

# 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. 6** *Political leadership*

**PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE RICHARD ALSTON AO**  
**VISITING PROFESSOR**  
**UNSW CANBERRA**



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**John Howard Prime  
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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

Inquiries about *Policy Perspectives* may be directed to the Executive Editor, Andrew Blyth (email: [a.blyth@adfa.edu.au](mailto:a.blyth@adfa.edu.au))

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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.



**Professor the Honourable Richard Alston AO** is now on his fourth career. He commenced his working life as a barrister practising in crime and personal injuries and later in commercial and administrative law. In 1986 he was appointed to the Australian Senate and was on the front bench of the Coalition parties for 15 years. From 1996 until 2003 he was the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and served as the deputy leader in the Senate for ten years. In 2005 he was nominated by Prime Minister John Howard as Australia’s High Commissioner to London, where he served until 2008. Since that time, he has been involved in various aspects of commerce, having chaired three ASX listed companies and served for seven years on the international advisory board of one of the world’s largest hedge funds as well as a director of a UK public listed company. From 2014–2017 he was the Federal President of the Liberal Party of Australia. He retains an abiding interest in the Arts and has published a memoir, *More to Life than Politics?* as well several essays on political themes.

# POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Richard Alston

**THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP.** Google says there are at least 15,000 books on the subject and thousands more articles appear every year. But most of these are about business and I would argue that political leadership is a protean art that defies simple definition. It is also an extremely difficult art to master.

Prominent economic historian, Niall Ferguson, says that every secretary of state and national security adviser must make choices between bad and worse options. The same can be said of political leaders. Ferguson also says, presciently, that anger has replaced dialogue to carry out disputes, especially in the social media age.

In my time as Liberal Party President (state and federal) and a senator from Victoria, I have had dealings with 11 prime ministers and over 40 State premiers, not to mention quite a few offshore. Hopefully I learned a few lessons along the way.

All good leaders are different, whether it be Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela (whom I met at the inauguration of his successor in Pretoria in 1999) or Martin Luther King Jr. Their achievements depended on their unique socio-cultural contexts.

A new book on leadership written by the legendary 99-year-old Henry Kissinger strongly emphasises the importance of great men and women in bringing about major changes. He sees the role of leaders as being to guide and inspire and identifies five critical qualities: tellers of hard truths, visionary, bold, capable of spending time on their own and not fearing to be divisive. There are very few leaders, past or present, who have exhibited even most of these characteristics.

One who probably did meet all these exacting standards was one of Kissinger's six subjects, Lew Kuan Yew, first Prime Minister of Singapore between 1959 and 1990. He started public life as a socialist firebrand but later converted to free enterprise and turned his small island state of Singapore into a global success story. Perhaps his greatest attributes were transparent incorruptibility and a fierce determination to pursue his economic dream.

One of Kissinger's most interesting requirements is spending time reflecting on your own. In our time, Kevin Rudd (prime minister 2007–2010; 2013) and Malcolm Turnbull (prime minister 2015–2018) clearly lacked this ability, whereas John Howard (prime minister 1996–2007) and Robert Menzies (prime minister 1939–1941; 1949–1966), especially in their 'wilderness years', clearly did.

It is sometimes said that leaders are born, not made. But it is certainly not just a case of genetics, as many leaders have emerged from modest, even poverty-stricken, families. To name just two: Bill Clinton was born after his father died and his mother was an alcoholic who married three times – hardly a promising start. Abraham Lincoln was born into poverty in a log cabin. He lifted himself up by his bootstraps, educated himself and became a lawyer. The American Civil War (1861–1865) made him.

It is much more likely that leadership skills are a product of one's environment. In other words, growing up listening, learning, thinking, planning and drawing on vital lived experiences. That is why parliamentarians who were in politics a long time before becoming prime minister are usually much more successful – compare Paul Keating and John Howard with Julia Gillard (prime minister 2010–2013) and Kevin Rudd, certainly Malcolm Turnbull and perhaps even Scott Morrison (prime minister 2018–2022). Bob Hawke (prime minister 1983–1991) was a special case – he had been playing politics at high levels all his life.

