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In attempting to locate John Howard the political leader, one has to wade through a remarkable amount of vitriolic criticism and ungainly praise - John Howard polarises opinion. The extensive criticism of Howard is unsurprising given some of the divisive debates over which he has presided. Yet, Howard was a polarising figure long before he became prime minister, and the tumult that surrounds him makes a stark contrast to the mild-mannered image that he cultivates.

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From Vitriolic Criticism to Ungainly Praise: Locating John Howard's Political Success

By Peter van Onselen &
Wayne Errington

Veteran left wing political commentator Mungo McCallum once wrote that the chronicler of the Howard years would need 'a strong stomach'.¹ Mungo was right, but not for the reasons he intended. John Howard polarises opinion. In attempting to locate John Howard the political leader, we have had to wade through a remarkable amount of vitriolic criticism and ungainly praise. A single, obsequious biography of Howard² sits alongside a host of volumes critical of his government. The extensive criticism of Howard is unsurprising given some of the divisive debates over which he has presided, from waterfront reform to asylum seekers to the war in Iraq. Yet, Howard was a polarising figure long before he became prime minister, and the tumult that surrounds him makes a stark contrast to the mild-mannered image that he cultivates.

The vitriol surrounding John Howard's tenure as prime minister plays itself out in the nation's media on a daily basis. At the same time, Howard's cheer squad of conservative newspaper columnists are undeterred by the many compromises he has had to make as prime minister. Right-wingers who admit to their disappointment in Howard's pragmatism are more likely to be found in obscure think tanks or weblogs than on the front lines of political debate. On the other hand, Howard's tenure has seen record numbers of prominent citizens declare their shame at being Australian. 'I have never before been ashamed of my country,' Fraser government minister Peter Baume told *The Australian*. 'Now I am.'³ Strangely, many of these newly-ashamed people lived through the White Australia Policy, the stolen generations, and the Fraser government's recognition of Indonesia's genocidal occupation of East Timor. It took John Howard's prime ministership to move them to express shame of their country. Clearly,

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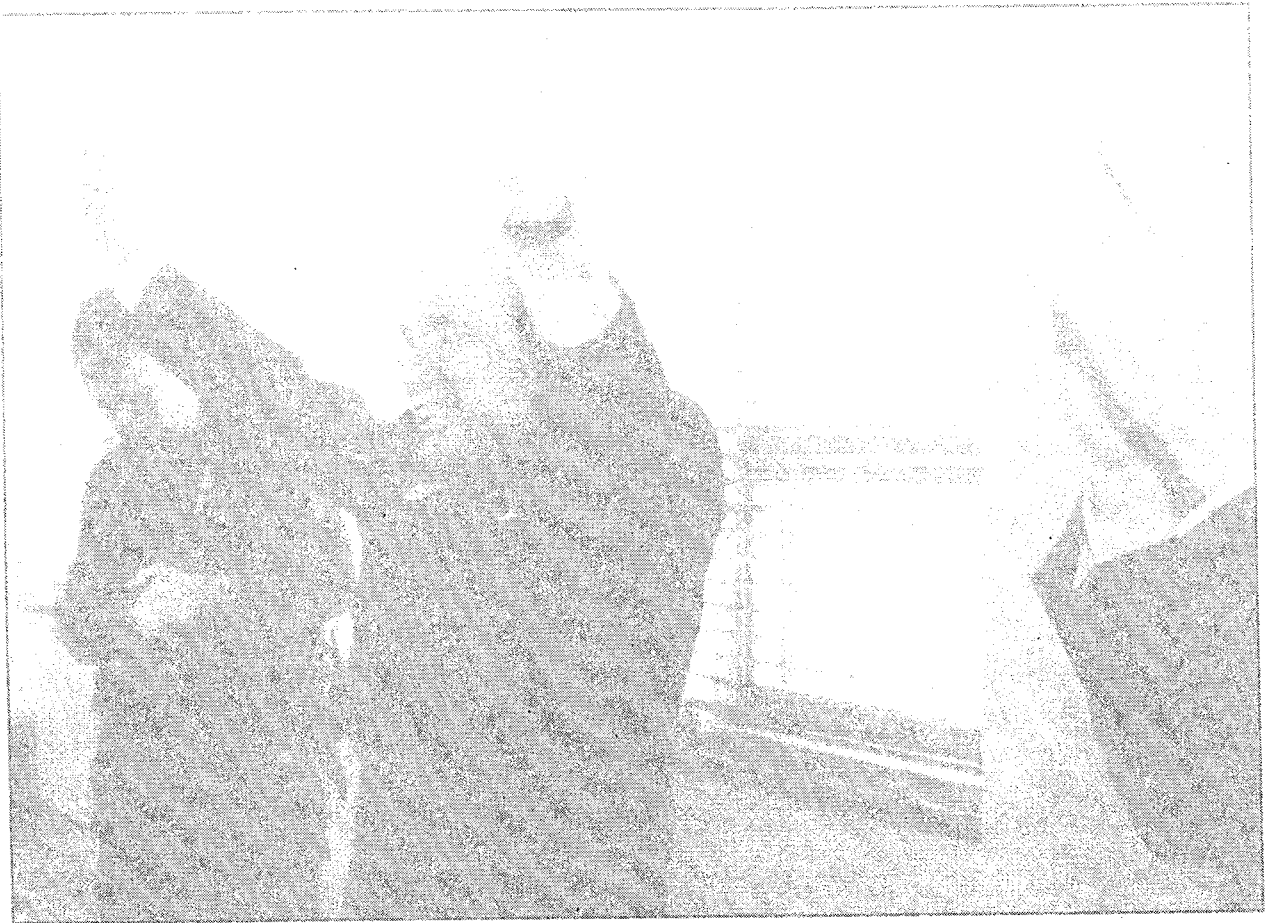
for small 'l' liberals, John Howard's triumph offended their sense of progress. Progressives believed that Australia had moved beyond the racism of its foundation. How does a leader stuck in what Donald Horne called the 'Dreamtime Fifties' win elections today?⁴ Unsurprisingly, theories of Howard's electoral success are as polarised as any other aspect of his administration.

