Keating the Fascinator

Neal Blewett

Don Watson
Recollections of a Bleeding Heart:
A Portrait of Paul Keating PM
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WHAT IS IT about Paul Keating that so fascinated his retainers? Six years ago, John Edwards wrote a massive biography-cum-memoir taking Keating’s story to 1993. Now Don Watson has produced an even heftier tome. Narrower in chronological span — 1992 to 1996 — Watson is broader in his interests, more personal, more passionate. While not the masterpiece it might have been, Recollections of a Bleeding Heart remains the most compelling contemporary portrait of an Australian prime minister. Paul Keating has found his Boswell.

Recollections is really three books in one: a subtle and sympathetic analysis of the many facets of the twenty-fourth prime minister; a narrative of high — and low — politics in the Keating years; and a compendium of the political wit and wisdom of Don Watson.

I was a colleague, though never an intimate, of Paul Keating for over ten years, and there is much of revelation here, for example the erosion of his marriage, a theme running like a drum-beat through the narrative. Yet it is the familiar that is most striking: in passage after passage, one stops short in recognition. This is the Keating I knew, but had never been able to capture in words. Complex, ambiguous and elusive, he has until now escaped any convincing delineation.

Watson portrays him as the most contrary of all politicians: ‘an enigma, a paradox, an oxymoron on legs, a contradiction.’ He was in turn the promoter of order and the bringer of chaos, sometimes ‘like a man who believed the world was disintegrating and it was his lonely desperate task to try to hold it together’, and at others wishing to ‘unleash the dogs, let all hell break loose’. He would be ‘energetic and focused one day, the next inert and remote’. He is at once the refined aesthete with his deep, if narrow, interests in the arts, who ‘would not react to a serious challenge [in domestic politics] until he felt the shadow of the axe above him’. This became very much a problem for his minders. ‘Years of death-defying struggle had given him the metabolism of a cornered rat — he could not get excited until the stakes were very high, preferably a matter of life and death.’ And yet sadness hung about him. He could, as I know, be the most exuberant of men, yet melancholy was never far away. Indeed, it was this sense of sadness that, for Watson, remains the dominant impression, perhaps even a sense of mourning, which ‘empties the mourner’s world, leaving it like an abandoned house’. In future, when I am asked, ‘What was Paul Keating really like?’ the answer must be, ‘Go read Don Watson’.

There are some wonderful set pieces in the narrative: a glimpse of the reception for Elizabeth II in King’s Hall in February 1992, notorious for Keating’s alleged ‘manhandling’ of the Queen, where, as Watson opines, ‘if he touched her at all it must have been little more than the epidermis of his fingertips’; the Bankstown policy speech a year later, with the heart-warming family appearance at the end, when Keating’s ‘happiness was palpable and infectious’, and which moved my senior adviser to tears; the triumph in the Bankstown Sports Club on the evening of 13 March 1993 when, through the ‘dinging and buzzing and rattling’ of the poker machines, it became apparent that the unwinnable election had been won; the pilgrimage to Ireland; the passage of Mabo through the Senate where in ‘the packed public gallery … those big rodeo hats … rose and applauded’; and that last policy speech — ‘the hardest policy speech to write because the government was too old’.

Scattered through Recollections are Watson’s reflections on politics: on politicians and the media; on the art of speechwriting; on the theatre of question time; on ‘the relatively benign corruption’ of the democratic process; on the wisdom of televising parliament, and a host of other mini-essays. He is also good at capturing a sense of place: Canberra ‘affluent, informed and civilised yet … a lot like a gimcrack suburb or a declining country town’; parliament house with ‘its giant rattling hills hoist of a flagpole … an elephantine expression of the suburban dream’. This descriptive talent is exercised during many of Keating’s expeditions overseas, occasions on which the prime minister was frequently at his best, handling as he was the ‘big picture issues’, but which often had damaging domestic repercussions. Watson was there when Keating unexpectedly knelt to kiss the soil at Kokoda, a reverberating symbolic gesture,
but as Watson notes: ‘Old diggers … had at best mixed feelings about this svelte creature in his Italian suit blessing their ground.’ And there is a delightful glimpse of prime minister and speechwriter in Berlin ‘in the evening gloom … hunting Schinkel buildings, stealing round corners to evade the press in streets all blackened and bullet-pocked from fifty years before’.

Watson’s perspective is inevitably presidential, a view focused on a single individual. Australian elections have become increasingly presidential, contests dominated by the prime minister and the would-be usurper, with even the most influential of Cabinet and shadow ministers playing only bit parts. But to conclude from this that our political system is presidential is an error. Without Hawke’s charismatic engineering skills, Labor would have been unlikely to win four elections in a row; yet without the solidarity and achievements of an able Cabinet those successive victories would have been improbable. Ministers and prime minister are tied together in a symbiotic relationship; both need to flourish if the government is to survive. For a scholar to neglect this is an academic mistake; for a prime minister to succumb to presidentialism can be fatal.

