises faced by the Howard Government.

The nature of crisis can vary – in severity, origin and subject. A crisis can be short or protracted. Our sense of crisis is defined by our age – the wartime tribulations

of John Curtin cast crisis in a different frame to those faced by John Howard.

There are two common features that define a crisis. Crisis reveals the true character of a prime minister. A crisis is an event beyond the ordinary. It calls forth a deeper, more elemental response – a response that exposes the leader's heart, perhaps the leader's political soul and, under pressure, the leader's flaws. When much of the mundane business of government decision-making is forgotten, history resurrects the moments of crisis because those moments define the prime minister's character.

They are not forgotten.

Second, a crisis is invariably a test of governing ability. I have long argued that our system is best understood as a model of prime ministerial government. Its face has changed from Gough Whitlam to Scott Morrison to Anthony Albanese, but prime ministerial government is the central organising principle. In 2009 I argued that Howard built a structure of prime ministerial government that gave him more power than his Liberal predecessors, Sir Robert Menzies or Malcolm Fraser.

A crisis tests the capacity of a prime minister to mobilise the necessary elements at his disposal - in the executive or the parliament or his outreach to foreign leaders and, invariably, it tests the leader's relations with the public - the ability to explain, to appeal and to persuade. A crisis typically tests the leader's standing with the people. It is in a crisis that prime ministerial government faces its supreme challenge.

In my discussion about the Howard Government and crisis management I am opening the lens wide. I adopt a broad interpretation of crisis, not a narrow interpretation, because I want to examine the Howard Government in the sheer variety of critical situations it faced. I don't want to be constrained by academic debate about what exactly constitutes a crisis. I think the 'wide lens' approach offers more insights into the Howard years.

These crises I deal with in this paper are gun laws, the waterfront dispute, the East Timor intervention, the MV

*Tampa*, the '9/11' attack and our military commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally, the Bali bombing.

I could easily have looked beyond this list. Many other events had elements of crisis, for instance, the consequences of the High Court Wik decision, the Commonwealth's intervention to take over indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory, the shock to the economy in early 2001 from rising interest rates, a negative growth quarter and a falling currency and the drama filled week in early September 2007 when John Howard asked Alexander Downer to sound out the cabinet on his possible resignation as prime minister.

My technique in this paper is to assess each of the crises I have selected and draw lessons from them.

## **Port Arthur massacre**

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The first crisis coming within weeks of Howard assuming office was the Port Arthur massacre that saw 35 people killed in the use of semiautomatic weapons. The nation was shocked; an emotional memorial service was conducted at Hobart. The prime minister responded quickly and with a firm position – he wanted to impose tough gun laws including on ownership, sale and importation of semiautomatics along with a gun buyback scheme.

This was an ambitious response. It ran into significant opposition from farm and rural sectors, from influential parts of the National Party, from parts of the Liberal Party and from some states – and support of the states was essential. There was an enduring legacy from Howard's stance – Australia's status as a democracy that shunned gun ownership was entrenched.

Howard's response reflected the two principles of crisis that I have identified. The Prime Minister's determined action was based on conviction. Before becoming PM, Howard had publicly supported tighter gun laws. He had an established, declared position. Howard's observation of America's gun culture and its consequences had sharpened his belief in the opposing vision for Australia. Without prime ministerial conviction, this change would not have happened.

It was also an example of governing authority. Coalition relations were potentially on the line. But Howard won immense support from Nationals Leader, Tim Fischer. The attitude of Queensland and Western Australia – states that had initial concerns – were vital. But Howard was

determined, knew he enjoyed public support and had been prepared to take the issue to a constitutional referendum if required. It was not.

The crisis also reflected another aspect of Howard – on this issue he rejected individual rights in favour of a superior social order, a re-occurring feature of Howard's philosophy as prime minister.