For me the key to successful stewardship is understanding economics. Both Howard and Paul Keating (prime minister 1991–1996) learnt a lot as Treasurers and simply being immersed in political issues for more than two decades. In contrast, Rudd may have had some theoretical understandings, Gillard very little. Gough Whitlam (prime minister 1972–1975) and Tony Abbott (prime minister 2013–2015) both eschewed economics, and it showed.

In his latest political biography, Anthony Seldon, the doyen of British political biographers says of former United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May (2016–2019): 'She came to office knowing little about economics, which prevented her from understanding better the complexities

involved. She understood little about government, including the powers and limitations of her office, how to make Cabinet government and the civil service work for her, and how to advocate and persuade. These skills were not optional extras for the task in hand'.<sup>1</sup> This is a devastating indictment of a prime minister completely out of her depth but, at least to a lesser extent, the same could be said of some other recent prime ministers in Australia.

Rudd, Turnbull, John Hewson (Leader of the Liberal Party, 1990–1994) and John Gorton (prime minister 1968–1971) all prided themselves on being party outsiders, but this proved to be a weakness not a strength. Howard had been a vice president in the New South Wales Liberals and understood the critical importance of keeping the party on side and understanding its concerns – first, look after the base!

Doris Kearns Goodwin, the renowned American political historian, says the vital qualities of leadership are intelligence, energy, empathy, verbal and written gifts and skills in dealing with people. I would add a fierce ambition, which Andrew Peacock (former Leader of the Opposition (1983–1985; 1989–1990) lacked, but Howard had in spades, plus perseverance and a strong work ethic.

Howard also has a memory like an elephant, so he never needed speech notes. Perhaps some of the most powerful and enduring words ever uttered in public life were spoken by him in the heat of battle during the 2001 election campaign launch held in Sydney: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'. I was there – you could hear a pin drop, as his words sank in.

Leadership is not just about achieving outcomes. It is taking people with you, as John Howard did, by giving everyone a 'fair go' in Cabinet, with the result being very few leaks to the media. He was constantly in touch with backbench members. While I was busy preparing for question time in my office eating a sandwich, he was often found in the dining room with colleagues.

Great leaders are judged by their character, and they inspire others through integrity, displayed in their actions and words. As Tony Abbott said recently of the Howard years: 'Good leadership is about character, convictions and courage'.

It is also not just about 'the vision thing', as George H W Bush somewhat derisively dismissed it. Visionaries do not have a great track record – no doubt Hitler regarded

himself a visionary, so too, perhaps, Julius Caesar and Napoleon. It ended badly for all of them.

When John Howard was asked about his aspirations in the lead up to the 1996 Federal election, he said that he wanted Australians to be 'comfortable and relaxed'.<sup>2</sup> This comment evoked howls of derision as it was seen as lacking in vision. Yet it struck a chord with middle Australia, who had grown tired of being preached to and wanted simply to be understood and appreciated.

Longevity is not necessarily proof of quality leadership. Angela Merkel served as German Chancellor for 16 years and was frequently referred to as the 'de facto leader of the European Union', but I think the reality was that there was no one else – think French presidents Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) and Francois Hollande (2012–2017), and prime minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi (1994 to 1995, 2001 to 2006 and 2008 to 2011). She was much more concerned with German pre-eminence than European success. Keeping the euro low was a real boon for German exports, but a killer for small countries such as Greece.

Good political leaders are hard to find. After all it is a very difficult job and you are under the pump every day, so temperament is critical. Howard had a certain calmness – I never heard him swear or lose his temper. His long experience had solidified into political wisdom – he had seen it all and instinctively knew the right response. He had a good sense of humour and never let his ego take over – he was always extremely patient and courteous towards others.

Howard was upfront about his intentions, not like Keating who promised not to privatise the Commonwealth Bank and Qantas and, notoriously, not to repeal 'L-A-W' tax cuts. But when he reversed his previously staunch opposition to a goods and services tax, Howard took it to an election with a major compensation package – a high-risk strategy but the ultimate in electoral transparency.

Busy prime ministers often find it convenient to delegate a range of responsibilities including attendance at various events, but this can have its downside. When he established the Prime Minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Committee (of which I was a member) Howard made a point of not only attending but chairing every meeting. He had clearly learned the lesson from reports that Paul Keating had attended meetings of his predecessor body in desultory fashion – arrived late, left early – clearly only nominally engaged.

