Tabs on Howard

Neal Blewett

Robert Manne (ed.)
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DO JOHN AND JANETTE choke on their cereal at the name of Robert Manne as they breakfast in their harbour-side home-away-from-home? They have every reason to do so. No single individual has provided so comprehensive a challenge to Howard and his ideological claque in the culture wars now raging in this nation. Manne was early to denounce Howard: for his soft-shoe shuffle with Pauline Hanson; for the inhumanity of the government’s approach to the boat people; for the shallow basis for our participation in the Second Iraq War. In the wider war, he wrote a savage critique of the right-wing cognoscenti who assailed Bringing Them Home, and he has rallied the troops to repel Keith Windschuttle’s revisionist history of black—white confrontation in nineteenth-century Australia. Now he has edited this selection of essays, which provides a critical survey of the Howard government across a wide range of its policies.

For a government that has been extraordinarily successful electorally, its record, according to these assessors, is pretty dismal. Nearly every evaluation comes down on the negative side. It is, of course, an elitist view: the contributors are all eminent figures in their fields of expertise. Given the Abbottian view of élites, this may, for some, be sufficient reason to dismiss the book. But for those not misled in this way, these essays provide an absorbing and sobering assessment of our present rulers.

Manne himself provides an introductory overview, setting the government in its social context and summarising its history. Manne interprets the Howard government in the light of the two revolutions that have transformed Australia over the last generation: the post-Menzies cultural revolution, which repudiated the old approach to race and ethnicity; and the post-Fraser economic revolution, which tumbled the pillars that had structured the Australian economy, some for almost a century, others since the time of Keynes. These upheavals were the result of an élite consensus, but the masses were alienated from the political class due to the insecurity and uncertainties that resulted. The hardships occasioned by rapid economic changes led to the scapegoating of the apparent beneficiaries of the cultural revolution: Asian immigrants, ‘multicultural ethnics’ and Aborigines. The first political victim of this alienation was Paul Keating, who epitomised “multicultural ethnics” and Aborigines. The first political victim of this alienation was Paul Keating, who epitomised the Liberal party’s extension of Aboriginal title, by a negative approach to reconciliation, by killing off the republic and by identifying himself with the attack on ‘black armband’ history. Above all, he revealed this sympathy through his gentle treatment of Pauline Hanson, herself the most obvious political product of the alienation of the masses. Ultimately, he rallied populist sentiment to the Liberal cause by his harsh treatment of the boat people, culminating in the Tampa incident, which brought the not unjustified complaint from Hanson that he had stolen her political clothes. Through this tricky piece of cross-dressing he corralled the bulk of the One Nation vote in 2001.

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Helen Irving takes up a similar theme. For one who is confessedly ‘unashamedly Burkean’, Howard’s approach to a courageous decision on the GST and by the further pursuit of privatisation. However, he signalled to ordinary people that he shared their disquiet over the cultural revolution by attacking the radical élites, by the abolition of some of the central institutions of multiculturalism, by resistance to the extension of Aboriginal title, by a negative approach to reconciliation, by killing off the republic and by identifying himself with the attack on ‘black armband’ history. Above all, he revealed this sympathy through his gentle treatment of Pauline Hanson, herself the most obvious political product of the alienation of the masses. Ultimately, he rallied populist sentiment to the Liberal cause by his harsh treatment of the boat people, culminating in the Tampa incident, which brought the not unjustified complaint from Hanson that he had stolen her political clothes. Through this tricky piece of cross-dressing he corralled the bulk of the One Nation vote in 2001. What emerges from Manne’s analysis, though he scarcely admits it, is that Howard, on this evidence, is a formidable political strategist.

This issue is addressed by that larrikin political commentator, Mungo MacCallum, whose career seems to have been revitalised by John Howard. He opens with the provocative claim that Howard is ‘the best politician’ he has known in forty years. However, once this claim is disentangled from a web of abuse — the PM ‘has the breadth of vision of a blindworm and the imagination of a damp lettuce’ — it seems to amount to two things: that Howard is a politician of extraordinary resilience and a consummate manipulative opportunist. No one can impugn Howard on the former, but the latter is to underestimate him, as many have done to their cost.

Judith Brett does not do so. In an essay sympathetic to Howard, she makes a powerful case that he is ‘the most creative political leader’ the Liberals have had since Menzies. He has not simply regurgitated the rhetoric of Menzies but has adapted the Menzian tradition and language to contemporary circumstances. In so doing, he has recaptured ‘the consensual centre’, banished Labor and the ‘minority interests’ clustered around it, at least rhetorically, from the mainstream of Australian life, created a new bogey — the élitist ‘chardonnay set’ — and, with extraordinary chutzpah, not only used elements of the radical Australian Legend for conservative purposes but even annexed Labor’s domain of work with his ‘Howard’s battlers’. But Brett’s enthusiasm for Howard appears to have waned. Her disenchantment stems from his un-Burkean preference, at least on cultural issues, for populist sentiment over the national interest, for rule by ‘the ill-informed mob’ rather than for vigorous debate around a plurality of views. She dislikes his growing preference for the ‘chummy exchanges’ of talk-back radio over the ‘probing format’ of the press conference, and his growing disregard of the value of informed debate in a liberal democracy. She ends with a surprising castigation: ‘the longer Howard has gone on the more he resembles Keating in his self-serving conviction that only he knows where Australia’s national interests lie.’
constitutional issues, apart from the monarchy, has in fact been anything but Burkan. Ministerial responsibility and accountability had long been eroded before Howard came to power, but they probably reached a nadir with the ‘children overboard’ affair. Howard appears to have done little to rein in ministerial attacks on judges, and the appointment of a cleric as head of a secular state was certainly novel. Irving is right to describe his proposal to resolve deadlocks between the two houses as ‘an extraordinarily radical one’.