## **Waterfront**

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A different but critical event for the Howard Government was the 1998 showdown on the waterfront - triggered not by a surprise event but government policy. Howard was elected on an agenda to make the waterfront internationally competitive and that meant breaking the monopoly power of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). At that time the MUA had achieved a high wage, poor productivity outcome. Howard described the resulting crisis as 'the most bitterly fought domestic issue of my whole time as Prime Minister,' a situation, he said, that became violent and divisive.<sup>1</sup>

At an early stage, Howard and Industrial Relations Minister, Peter Reith realised that reform would likely trigger an explosive confrontation. A necessary condition was an employer willing to fight and Chris Corrigan, boss of Patrick stevedoring company was that employer. Corrigan's assumption was that a trained non-union alternative workforce was essential, and the MUA would never tolerate that alternative being established.

Howard told Corrigan the government would back his campaign with one condition – that it complied with Australian law. But Howard's dilemma was that the government was not in full control – it was hostage to Corrigan. This point is fundamental to the crisis and the difficulty the government faced.

In April 1997 Corrigan dismissed his unionised workforce, put balaclava-clad security guards with dogs onto the dock. The MUA was locked out. It was a public relations disaster for Corrigan and Reith. Most media favoured the union. Scenes of violence and chaos dominated on television. Strong picket lines were set up to intimidate the non-union workforce. In the Federal Court, the MUA won a reinstatement decision that dismayed the Howard Government but a subsequent High Court ruling while backing restatement opened the way for a settlement.

In the end, the MUA monopoly stayed but its power was

broken - the union lost half its workforce and its day-to-day control on the docks. Management seized the upper hand. Many new efficiencies were introduced. Corrigan got a viable business. Howard declared 'the Australian waterfront had changed forever'. He branded the waterfront reform 'one of the great achievements of the government'.

Reith was seriously damaged. His home and family needed security protection. In a conversation with Howard at the peak of the crisis Reith, given the damaging situation facing the government, offered to resign, an offer Howard would not countenance. He praised Reith for his courage and composure under relentless attack. Howard believed that losing Reith would have sent a devastating signal of political failure and retreat on industrial relations reform. As for Corrigan, Howard saw him as a rare business leader prepared to take a stand for reform.

The absolute key to the waterfront crisis was the determination of the prime minister to prosecute the cause of reform. This was a crisis filled with uncertainty and risks for Howard, Reith and the government. Would other Liberal prime ministers, before or since, such as Malcolm Fraser, Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull or Scott Morrison have engaged in such high-risk tactics for a reform mission? I doubt that very much.

For much of the time opinion was against the government despite strong support among the Coalition constituency to challenge the MUA. The outcome was in no way ordained. Court decisions were vital - initially going against the government but then opening the door to a resolution. In the end there was still uncertainty within the government about whether it had really won the politics of this battle. This was a different sort of crisis – it was a policy driven crisis.

It highlighted the paradoxical character of the Howard Government, a character that stands in contrast with subsequent Coalition governments. Howard as prime minister was shaped by two competing compulsions. He sought to be an agent of stability aspiring to a mood where people were 'relaxed and comfortable' - yet he was prepared to provoke major upheavals to pursue his reform agenda. The notable examples of the latter were his campaign for the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and his pursuit of industrial relations reform, exemplified initially in the waterfront campaign and then in his final term with *WorkChoices*. They point to a prime minister of policy beliefs and a temperament willing to take a risk.

## Timor-Leste

I have no hesitation in including in my crisis list what John Howard called the East Timor liberation story. This was a transforming event for Howard – the point at which he passed the threshold to become a national security leader. This crisis empowered Howard – as a military and diplomatic Prime Minister.

In September 1999 acting under authority of a United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution an international force led by Australia was dispatched to East Timor to impose order on the province after its vote for independence from Indonesia in a national plebiscite. This was Australia's most vital military commitment since the Vietnam War. It followed slaughter, population re-location and 'scorched earth' tactics against East Timorese by local pro-Indonesian military with support from the highest levels of the Indonesian army. Intelligence suggested the risk of large-scale killings. Howard told UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, that Australia would make a major troop commitment to the international enforcement contingent but would insist on leadership of the intervention. Annan agreed. Howard launched a diplomatic campaign to secure contributions from a range of nations.

