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The Howard Decade in Australian Government and Politics

JOHN WARHURST

Australian National University

This collection of papers, focusing on domestic politics, examines a decade of Australian government and politics from 1996–2006 under the Prime Ministership of John Howard. Leading a conservative Coalition government made up of his own Liberal Party and its junior partner the National Party, Howard has won four elections and is facing a fifth election in 2007. The decade has been characterised by the electoral success of the government, the divisiveness of the debates that surround it, the centrality of Howard himself, and the limits to the explanations advanced in studies of both Howard himself and his government. This collection aims to contribute further to these explanations by offering qualitative analysis of the style of the government; quantitative analysis of the government's appeal to voters; examination of both Howard's central administration and his government's approach to federalism; and four studies of economic and social policy.

Introduction

The Howard decade began on 2 March 1996 and, at the time of writing, continues unfinished by either the retirement or defeat of the main figure, the Prime Minister John Howard. The Liberal and National parties have now won four election victories, in 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004, and a fifth election is scheduled for later this year. These elections have been given careful academic study (Bean, Bennett, Simms and Warhurst 1997; Simms and Warhurst 2000; Warhurst and Simms 2002; Simms and Warhurst 2005). The most controversial of these elections was the so-called Tampa election of 2001, conducted with a whiff of race politics in the air (Solomon 2002). The final one that delivered the government control of both houses of parliament from July 2005, by dint of a remarkable victory in the Senate, was 2004.

Despite some changes in personnel, recurring leadership tensions and some back-bench dissent, there has been a solid core to the top levels of the government,

John Warhurst, a specialist in party and electoral politics, has contributed to and jointly edited books on each of the four federal elections during the Howard decade. He would like to thank the organisers of the John Howard's Decade conference at which drafts of the papers in this Special Issue were delivered, all those colleagues who acted as referees for the papers, and David Adams and Wayne Errington for their helpful comments on this Introduction.

including as well as Howard himself, senior ministers like the Treasurer Peter Costello and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Alexander Downer. But, symptomatic of the travails of the junior Coalition partner, there have been three Deputy Prime Ministers, Tim Fischer, John Anderson and Mark Vaile, as the leadership of the National Party has changed. The government has also been blessed with considerable continuity among its senior public servants and advisers (Tiernan 2006).

On the other hand, the Opposition Labor Party, following 13 years in office under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, has since suffered considerable instability in leadership and general soul-searching, review and organisational reform as it sought to find the answer to Howard's supremacy. Howard has fought elections against three Opposition leaders: Paul Keating, Kim Beazley (twice) and Mark Latham. Furthermore, on two occasions Labor leaders were unseated by their party before they had even reached an election: Simon Crean and Beazley again. At the time of writing Labor is led by Kevin Rudd, elected to the leadership over Beazley in December 2006.

Although there has been stable government, there has also been instability in the minor political party universe. Pauline Hanson was elected as an Independent at the 1996 election and, subsequently, her shooting-star of a party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, exercised a considerable destabilising influence at the elections of 1998 and, to a lesser extent, 2001 (Leach et al 2000). The Australian Democrats, a balance of power party in the Senate, suffered considerable turbulence and lost two leaders, Cheryl Kernot and Meg Lees, from the party itself, until ultimately losing public confidence almost completely in 2004. The Australian Greens continued their steady growth in influence, overtaking the Democrats as the third force, without yet quite satisfying the more optimistic predictions for its success. A second new party, Family First, won its first senator in 2004 on a rising tide of interest in religion and politics.

Ideology, Personality and Values

The decade has been characterized by extensive debate about both the ideological underpinnings of the government and the personal beliefs and motivations of its prime minister. Howard has always been central and the debate has been highly charged. The prominent journalist Dennis Shanahan (2006, 31) claims, with some exaggeration, that Howard 'has had more vitriol directed towards him than any prime minister since Billy Hughes', while the respected student of the Liberal Party, Judith Brett (2006, iii), concurs that 'much that has been written about Howard and his government has been wrong, or at least overheated'.

Certainly the criticisms of Howard and his government have been very strong. Many critics have under-rated Howard from the very start and bemoaned his 'ordinary man' leadership style (see the summary by Adams 2000). Others have strenuously objected to certain key policies, including Australia's membership of the Coalition of the Willing and its part in the Iraq War, its treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, and lamented Australia's turning away from the three Rs of 'refugees, reconciliation and the republic' (see Manne 2004). In turn, these critics have been condemned by Howard supporters in the media as unrepresentative 'elites' and bitter 'Howard-haters'.