Lucky John

At one extreme, we have the tale of lucky John. 'It is possible,' Don Watson wrote of Howard in *New Matilda*, 'that no leader in the English speaking world has had his stars so favourably aligned since Elizabeth I. For serial good luck, only Menzies comes close.'⁵ The tale of lucky John goes something like this: Howard was a disaster as Liberal leader in the 1980s but the leadership fell into his lap when then leader Alexander Downer imploded in 1994/95. The 'weak and sneaky' Howard (Paul Keating's phrase) slid into office on the back of the unpopularity of the Keating government.⁶ Since then, Howard has presided over a historically incompetent ministry, and fell over the line in 1998 with a minority of the two party vote. The government was able to delay difficult decisions due to the strong economy inherited from Hawke and Keating. Economist John Quiggin argued that Horne's famous epigram could be applied, 'with equal or greater justice, to the Howard government and its term of office, particularly as regards economic policy. Sooner or later, however, this kind of luck will run out.'⁷ It is 'the government's fiscal good luck', according to Labor MP Lindsay Tanner, that has allowed them to spend generously on their preferred interest groups and at the same time run ever greater budget surpluses.⁸

But wait, there is more. Had M.V. Tampa not sailed over the horizon in 2001, Howard would have gone down in history as the prime minister who squandered a landslide victory in record time and expedited the defeat of Coalition state governments, joining Billy McMahon as a Liberal prime minister the party prefers not to talk about. The Senate majority attained in 2004 came as a surprise to many. 'Will John Howard's luck ever run out?' one commentator observed.⁹

Winning an increased majority in 2001 was certainly an important turning point for the government. Yet,



PM John Howard acknowledges the applause during the Liberal Party meeting at Parliament House in Canberra, October 18, 2004. Mr Howard was formally re-elected as Liberal Party leader at the meeting, the first since the Liberal-National coalition was returned with an increased majority on October 9. (AAP/IMAG/Alan Porritt)

Howard showed in coming from well behind in the opinion polls to increase his majority in 2004 that victory in 2001 was no fluke. Howard himself, in the 1980s, along with British Conservative leader Michael Howard in his unsuccessful 2005 campaign, demonstrated that rabble-rousing on immigration from opposition simply looks desperate. So, too, would Howard's Tampa adventure have appeared quite differently had he been as far behind in the polls in August of 2001 as he was in February. By August, Howard had well and truly lifted the government's fortunes through changes to GST business reporting requirements, the first homeowners grant and petrol excise indexing.¹⁰ The pragmatist had narrowed the gap.