The key was obtaining the consent of the Indonesian Government. The Clinton Administration, initially slow to react, delivered high level warnings to Indonesian President Habibie to help secure his acquiescence. But the Indonesian Government was divided and there were real fears the Australian-led force would face military resistance. The Australian commander, Major General, Peter Cosgrove (later Chief of the Australian Defence Force and Governor-General) told me he had expected 'perhaps scores' of Australian casualties.<sup>2</sup> Visiting the troops in Townsville before their departure Howard was conscious that some of these young men might face an early death.

This was an unprecedented moment in Howard's prime ministership. For the first time he was putting Australian lives at risk. The opening days of the deployment were the most dangerous of Howard's time as Prime Minister to that point. Indonesian troops in East and West Timor vastly outnumbered the size of the intervention force. If it had been challenged the consequences would have been dire. Cosgrove did a brilliant job in being both firm yet working with the Indonesian military.

The backdrop was an agitated, often hysterical mood at

home with Labor and much of the media attacking the government for not supporting an international force into the province before the independence vote. This was never an option. Habibie had made this clear in the most singular fashion. However, within the Labor Party and much of the media this idea became embedded as apparent proof of the government's so-called appeasement of Jakarta.

With Australian public opinion firmly behind East Timor and hostile to Jakarta the extent of hysteria was amply revealed in a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial calling upon Howard to declare Australia's unilateral intention to intervene even without UN authority, a step that would have invited war with Indonesia. Such advocacy was divorced from any military or political reality and promoted Howard to say that 'it was an option no responsible government could have contemplated'.<sup>3</sup>

The operation overall was a remarkable success. For the first time Australia was a leader, not a follower, in a major UN intervention. For the first time Howard had conducted an international diplomatic campaign with a range of national leaders to secure commitments to participate in the force. For the first time he had engaged with and influenced a US president – President Clinton – in striking agreements over military and political tactics. Obviously, relations with Indonesia were damaged. Foreign Minister Downer said: 'They loved us a lot less but respected us a lot more'.<sup>4</sup>

The East Timor crisis brought to full maturity the operation of the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC). While the NSC had been a Howard Government initiative (and discussed in a later paper) its enduring value as a decision-making forum was entrenched at this time. The legacy is vast. At the height of the East Timor drama, the NSC met twice a day. Fundamental to its structure and value was having the few senior ministers involved sitting with the critical security, policy and military advisers. This decision-making model worked effectively on East Timor and was later used at length by the Howard Government in relation to Afghanistan, Iraq and national security decisions against Islamist terrorism.

Indeed, the NSC as a model won enduring bipartisan support. During the Coalition era 2013–22 it became a defined feature of the operation of government where it proved over time to be an efficient instrument of decision-making. But the NSC had two crucial consequences.

First, the NSC enhanced the centralising influence and power of the prime minister. It became integral to the

notion of prime ministerial government. It brought all elements of the military and security system into the one room where the PM would dominate. It gave every prime minister who operated within the NSC for any time a sense of empowerment and created within the office a permanent legacy of national security guardianship with the electoral dividends this involved. It meant that all elements of the national security system were effectively 'locked into' the final agreed decisions. It also meant that the heads of the intelligence and security agencies won regular access to the highest levels of government decision-making, on par with heads of the major policy departments – a situation that enhanced their influence within government and with successive prime ministers.

The East Timor story began with a policy change – when Howard and Downer changed two and a half decades of Australian policy by launching an initiative to President Habibie proposing a ballot thereby opening the possibility of East Timor's separation from Indonesia. The protracted legacy constituted a series of crises running over months – diplomatic, political and military. But the operation's success has concealed the extent of risk and danger.