Howard recognised the importance of these regular meetings of the great and the good of the scientific community, from whom we all learned a great deal. His enthusiastic participation not only inspired confidence among attendees but delivered a very important political bonus.

At the start of the 2001 election year the science natives were getting restless. But when we released a comprehensive, multi-faceted, five-year \$3 billion innovation action plan ('Backing Australia's Ability') they quickly realised its seminal importance and strongly supported it. There is no doubt that Howard's attendance, energy, and leadership convinced some, if not, all, involved of the Government's commitment to science and innovation.

Howard strongly believed in continuous communication and was therefore effectively in constant election mode. He took every opportunity to drive home his messages by speaking directly to people, particularly via talk back radio, which went to the audience without intermediation by journalists or editors, unlike with the written media, who were always keen to put their 'spin' on issues.

Howard had impressive management skills, and did not just 'enjoy the problem', as many are wont to do. He was careful to select high quality office staff with people of the calibre of Arthur Sinodinos, a Treasury economist and Graeme Morris a highly skilled political operative. He also appointed excellent chairmen of the Cabinet Policy Unit in Michael L'Estrange (former Rhodes Scholar and executive director of the Menzies Research Centre) and Paul McClintock (acting as the Prime Minister's most senior personal adviser on strategic directions in policy formulation), both of whom went on to forge successful careers in the private sector.

He was also very respectful of the public service, whose capacity to leak when unhappy was a constant factor. Accordingly, when he rejected advice, he was careful to ensure he explained his reasons to those who mattered.

If there was a single key to Howard's prolonged success it was his mastery of politics. He knew that it determined electoral outcomes even more than good policies. He was acutely aware that you must compete constantly and hard in the life and death game of politics. This might seem axiomatic, but leaders and senior Cabinet ministers often persuade themselves that good policies alone will deliver good political rewards. They do not.

This was clearly not the case in the recent 2022 election,

where Labor was the ultimate policy small target and spent most of its time denigrating Scott Morrison and turning him into a hate figure. Morrison was sound at economics but strangely reluctant to tackle Labor opponents such as Mike McGowan (Premier of Western Australia), Daniel Andrews (Premier of Victoria) and Anthony Albanese (Leader of the Opposition), not to mention the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Leaving his best policy of 'super for housing' until the last week of the campaign, when more than 40 per cent of eligible voters had cast their ballot, left many political operators and media commentators baffled.

At the end of his monumental political career Robert Menzies said that building a strong coalition with the Country Party (now the Nationals) was not only crucial but one of his proudest achievements. Howard was quick to agree. He made sure that he was in constant contact with their leaders, Tim Fischer (Deputy Prime Minister 1996–1999), John Anderson (1999–2005) and Mark Vaile (2005–2007), all of whom were not only admirable human beings but very effective leaders.

It took me a while to work out that many of them had almost identical views to right of centre Liberals and this was often because there were no Liberal Party branches in their electorates, so they simply went with the local strength. This made our political task a lot easier, but Howard never took any chances.

Malcolm Fraser was Prime Minister of Australia (1975–1983) for the duration of my three-year term as Victorian Liberal state president, so I had many dealings with him. I suspect history will say that he did not take full advantage of his opportunities, particularly when he had the numbers in the Senate. Shortly after my election I crossed swords on ABC television with Sir Robert Sparks, then-powerful National Party State President in Queensland. This clearly alarmed Fraser who promptly invited me to dinner at the prime minister's official residence, 'The Lodge', but he squandered his opportunity. He lectured me endlessly about the importance of the National Party, without ever asking me what my thoughts were on the subject. As a result, Fraser missed the chance to work with me (and the Victorian Division) on the issue.

In those years I felt it was important that the Liberal Party contested every seat so that its loyal supporters could be accommodated at the ballot box. However, this ran squarely into Fraser's keen desire to protect his close friend Peter Nixon in Gippsland from competition. He won

the argument, but only after some heavy browbeating. He even went so far as to suggest privately that he and Doug Anthony (then leader of the National Party) could form another party, implying that the Liberal Party was only a flag of convenience, which did not impress me very much. It was not long before I came to realise what a profoundly important figure Nixon was, and I have since admired him greatly.