One of the Howard government's foremost critics, Robert Manne (2004, vii), prefaced his examination of the government's performance with the following observations on the decade:

Many Australians wholeheartedly admire the Howard government. Many others, although less enthusiastic, regard its performance as mixed but unexceptionable. A sizeable minority, however, believe it to be the most backward looking and mean-spirited government of Australia's post-war years.

Stressing the point that Howard, elected four times, is a complex and successful leader, Dennis Shanahan (2006, 31) makes the case for Howard's place in history in the strongest terms:

John Howard is Australia's most successful prime minister. He has out-served, and maintained his popularity longer than, Labor's longest serving prime minister, Bob Hawke. He has outperformed the Liberals' longest serving prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies.

The decade has also been a period of strong economic growth, security dilemmas and dramas, and military commitments. Public responses to these phenomena have underpinned the government's electoral success. There have been lengthy parliamentary and electoral battles over taxation reform, native title and privatization, to name just three issues. The decade has also witnessed the Hanson episode, the fierce culture wars over history, national institutions and education (Windschuttle 2002; Macintyre and Clark 2003), and the rise of the religious right (Maddox 2005; Lohrey 2006).

A number of these themes have been noted in the literature as the decade has unfolded. It is not true that there has been very little serious study of the Howard government as some allege (Cater 2006); although such claims touch on the regrettable chasm that exists between academic and popular analysis, and the imbalance between the single biography of Howard and the multiple biographies of Latham.¹ There have been general detailed examinations of public policy themes (Singleton 2000, Aulich and Wettenhall 2005), as well as of particular controversies such as Indigenous affairs (Brennan 1998); the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees (Marr and Wilkinson 2003; Brennan 2003; Weller 2002); government relations with the ABC (Inglis 2006); and the war against terror and the American alliance (Garrahan 2004).

This special issue arose from a university conference on John Howard's Decade held in Canberra on 3–4 March 2006, almost to the day 10 years after the government's first election.² The conference itself did not escape highly-charged interactions, especially surrounding the invited speech at the conference dinner by the Director of the Sydney Institute, Gerard Henderson. This collection of papers is just a sample of those delivered at that time, but they make a coherent attempt to take up some of the more important themes.³

¹But note P. van Onselen and W. Errington, *John Howard: The Biography* (2007), which is set to be published in mid-2007.

²The organising committee, drawn from the Australian Defence Force Academy (UNSW), the Australian National University and the University of Canberra, was chaired by Dr Kim Huynh (ANU). The conference was made possible by funding from The National Institute of the Social Sciences and Law, The ANU Faculty of Arts, The Research School of Social Sciences, UNSW@ADFA, and the University of Canberra.

³Some of the other papers from this conference have already been published elsewhere in this Journal, including Warhurst (2007).

Since then other important contributions have been made (see van Onselen and Errington 2006). George Megalogenis (2006) has stressed the continuities in economic policy between Howard and his predecessor, Keating, a general viewpoint that would be shared by many earlier critiques of the modern Labor Party. *The Australian* newspaper's journalists have published a generally laudatory set of observations (Cater 2006) that contains, among other useful perspectives, Paul Kelly's discussion of Howard's governing style that claims (2006a, 3) he 'has brought the art of political management to a zenith with his own interpretation of prime ministerial government' (see also Kelly 2006b).

Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison (2007) have built on their earlier studies of government-NGO relations (Maddison, Dennis and Hamilton 2004; Maddison and Dennis 2005) to allege that executive power has been used by the government in a distinctive attempt to stifle dissent. They gather together numerous established critics, including historian Stuart Macintyre, the whistle-blower from the intelligence services Andrew Wilkie, and Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate. Robert Manne's foreword (2007, ix) argues that this government 'has become more intolerant of criticism and greedy for control the longer it has been in power'.