It verifies my thesis about crisis – Howard's convictions, backed by Downer, were critical: that Australia, ultimately, must support an independent East Timor and that we must lead in delivering that transition. At each point prime ministerial governance was pivotal – Howard realised that while the decision to commit the Australian Defence Force (ADF) was a shared cabinet decision his ministers 'instinctively left the final decision to me'. If Howard had said 'no' his ministers would have accepted that. East Timor was a classic crisis revealing the operation of prime ministerial authority.

This event produced another legacy. It showed that success in crisis can change a prime minister. The upshot was a more seasoned, more triumphant, bolder John Howard.

## ***MV Tampa***

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East Timor was the prelude to another, more prolonged phase in the Howard Government and crisis management – an era of far-reaching disruption from August 2001 to late 2003. This was defined by a series of crises and their consequences that, while separate events, had powerful connecting national security themes – the four standout events being the 2001 Tampa interception, the 9/11 Islamist attack on the United States leading to the invoking of the ANZUS Treaty and our military commitment

to Afghanistan, third, the Bali bombing of October 2002 that saw 88 Australians killed, the largest number of our casualties in peacetime, and finally, the March 2003 commitment to the Iraq War with devastating consequences as the invasion turned counter-productive.

These events transformed the Howard Government – from the eve of the 2001 election campaign until well into its third term. The government, while conducting its economic and social decision-making tasks, was plunged into a series of shock, national security and military responses and political opportunities that defined John Howard's character, polarised views about his government, ignited his supporters in ideological conviction and provoked a bitter campaign of moralistic hostility against him. Many of the most vivid, long lasting and contentious memories of the Howard Government come from this period. The government's response to these events while exercising in crisis management constitute a much larger story – of a government whose identity was framed by crisis, its response to crisis and a prime minister who turned crisis into extraordinary electoral advantages.

These events were conspicuous for the emotions they unleashed and for the core principles they involved. They called forth, as never before, John Howard's convictions about national sovereignty, border security, the American alliance and national security in a way that defines his government before history.

The dilemma raised by the Norwegian freighter Tampa would pivot on a clash of principles – the right of a liberal democratic state to protect its borders and decide who becomes part of its community and the principle of universal human rights obligating rich nations to accept asylum seekers arriving on their doorstep. The world has devised no agreed answer to this conflict. Australia has long accepted refugees in its offshore program. But its capacity as an island continent able to protect its borders has promoted a political culture that opposes unauthorized arrivals.

In August 2001 the Tampa had collected more than 430 asylum seekers from a stricken vessel but its captain had been forced under pressure to change course and head to Christmas Island. The moment that ignited Howard and his cabinet was when they realized the captain had lost control of his ship. Howard took an immediate, instinctive stand on principle – he would not tolerate asylum seekers effectively hijacking a merchant ship to enter Australia.

Tampa became an opportunity for Howard to confront the

steady influx of boat arrivals to Australia over the previous three years. A range of policies had been put in place with little impact. A frustrated Howard had been losing his battle with the people smugglers. Howard felt to give landfall to Tampa was tantamount to an act of surrender. This was his mindset; it is the reason he resorted to military force. He chose confrontation to uphold sovereignty. After the Tampa entered Australian waters, the government ordered the SAS to board and take control of the ship. It was a popular move but filled with danger.

What would happen to the asylum seekers? The government had no solution. Indonesia and Norway at head of government level had refused to help. At this point having taken a stand on principle Howard had to mobilise the resources of government – legal, diplomatic and financial – to solve the deadlock he had created. There was a sense of desperation and panic within the government. Operating in uncharted territory Howard authorized a bill to validate the military action and then, secured what became known as the 'Pacific Solution' – relocating the Tampa asylum seekers to other Pacific nations, notably Nauru and New Zealand to ensure they would not land in Australia. Downer and Reith worked overtime to procure solutions. Reith visited Nauru to finalise that deal while New Zealand's PM, Helen Clark, did Howard an immense favour by accepting some asylum seekers.

On the water the ADF was deployed to prevent vessels reaching Australia. The strains within Australia's system of government at these unorthodox policies were immense. Yet the determination of the government reflected a 'whatever it takes' mentality. The key event domestically was the full Federal Court decision supporting the validity of the government's actions against Tampa and its asylum seekers.