When we turn to policy issues, criticism mounts. The respected Aboriginal leader Mick Dodson tackles four issues: native title, the stolen generations, reconciliation, and the National Museum of Australia affair. On native title, he finds the government’s response ‘unbalanced and blatantly unfair’; on the stolen generations, ‘lacking in compassion and understanding’; on reconciliation, ‘intransigent’; on the National Museum affair, revealing a desire for ‘a sanitised and triumphantist view of Australian history’. In a passionate but authoritative review of refugee policy, William Maley denounces the government for ‘betray[ing]’ the cause of freedom by treating the victims of oppressive régimes with moral cruelty’.

In a balanced and carefully delineated effort, in which he sets social welfare in the wider economic context, Julian Disney finds both pluses and minuses, but concludes that ‘Howard’s deceptively modest goal of achieving “a relaxed and comfortable” nation remained little, if any, closer to realisation for a large number of Australians’. Simon Marginson is more sweeping on higher education: ‘the successive Howard governments have been the least constructive of all Australian governments since World War II.’ Nor is Marginson optimistic about the latest Nelson reforms, which ‘may strengthen the resource base of the top six to ten universities but at the price of less public investment in the sector, fewer opportunities for the average family and declining quality in most institutions’.

Ian Lowe is equally caustic on environmental policies. While noting that the government’s record is not ‘uniformly awful’, he states that its legacy will be ‘degraded landscapes, defunct institutions, disappearing species and disillusioned communities’.

There are two chapters on foreign policy. In a highly critical essay, weakened by a rather scatter-gun approach to too many targets, Tony Kelvin savages almost all aspects of Howard’s foreign, defence, trade and security policies. In a more narrowly focused chapter, written from a conservative realist standpoint, M.C. Ricklefs provides a nuanced account of relations with Indonesia. Ricklefs traces the often-turbulent exchanges between the Howard government and post-Suharto Indonesia and cautiously concludes that post-Bali the relationship, unencumbered by naïve expectations of somehow being ‘special’, may now ‘rest on a foundation of shared practical objectives that may endure’. But the racism, xenophobia and bigotry surfacing in Australian domestic politics, and the often triumphantist, superior and insensitive comments of Australian leaders — not that the Indonesians are blameless — makes it ‘difficult to see what can restore trust and respect as an element in this relationship’. As the diplomat Kelvin reminds us, ‘in diplomacy words are indeed bullets’.

One might at least have thought that the government had got the economy right. But even here John Quiggan gives it few marks for creativity. The recent sustained period of economic expansion has more to do with tough decisions by its Labor predecessors, competent macro-economic management by the Reserve Bank, plus a modicum of luck. The government has had little in the way of a coherent economic policy, apart from the good sense to let the Reserve Bank get on with the job. It has veered between spurs to complete the unfinished business of the Labor years in areas where its predecessors had been unwilling or unable to act, occasional ‘nation-building’ developmental exercises such as the Alice Springs to Darwin railway, and bursts of irresponsible pork-barrelling whenever the natives get restless, as in early 2001. For most of the time, ‘it appears content to drift, happily taking credit for a long period of relative economic prosperity and putting forward economic reforms on a purely opportunistic basis’. Even its vaunted achievements on unemployment are questionable, given the extent of the economic recovery, the significant expansion of disability pensions among those of working age, the increased opportunities for early access to the age pension and the extent of the part-time male workforce. Quiggan believes that, in time, this period in Australia’s history will be seen as a decade of lost economic opportunities, a decade to which we may apply Donald Horne’s 1964 epigram ‘a lucky country, run by second-rate people, who share its luck’.

Perhaps the government has a better record in fields not covered in this compilation. The understandable focus on refugees may neglect some positive aspects of the government’s immigration policies. But it is hard to think of much else. Communications policy under Richard Alston is best characterised as bumble, bungle and grumble (with the ABC); and the present deputy prime minister, pleasant though he is, has not brought much imagination to transport policy. Nor is the government likely to get much kudos from health, a surprising omission from the book. On health, the government has been so paralysed by the popularity of Medicare that it has eschewed any effort at systemic reform, along the lines pursued by a number of conservative governments overseas. Instead, it has nibbled at Medicare with a number of retrograde changes that shift the system back towards that prevailing in the early 1980s.

Creative oppositions, such as those led by Whitlam in the late 1960s and Hayden in the early 1980s, have mined such works as this to forge effective electoral bullets. This book provides that opportunity for federal Labor in 2004. But it also provides a warning. The electoral success of Howard’s populism runs like a thread through the book, cheering supporters, dismaying opponents. While this may be an immediate electoral threat to Labor, it is also, ultimately, as Brett diagnoses, a threat to Australia’s national interests.