Watson recognises this but only late in the day, on page 697 — ‘good government depended on more than a prime minister, it depended on a team’ — and then only as a last desperate remedy to succour the prime minister. The rest of the book is infected with the virus of presidentialism, the symptoms of which are everywhere. Watson writes as though the most significant battle within the government was the one for the prime minister’s soul, fought out in the prime ministerial bunker between ‘the pointy heads’, the high priests of economic rationalism, and the ‘bleeding hearts’, the ‘suckers for every sob story’. Cabinet struggles barely touch his radar screen. The resignation of Don Russell, Keating’s chief adviser and the leader of ‘the pointy heads’, is given five pages; that of the Treasurer, John Dawkins, and the Health Minister, Graham Richardson, half a sentence each. Yet it can be argued that the resignation of these two Cabinet Ministers, particularly Dawkins, portended the decay of the government. Watson is also cavalier in his treatment of ministers and ministries. Simon Crean was not Industry Minister; Peter Baldwin was never Minister for Employment, Education and Training; Bob McMullan became Minister for Trade, not Minister for Social Security, in 1994; David Beddall did not become a minister in May 1992; Con Sciacca was not a senator; I was not Health Minister in 1992. These are venial sins, but indicative of the author’s tunnel vision.

All this relates to the central question that any writer on Keating must answer. How did he lose the winnable election of 1996 after having won the unwinnable one of 1993? The former was fought in a much more benign economic climate than 1993, after four years of impressive growth accompanied by low inflation, though admittedly unemployment remained intractable. Moreover, having had but one leader through the 1990 parliament, the Opposition now had once more succumbed to leadership troubles being led in turn by a lame duck, a clown and a recycled has-been from the 1980s. Conventional wisdom has it that the voters, having disposed of the greater evil in 1993 (Hewson and the GST), simply waited behind the back shed with their axes to whack the other evil (Keating) at the first opportunity. The trouble with this thesis is that it suggests that the most creative politician of his generation was incapable of using the economic recovery — of which he was the architect — plus his opponents’ travails to refurbish his image and refashion the national story.

Watson’s answer is not easy to discern amid his abuse of the press, his continuing psychoanalysis of his master, and much personal angst. In crude terms, he seems to believe that Keating was destroyed by the magnitude of his achievement, itself undermined by the policy failure that ‘we never found a place for the people in the big picture’ and by the kinks in the prime minister’s personality, above all by his ‘recoil from the pursuit of popularity and trust, which is to say from the essence of politics’. This is a presidential explanation but one which transforms the simple revenge western into a drama of Shakespearean dimensions, in which the hero of vast achievements is undermined by the policy failure that ‘we never found a place for the people in the big picture’ and by the kinks in the prime minister’s personality, above all by his ‘recoil from the pursuit of popularity and trust, which is to say from the essence of politics’. This is a presidential explanation but one which transforms the simple revenge western into a drama of Shakespearean dimensions, in which the hero of vast achievements and great potential is brought down by flaws in his own personality.

This leaves out that other indispensable element of Australian government — the Cabinet. Watson tends to be dismissive of ministers’ roles: ‘We waited in vain for ideas from … ministers’ offices.’ It was not an impressive Cabinet by comparison with the Hawke Cabinets, and was also distinctly unstable. In nearly nine years, Hawke lost only four Cabinet Ministers, admittedly one twice, as a result of dereliction or disaffection. In three years, Keating lost as many, and the crisis that engulfed another minister, Carmen Lawrence, in 1995, wrecked any chance for political concentration and recovery. Nor did the Keating Cabinet seem to work very well. 1993 — a year of lost opportunities — was notorious for a
botched budget. Watson wonders why ‘the politics [had] been so abysmal, so stupid, so unconsidered’, and notes that, on certain controversial budget items, there had been no meeting of advisers with the prime minister. What he might well have asked was what had happened to the Cabinet’s Expenditure Review Committee, that engine room of government that had brought courage, discipline and political sense to budgets and economic statements for more than a decade.

Perhaps other issues absorbed the prime minister’s attention — in 1993, above all, Mabo. But here again one questions the workings of government. Mabo was a magnificent but fraught achievement, but why was its development and management left to two junior ministers? Keating could not escape involvement at critical points in the debate, but responsibility in the hands of a senior Cabinet Minister would have eased what became an excessive burden. That is how Cabinet government should work. Then, in late 1994, the brawl over logging between two ministers — David Beddall and John Faulkner — erupted, wrecking understandings with the Green movement. As Watson admits, the affair had ‘been taking shape for months’, with relations between the two ministerial offices ‘poisonous’. Watson goes on to note that ‘no one called the warring parties together and demanded a political compromise’. The issue never came before the Cabinet, the usual resolver of such disputes, because ‘the prime minister was not driven to consider it seriously’.

How far the weakening of the relationship between prime minister and Cabinet was due to Keating’s succumbing to the vice of presidentialism is not clear. In his hubris, did he believe 1993 was his victory rather than Hewson’s defeat? Was he beginning to see even his own colleagues as politicians ‘with brains like sparrows’ nests — all shit and sticks’? While Watson denies the allegations of presidentialism, his claims that ideas were only coming from the bunker — not from ministers, not from public servants, not from the National Secretariat — tend to confirm them.

Like his master, Watson is self-indulgent. Four years, even with Keating, scarcely justifies a book of more than 700 pages. For all its brilliance, the psychologising becomes repetitious, occasionally verging on the maudlin and toppling over into absurdity. Some passages are overwritten and blowzy, and many of Watson’s observations could be more tightly disciplined. Judicious editing would have secured a tauter and more supple book.

But it would be unfair to finish on a carping note about a splendid book that gives such pleasure; and, for true believers, such pain. When Keating lost office, he was younger than all but one of his postwar predecessors when they gained it. This fact alone suggests the tragic waste of a political talent. It was a tragedy not only for Keating personally but for the nation which he pummelled, transformed, inspired and infuriated.