The country seemed to divide into Howard admirers and haters, the former being a majority. His statement at the campaign launch that 'we decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' put the principle in a way guaranteed to have popular support. But the Tampa became a launch point for human rights advocates and progressive and media critics to cast Howard as morally unsuitable for office. His policy response to the Tampa, essentially improvisation under pressure, constituted an enduring change to Australia's asylum seekers policies and delivered on the government's goal of border protection.

This was a crisis where Howard's response resulted in

the erection of a new set of legal, administrative, immigration and defence policies that would have previously been regarded as unacceptable. Australia's stance has had regional and global ramifications. The Tampa was a crisis that changed Australia. It saw the implementation of a new border protection regime, adopted by the political system and supported by the public – despite a strong dissenting minority denouncing Howard on moral grounds. Once again, the key factor at work was the determination of the prime minister having decided the asylum seekers were not to land in Australia at that time. There was, however, a postscript – in the end after processing of claims offshore Australia did accept a small number of the asylum seekers.

In summary, the Tampa contains a series of lessons about crisis management. First, a leader needs a profound and clearly understood political principle on which to base such a contentious and complex response – and Howard had that in national sovereignty. Second, the government must win in the courts – defeat in the courts means the entire position unravels. Third, the Tampa reveals the sheer power that an Australian government can deploy when desperate in terms of summoning support from within the region. Fourth, the Tampa story, again, reminds of the immense risks that crisis can involve with Howard having stopped the boat before knowing what to do with the asylum seekers. Finally, it shows that if the leader comes through the political rewards can be decisive.

## War on terrorism

Within days an epic global incident had occurred – the Islamist attack on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 when Howard was in the United States' capital, Washington, D.C. holding official talks with President George W. Bush. The attack transformed global politics – it turned Bush into a war president pursuing the instigators, al Qaeda, into Afghanistan, launching a 'war on terrorism' and, in 2003, invading Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The day before the attack Howard and Bush had bonded in their talks with Howard saying he and Bush 'are very close friends'.

Being in Washington the next day, experiencing the ruthlessness of the attacks, absorbing the disbelief, anger and vulnerability of Americans, Howard said he felt the tragedy 'even more keenly'. In the coming days, he made some of the most fateful decisions of his prime ministership.

Howard's reaction was instinctive. Declaring his support for

'our American friends' he said: 'We will stand by them. We will help them'. Howard saw 9/11 as an epoch changing event. He believed 'that it was going to change the way we lived'. He condemned the attack as an 'outrageous act of war'. Before leaving Washington, he said: 'I've also indicated that Australia will provide all support that might be requested of us by the United States in relation to any action that might be taken'.

The implication was unmistakable: that Australia would participate, if asked, in any future military action by the United States. Howard did not have to make such a call. He did so deliberately. This is the origin of Australia's involvement in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Before sunset on 9/11 Howard's mind was set.

In his first interview on Australian radio after the attack, Howard said: 'I just can't overstate the sympathy, the solidarity, the empathy I feel for the American nation and the American people at the present time'. He said the attack on civilians was 'in some respects worse than Pearl Harbor'. But his grasp of the crisis went directly to Australia. Howard saw this as an assault 'on the way of life that we hold dear in common'. He believed the strategic implications were global given the universality of al Qaeda's campaign. On returning home he told the Australian people that 9/11 was also 'an attack upon the people and values of Australia'.<sup>5</sup>

In short, Howard's proximity to the attack, his instinctive view of its meaning and his conception of the crisis as a threat in common to America, Australia and the civilised world became the unshakeable foundation for his future actions. For Howard, this was not an emotional over-reaction but a profound statement of belief. These were his words, not those of his advisers. They came from a leader, emboldened by past crisis with a firm view of the 9/11 attack.