Fraser was from the land and clearly regarded the powerful National party triumvirate of Anthony, Ian Sinclair and Peter Nixon as soulmates. Whereas Menzies and later Howard were able to strike the right inter-party balance, Fraser seemed almost anti-Liberal at times and could not conceal his disdain for key Liberal policies such as privatisation.

At this point it is worthwhile reflecting on several players who did not quite make it to the top. Andrew Peacock came closest, having been Leader of the Opposition on two occasions (1983–1985 and 1989–1990). He was not lacking in charisma but did not quite have the killer instinct needed in politics. In contrast, Howard was obsessed with politics, while Peacock merely enjoyed it, along with other extra-curricular activities.

Alexander Downer (Leader of the Opposition, 1994–1995) was capable but probably came to the job of Opposition leader too early. He never really recovered from being filmed putting on fishnet stockings and several other gaffes (his 'Things that Batter' remark in 1994), ruthlessly exploited by a master politician in Paul Keating. The Labor Prime Minister had already seen off Downer's predecessor, John Hewson, who was regarded as a Party outsider and a political parvenue. His economic policy instincts in those days were generally sound but he was not really interested in cultivating key interest groups or tailoring his cloth to suit the political demands. Accordingly, Hewson pressed ahead with Fightback! – his economic brainchild – with little consideration for the fact that the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was a complex subject needing to be carefully and patiently explained to the masses, as Howard and Costello were later able to do successfully when arguing for taxation reform.

Peter Costello (Treasurer, 1996–2007) had a very good mind and would have achieved great success if he had stayed at the Bar. However, having shared an apartment in Canberra with him for some seven years, my impression was that he enjoyed the cut and thrust on the floor of the Parliament and getting his head around complex

economic issues, but he had little interest in the art of politics which was a very different challenge. At no point did he ever raise with me his interest or willingness in challenging for the leadership of the Liberal Party.

Another outsider worth mentioning is John Elliott. In his prime, Elliott was one of Australia's leading businessmen, with a very good brain and a fierce dedication to the Liberal cause. Apart from serving as Federal President of the Liberal Party he almost singlehandedly formed the 'Victorian 500 Club' (500 members at \$500 each), as a major fundraising entity. He was interested in getting into politics and, as he had stood aside for me to become Victorian State President, I was happy to help. But his business interests proved too enticing and ultimately led to his downfall.

## World leaders

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Since the Second World War there have been few outstanding political leaders. Certainly, none in Europe in last 25 years. Very few in the United States of America, since Ronald Reagan (president 1981–1989) and Bill Clinton (president 1993–2001), whom I met several times, and who also addressed Federal Cabinet. I last saw him in Los Angeles a few years ago at the Eli Broad Museum opening – the old magic was still there!

When Harold Macmillan, United Kingdom prime minister (1957–1963) was asked what the greatest challenge for a statesman was, he replied: 'Events, dear boy, events' – a telling insight, as many big happenings come out of a clear blue sky – only recently, the Global Financial Crisis, Ukraine and Covid-19. Domestically, take the Port Arthur massacre, which happened barely eight weeks after John Howard became prime minister. Gun control was the ultimate political test for a Liberal leader as it potentially pitched the Liberals at odds with their Coalition colleagues, the Nationals. Yet Howard's resolute determination and cool head under pressure carried the day. He stayed the course and carried the nation.

Margaret Thatcher, prime minister for over eleven and a half years (1979–1990) was in a class of her own – thereafter only Tony Blair (prime minister 1997–2007) really stood out and then for his political skills, having brought a left leaning Labor party in from the cold, rather than any major policy achievements – the same could be said of David Cameron (prime minister 2010–2016), who followed Gordon Brown's disappointing two years in office.

I met Margaret Thatcher several times, but she was then rather in her dotage. She was of course a policy wonk, backed by steadfast beliefs in the righteousness of the cause. She loved to project strength – ‘TINA’ (There is no Alternative), and ‘The Lady is not for turning’ said it all. She forever revelled in the glory of being nicknamed ‘the iron lady’ – intended to be a putdown but to her it was the supreme compliment. It must be said that the times suited her. England was in the middle of the winter of discontent and was being constantly derided as ‘the sick man of Europe’. Unlike Rudd, who was obsessed with capturing the four-hour news cycle, Howard focussed on making the big things count. He may have learned this from Margaret Thatcher.