In winning multiple elections, Howard was also fortunate in his opposition. The weakness of the opposition over this period was partly a function of Labor's own long period in office (1983-96), after which they had demons of their own to exorcise. Internal debates about what Labor should stand for have now been compounded by the demoralising effect of a long spell in opposition. When a political party is out of government for a sustained period of time they find it difficult to look like an alternative government. In this sense John Howard's success has undoubtedly been influenced by the exodus of talent from the previous Hawke

and Keating governments. By 2006, Beazley and Crean were the only two members of the Labor front bench with ministerial experience. Now Beazley is no longer on the frontbench and only time will tell if new Labor leader Kevin Rudd is capable of prolonging his early honeymoon in the polls into an election winning lead by the time of the federal election. In opposition, Labor distanced itself from the Hawke and Keating economic reforms, leaving Howard free to take credit for low inflation and falling unemployment. Mark Latham's failure to challenge the government's economic credentials, both early in his leadership and during the campaign, allowed Howard to run a successful scare campaign on interest rates in 2004.¹¹

Yet, all politicians have good luck. Successful governments and dispirited oppositions are two sides of the same coin. Bob Hawke was lucky to have had an embattled John Howard as leader of the opposition in 1987. Andrew Peacock had narrowed Labor's majority in the 1984 election and was polling strongly prior to resigning from the leadership in 1985 paving the way for Howard's accession. On the other hand, while Howard has presided over a period of low inflation, the onset of economic contagion amongst Australia's fastest growing trading partners in 1997 was hardly a lucky start to Howard's prime ministership.

John the Genius

If Howard hasn't had any more luck than your average politician, how to explain his success? Alternative explanations tend to emphasise political skill. Mungo McCallum has described John Howard as the best politician he has seen - the 'most adept at winning the game, at learning all the tactics, tricks and deceptions involved in climbing the greasy totem pole and, once he has reached the top, repelling all opponents and staying there'.¹² After he dispatched Mark Latham in 2004, the tale of genius John emerged more strongly, now carrying the weight of explaining four election victories in a row. Prior to the February 2005 Western Australian election, Premier Geoff Gallop spoke of the 'Howard halo' effect.¹³ In an interview in 2005 for our biography on Howard to be released later this year, Liberal Party Federal Director turned MP, Andrew Robb, challenged us to name an Australian prime minister that has shaped the nation more to his liking than Howard.¹⁴ Leaving aside the question of whether conservative leaders should be in the business of remaking the country in their own image, Robb's view is widely shared by both supporters and enemies of the Howard government. To the extent that this assertion is valid, it is because the Howard government has uniquely combined the frenetic legislative pace of modern reformist governments with the electoral success typical of more cautious conservative governments.¹⁵ For conservative leaders, electoral success has historically been the crucial measure. By definition, one of their primary objectives is keeping the Labor Party away from the Treasury benches. Measuring a conservative leader by the success of their legislative program is, of course, much more difficult. Howard's former advisor, Gerard Henderson, argued that due to his economic reforms, Howard 'has been more successful than Menzies and Fraser'.¹⁶

Others marvel at Howard's combination of ideology and pragmatism. Janet Albrechtson noted in 2002 that 'John Howard, long derided as too dry by the wets and too wet by the dries, has masterfully navigated a course straight to the heart of middle Australia by articulating, even during his darkest political days, that Liberal vision'.¹⁷ While avoiding the excesses of ideology has been important to Howard's success, it has been something that Howard has done from a position of dominance within his own party. Indeed, Howard