It was the audacity of Howard's response and the immense political benefits he mobilised that revealed a prime minister now operating with great confidence and faith in his own judgment. At this point Howard exercised a supreme leadership role. 'In making that commitment I spoke for my government and the people of Australia', he said later.<sup>6</sup> This was Howard, claiming as prime minister, his right to speak for the nation, harnessing a political authority that arose from the crisis itself.

En route back to Australia Howard spoke to Downer and they agreed, at Downer's suggestion, that the ANZUS Treaty be invoked. The Cabinet formalised the decision



on Howard's return. After the meeting he announced that Australia was ready to assist the US 'within the limits of its capability'.

## War on terror

Australia was unaware that when Bush convened his senior administration figures at Camp David to debate their response to 9/11, the first item of discussion was Iraq – with a decision not to act against Iraq at this point. The second item was to target al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The crisis provided a further elaboration of Howard's view about the US alliance. He saw the alliance as a two-way street: it applied not just to threats to Australia but to threats to America. He sensed America would judge its true friends by their responses. Howard saw the alliance in global terms, not just as restricted to the 'Pacific area'. These events brought the alliance partners together in a new project – with Howard making clear he saw Islamist terrorism as a threat to Australia. Howard's commitment, however, made him hostage to Bush as a war president and Bush would prove to have serious limitations in that capacity.

Australia's contribution to the Afghanistan campaign involved special forces, aircraft and naval support and had bipartisan support at home. Its initial success meant almost nobody imagined this would become Australia's longest war. The deeper 9/11 legacy for Australia, however, was Howard's decision to support Bush in the invasion of Iraq.

Howard was always going to Iraq with Bush. Staying aloof from the Iraq War would have defied his history, values and instincts. Yet this became the most contentious foreign policy decision of his career. The March 2003 decision to participate in the Iraq War can be traced directly back to the 9/11 attack 18 months earlier.

The real significance of 9/11 is that it was a crisis for America but not Australia. Howard, by tying Australia to the US crisis, transformed the nature of the US alliance. He used the crisis to achieve goals he had long sought. Under Bush and Howard, the US alliance was deepened in its strategic, intelligence, military inter-operability and economic dimensions. These were permanent changes. It was 9/11 that turned Howard and Bush into brothers-in-arms and their partnership became the most significant in the history of the alliance.

While the Afghanistan commitment was bipartisan, Iraq was different. The United States' military action did not have UN authorisation. The Australian Labor Party opposed both the US action and Australia's participation. It testifies to Howard's authority in his party that there was no dissent from his war decision. Future historians will find that result remarkable. In justifying his decision Howard put much emphasis on the dangers posed by Iraq's assumed possession of a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capability – he genuinely believed these claims that were subsequently shown to be false.

The NSC decision-making process was flawed since participants knew Howard was determined to commit to the war. The entire NSC debate was about how, not why. The criticism of Howard is that he participated in a US-led intervention without a full appreciation of what the war meant, without any assessment of the intervention's strategic prospects or of what it might mean for the region.

But Howard was extremely tactical in his war commitment. He told the Americans that Australia would be involved 'at the pointy end' but then withdraw. It was a limited Australian commitment and there were no fatalities in combat. Howard understood the risks – he knew if Australia had taken significant casualties in such a politically disputed war that the price paid would be his prime ministership.

In summary, the 9/11 aftermath saw a seasoned Howard using the crisis to achieve long-run foreign policy goals while harnessing domestic political advantage as a strong leader. That advantage soon turned into a negative when the US intervention became counter-productive and the absence of any WMD capability invited a hostile retrospective judgment on the intervention. Howard, however, always defended his decision.

The previous year in 2002 Islamist extremists had killed 202 people including 88 Australians at Bali, the worst slaughter of Australians since World War Two. It was a shattering event that touched the Australian soul – young, innocent, holiday-makers, going abroad for adventure and recreation, had met a violent death. Howard travelled to Bali, comforted the grieving relatives, legitimized their anger and delivered a private message to weeping families: 'We'll get the bastards'.