Historians will recall with admiration how she took on the coal miners in the North and the print unions in London, both major contributors to the UK’s declining economic performance. Together with the deregulation of the UK financial markets she greatly reduced the power of the trade unions to hold governments to ransom and made Britain competitive once again.

I remember a select lunch in London in 2005 with John Howard where he said he was a social conservative. She reacted strongly: ‘I’m not, I’m a real conservative!’. She clearly thought that he was describing himself as a party animal! She remained a conviction driven politician to the end.

Perhaps the supreme compliment to her success in getting the country back on track was that both Blair and Brown sought to co-opt her legacy – even inviting her back to Downing Street! They dared not overturn any of her policy reforms. I recently watched a two-part documentary on Reagan and Thatcher – there is no doubt who was the dominant partner.

Boris Johnson likes playing the buffoon and his unruly mop top is clearly cultivated. He is highly intelligent, but with a light touch. He is also quite disorganised and easily distracted with few fixed political beliefs. He is certainly not alone. Of the 13 Conservative prime ministers in the 20th century (and the three to date in the 21st) only Thatcher could be regarded as right wing.

Cameron, Blair and Brown I came across with some frequency. Blair had star power – he was almost always upbeat with a light touch and could ad lib spectacularly well. Cameron had great political skills – I saw him win the leadership contest with David Davis by speaking for an hour without notes and he was always on top of his

brief in the House of Commons, but I doubt that history will rate him highly. Gordon Brown was the epitome of dour – very awkward to talk to and always looking at his watch or over his shoulder. During his ten years as Chancellor of the Exchequer his main pre-occupation seemed to be to blast Tony Blair out of office. But he was a weak Prime Minister, always playing political games. The 2008 Australian federal election coincided with a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kampala, Uganda so John Howard, fighting for his life, or at least his seat, could not attend. I had the honour of leading the Australian delegation.

It was my great good fortune to spend the evening with Stephen Harper, who was clearly one of the outstanding leaders of the 20th century, serving as Canadian prime minister for nearly ten years. Down to earth and easy to talk to, he had a great understanding of practical politics.

During the CHOGM debates Gordon Brown kept pestering me about the Australian election result and I worked out that he thought that as soon as Rudd had been declared the winner, I would have to change my line on climate change, which of course I did not. I was in good company with Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand (1999–2008), as we both argued that our countries should follow international norms in our climate objectives and not virtue signal by getting too far ahead of the pack.

Helen Clark was a very warm, friendly and capable leader and a good friend of Australia. In the lead up to her first election she was seen as very left wing with an approval rating of about four per cent, but quickly learned to govern as a centrist and, accordingly, stayed in power for some 10 years.

There is a lesson here, particularly for Labor leaders, as Anthony Albanese – and perhaps Bill Shorten – seem to have lately discovered. The key to success is to govern from the centre-right, catering principally for middle Australia, as Anthony Albanese looks like he is trying to do.

## Leadership succession

This is a topic which is frequently discussed in corporate literature but is completely different from political succession strategies. The average business chief executive has a life span of approximately five years – rarely planning their own succession. Senior executives emerge over time as potential candidates, but ultimately chair and chief executive officer promotion, ejection and retirement

are matters for the board. Lobbying in the media and canvassing internal support are often counterproductive. David Morgan, for example, killed his chances of becoming Chairman at BHP by letting it be known in the media that he was readily available.

In politics, succession is handled very differently. Very few prime ministers contemplate succession, and none plan for it, except perhaps Robert Menzies, who finally gave the game away in his seventies, leaving Harold Holt, his long serving and loyal Treasurer, as his obvious replacement. Menzies remains today the only prime minister to have voluntarily stepped aside at a time of his choosing.

In politics there is no board of governors, such as the Federal Executive of the Liberal Party, to oversee the issue. In fact, it was very reluctant to ever canvass the leadership matters, let alone publicly contemplate regime change, which would have been regarded as political treason. I can speak from personal experience in saying that the Federal President of the Party does not have a role to play. Malcolm Turnbull would have been very unwise to seek my advice.