Evaluating the Howard Decade

The papers in this collection build on these debates. They are written from quite different perspectives and utilise quite different methodologies. This special issue, largely focused on domestic affairs, begins with three contributions to the further understanding of John Howard: his electoral appeal, his ability to connect to and even attempt to construct Australian values and identity, and his ability to outflank his political opponents. Notably two of these contributions are about the political contest over values. Carol Johnson analyses the relationship between Howard's 'values' and contested concepts such as Anglo-Celtic identity, social conservatism, the Christian Right and a neo-liberal 'entrepreneurial culture'. She concludes that the Prime Minister has politicised Australian identity for partisan purposes. Nick Dyrenfurth examines the implications of Howard's self-description as an ordinary and practical man. He concludes that, in successfully outmanoeuvring the Left by appropriating the egalitarian ideals inherent in the rhetoric of 'mateship', 'battler' and 'the fair go', Howard has contributed greatly to his own popular and electoral success. Donald A. DeBats, Tim McDonald and Margaret-Ann Williams, utilising extensive interviews of participants, focus on the events surrounding Howard's accidental presence in Washington on 11 September 2001, when the American capital came under terrorist attack. Using this pivotal moment, they conclude that the Prime Minister's instinctive reactions not only reveal a great deal about his leadership attributes but also did a great deal to strengthen the Australia-US relationship.

Murray Goot and Ian Watson, in the tradition of quantitative political science, bring together, for the first time, an analysis of the whole Howard period. They seek to explain the elements of Coalition success, taking issue with many existing evaluations, by using surveys undertaken by the Australian Election Survey. There are no simple explanations. Goot and Watson address the question of Coalition government success from several perspectives. They point to the influence of workplace and labour market changes, which have shrunk the blue-collar vote; of the relevance of issues that have favoured the Coalition such as defence, terrorism and interest

rates; and of categories of voters – such as the elderly, those with little education and Catholics – that have swung towards the Coalition. They conclude that, although Labor faces a challenge to regain office, the underlying support for the Coalition is volatile and that other issues, such as health, education, privatisation and the environment, have consistently favoured Labor.

The next two papers, by Jenny Stewart and Maria Maley, on political management within the core executive at the national level, and by Andrew Parkin and Geoff Anderson, on federalism and the transformation of Commonwealth–State relations, examine structural politics under Howard. Stewart and Maley discuss three case studies in policy processes – the development of welfare-to-work policies, strategies to combat illicit drugs and industrial relations legislation – to illustrate a highly personalised system of political control. This control extends to the central agencies and ministerial staffers. Parkin and Anderson argue that the structures of Commonwealth–State relations are best described as ‘regulatory federalism’. They conclude that the central power of the federal government has grown during the Howard years but that, for structural reasons, collaboration rather than confrontation best describes the pattern of intergovernmental relations despite the States and Territories being governed overwhelmingly by Labor governments during these years.

The remaining four papers are more directly about particular public policies. Under the broad heading of Indigenous rights, Jane Robbins addresses native title, reconciliation and the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Across the portfolio the common theme has been opposition to measures that give recognition to Indigenous rights, on the grounds that any such recognition was deemed to be divisive. Indigenous politics was more prominent during the 1990s, especially in the lead-up to the 1998 election, than recently, as first Keating and then Howard battled to fashion an acceptable government response to Mabo and Wik, the revolutionary native title decisions of the High Court.

Alan Fenna and Richard Eccleston separately explore aspects of economic management and taxation policies. Fenna elaborates on a central element of the decade: economic good times, and argues that the government’s fiscal record has been ‘ordinary rather than extraordinary’. He also discusses the government’s personal taxation record and concludes that, although the GST-centred taxation reforms were significant, the government has presided over surprisingly high tax levels. Eccleston analyses the government’s efforts to reform business and consumption taxes. He concludes that, measured by efficiency and effectiveness, the government, led by an ‘ever pragmatic Prime Minister’, has been successful.

The final paper by Chris Aulich and Janine O’Flynn examines the government’s record in the field of privatisation; a field in which debates over the ownership and future of public institutions like Telstra have dominated the decade. Privatisation policy, although like much else inherited from Labor, has been accelerated under Howard. Under Howard’s watchful eye extensive privatisation has been achieved through determination and, ultimately, pragmatism.

Such characteristics sum up, in the eyes of a number of contributors to this volume, although certainly not all, the personal and corporate style of the Howard government. Just as the Howard government is an unfinished story, so the evaluations and re-evaluations of both this Prime Minister and his government will continue for some time.

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