Explaining his response to the author Howard said that 'reason controls anger'. He spoke as a people's prime minister. Later at the Parliament House Memorial Service held on 12 October – conspicuously a religious service

led by then Bishop to the Australian Defence Force, Right Reverend Tom Frame – Howard said Australians were ‘as tough as tungsten’ but also ‘a soft and loving people who will wrap our arms around those who have lost so much’.<sup>7</sup>

This was not Australia’s 9/11; it was not an attack on the Australian homeland. But Howard revealed two qualities in response – an empathy for a nation in tragedy drawing upon his own emotions and language and a political judgment that turned the crisis into an opportunity to deepen ties with Indonesia.

The Bali attack was part of a de facto civil war within Islam that would have inevitable consequences for Australia. The government promoted a joint Indonesian-Australian police investigation into the bombing that became the prelude to police, intelligence and counter-terrorism co-operation between the two nations. The Australian public did not blame Indonesia for the Bali attack, but this was partly a reflection of the Howard Government’s stance. In the end, the main perpetrators were either brought to trial or killed.

In strategic terms Bali crossed a threshold – terrorism moved to centre-stage as an immediate security problem for Australia, in the region and at home. The upshot was a renewed priority on resources and powers for the security agencies and the most intense passage of national security laws since the Second World War.

## Lessons learned

I was asked to nominate three failures of the Howard Government.

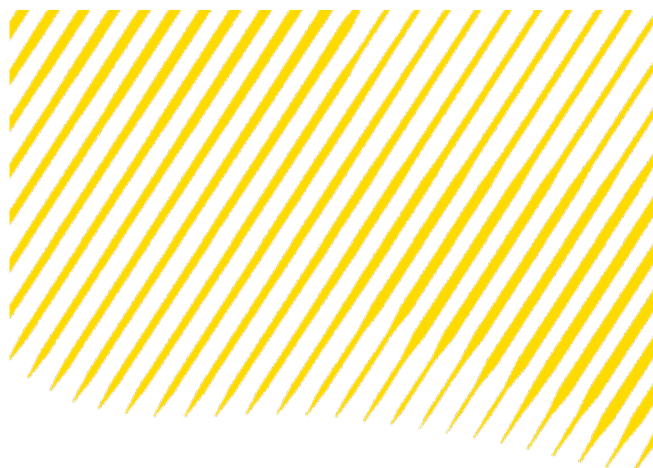
The first and most serious was its refusal to seek a full strategic assessment of the implications of the Iraq War and the prospects of Western intervention succeeding and achieving its declared aims. Second, I think there was too much hubris surrounding the success of the East Timor intervention. In an interview later Howard – while not using the words – endorsed the idea of Australia being a ‘deputy sheriff’ to the United States. That damaging branding would run for years.

Finally, on the waterfront issue – this may be more a consequence than a direct failure – but the union campaign was run by a young Greg Combet who learnt so much in the process. When the Howard Government launched its *WorkChoices* agenda years later, Combet then head of the union movement, was ready. The waterfront was the prelude to *WorkChoices*. It taught Combet how to fight

and win the bigger showdown. That became a decisive industrial and political event in our history and was a tangible factor in Howard’s demise as prime minister.

## Endnotes

- 1 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, HarperCollinsPublishers, Sydney 2010, p287.
- 2 Paul Kelly, *The March of Patriots*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 2009, p. 511.
- 3 *The March of Patriots*, p. 507.
- 4 *The March of Patriots*, p. 482.
- 5 *The March of Patriots*, p. 585–86.
- 6 Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p. 385.
- 7 Paul Kelly, ‘Bali: Beyond the Flames’, *The Weekend Australian*, 11 October 2003.



# 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.

## UNSW Press Howard Government Series Titles

- I The Ascent to Power, 1996 (released 2017)
- II Back from the Brink, 1997-2001 (released 2018)
- III Trials and Transformations, 2001-2004 (released 2019)
- IV The Desire for Change, 2004-2007 (released 2021)
- V The Art of Coalition: The Howard Government Experience, 1996-2007 (released 2022)



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