Succession is entirely the responsibility of the Parliamentary party, and they are not keen on gratuitous outside advice, let alone anointments and coronations. Extra-curricular machinations obviously need to occur as leadership contenders must count numbers to decide whether to stand for, and particularly succeed in achieving, the highest office.

Political regime change can be a very messy business. It is well documented how Malcolm Turnbull spent much of his time before becoming leader on two occasions (2008 and 2015) in publicly and privately undermining the incumbents by a non-stop media campaign which, because of his perceived left-wing leanings, was sympathetically received by many journalists, who were more than happy to assist in dethroning hate figures such as Tony Abbott.

However, Turnbull's constant guerrilla warfare campaigns against colleagues proved fatal. As Aaron Patrick says in his new book *Ego*: 'Ultimately Turnbull lacked the most important quality needed for leadership: the ability to win his colleagues' trust'.<sup>3</sup> He also adds that 'Turnbull seemed to lack the emotional strength to effectively lead his party when he felt he had lost control of events'.<sup>4</sup> Being a good front runner is never enough.

A much quieter and more successful transition occurred when the Labor Party finally realised, on the cusp of the 1983 election, that it was headed for defeat under Bill

Hayden. Privately, senior colleagues persuaded Hayden to stand aside in favour of former union leader and shadow minister, Bob Hawke. A similar situation occurred in 1995 when Alexander Downer deferred to John Howard. Coincidentally, both manque leaders went on to serve under their replacements as foreign ministers (with Hayden also later serving as a governor-general).

This would never happen in the private sector – a deposed chief executive would never become a board member. Sometimes the obvious replacement becomes impatient and seeks to force the issue by resigning from Cabinet, as both Paul Keating and Andrew Peacock did. As we all now appreciate, Keating was entitled to feel aggrieved, given that Hawke had welsed on his solemn promise before witnesses to resign.

The succession issue for the Federal Liberal Party arose quite acutely in the dying days of the Howard Government. There was some expectation that John Howard might have been persuaded to stand aside in favour of Peter Costello. I was out of the country during this time, but I did maintain contact with some of my former senior colleagues and my impressions are that:

1. John Howard, like some other political leaders, probably had some reservations about the political skills of his prospective successor – perhaps like Churchill, then in his eighties, who thought that Anthony Eden 'wasn't quite ready'.
2. Several members of the Cabinet felt that Costello was not likely to be successful in the game of politics, as he never seemed interested in political strategy discussions.
3. There was a considerable legacy of loyalty and respect towards John Howard, somewhat similar to those who supported Hawke to the very end in his doomed efforts to rebuff Paul Keating in December 1991.

Costello had a very good brain and was a tower of strength on the floor of the parliament and in arguing his case in the media. However, in Cabinet I found Peter Reith to be much more interested in the politics and substance of issues than Costello, who preferred to simply deal with Treasury matters. He was certainly available for the top job if drafted but not inclined to make much of an effort to assist his own cause. His decision to not contest the leadership and subsequently resign from politics strongly suggests he did not enjoy the politics of politics.



John Howard, in marked contrast, enjoyed every minute of politics – always keen to circulate at functions and shake every hand. I used to say that he would have done the job for nothing. He was always ready to acknowledge that he only got where he did through the Liberal Party. He had his finger on the pulse of every political manoeuvre. It was a pleasure to seek his guidance on the issue of the day. He was very quick on the uptake – he understood every aspect of my portfolio, but after attending to core business he was always happy to have a wide-ranging political chat.

There is a lot of luck in politics and my great good fortune was to have been there during the Howard ascendancy – no one else could have done it better.



## Endnotes

- 1 Anthony Seldon, *May at 10: The Verdict*, Biteback Publishing: Great Britain, 2020.
- 2 See ABC Television, *Four Corners* interview with John Howard, then Leader of the Opposition, in 1996: <https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/an-average-australian-bloke---1996/2841808>
- 3 Aaron Patrick, *Ego: Malcolm Turnbull and the Liberal Party's Civil War*, HarperCollins, 2022, p.4
- 4 Aaron Patrick, *Ego*, p.81



# 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)



## **Contact us**

Old Parliament House  
18 King George Terrace,  
Parkes, ACT 2600, Australia

[info@howardlibrary.unsw.edu.au](mailto:info@howardlibrary.unsw.edu.au)