For conservative leaders, electoral success has historically been the crucial measure. By definition, one of their primary objectives is keeping the Labor Party away from the Treasury benches

almost extinguished the small-l liberal side of the Liberal Party. Howard's use of ideas as political weapons played an important part in the factional battles of the 1980s. While this doesn't seem to have done much harm in terms of the harmony and discipline of the party in government, a less successful federal Liberal party may reap the whirlwind of the divisive practices of the Howard years. This has been the case in Howard's own division of New South Wales, where opposition since 1995 has been one continual intra-party bloodbath. Howard's sharpening of the factions within the party in the middle part of his career, and his failure as prime minister to intervene in the factional brawling that contributed to the failure of the party at state level must be considered an important part of his legacy. He has held back factional opponents from promotion (Pyne, Baird, Georgiou). He has rewarded moderates who have been prepared to toe the prime minister's line on important issues (Nelson, Coonan, Ruddock and, before her recent sacking, Amanda Vanstone). Amnesty International member Phillip Ruddock and prominent moderate Amanda Vanstone have presided over the mandatory detention of asylum seekers. Brendan Nelson and Helen Coonan have kept their liberal social views in check to win preferment. All of this is testament to Howard's dominance within his own party. The extent of the damage caused by Howard's factional warfare will only be known well after he has retired, and will likely cause some reassessment of his political skills.

There is, of course, a less flattering version of the 'genius' tale, where Howard is sneaky, rather than valiant, a 'brilliant practitioner of the art of changing the subject' according to *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Peter Hartcher.¹⁸ Beware the ideologue beneath the pragmatist, that 'master illusionist and toad of a human being'¹⁹ as described by Alan Ramsey. Manip-

ulator of the fears of the Australian people, Howard's malign influence lies behind everything from the Bali bombing to the Cronulla riots. He's Machiavelli with a dog whistle. In respect to Tampa David Marr said John Howard's genius was to understand that whatever impact turning the boats away would have on the way the world saw Australia, none of these violated principles would have much traction at home.²⁰ He mobilised neo-liberal arguments against the 'politically-correct', 'elite', 'special interests' such as feminists, unions, or aboriginal organisations.²¹

Kim Beazley's former chief of staff, Michael Costello, cited the narrative of an unassailable prime minister in 2005 when complaining about press coverage of Beazley's budget reply. Polls suggesting that the public preferred Beazley's tax plan were played down by a commentariat in awe of Howard's alleged political skill. Later in 2005, the Liberal Party federal conference rejected the government's industrial relations blueprint due to its centralist nature. When a leader is struggling, incidents like that can be fatal. Yet, with Howard perceived by the press as dominant, this event was barely reported. It didn't fit the narrative.²² This is in large part due to the emphasis of political observers (not just the press gallery) on tactics rather than substance. From *The Age* Shaun Carney earlier observed the unhelpfulness of this narrative to the government as well as the opposition. Descriptions of Howard as 'supreme' and 'dominant' are reflecting a moment in time, not a political dynamic.²³ Indeed, in spite of the great lengths to which he goes to influence the media, Howard himself is probably the last person to believe his own good press. The strong disapproval of Howard's performance in health, education, industrial relations and the Iraq war indicate that his leadership is in many respects tolerated rather than embraced. It is this fact that could see him struggle against an energised Labor Party under the leadership of Kevin Rudd.

These two images of the prime minister, Lucky John and John the Genius, are not so much wrong as incomplete. Both interpretations contain enough truth to be accepted by the government's supporters or critics, as well as a good many independent observers. They both capture elements of John Howard's success, since Howard has been involved in so many policy debates, campaigns and controversies. What they have

in common, however, is a desire to explain political success by making Howard seem in some way extraordinary. To win so many elections, it seems, a political leader must be extraordinarily fortunate or extraordinarily skilful. In fact, the sources of Howard's success are somewhat more mundane.

Strengths

John Howard's discipline is his greatest political quality, and one that earns him the respect of the electorate and even his opponents. It wasn't always a hallmark of his leadership, however. Howard's greatest piece of luck was losing the 1987 election. He would have made a lousy prime minister in those days. His weaknesses as a political leader clearly outweighed his strengths. On a range of issues, Howard had yet to show the pragmatism that would be the hallmark of his prime ministership. For example, Howard learned from the controversy surrounding his comments on Asian immigration to moderate his political rhetoric. Most importantly, though, he persevered. You can only be in the right place at the right time in politics if you don't quit before your time arrives. Few leaders would have suffered the blows from his own side of politics that Howard did, and stuck around for more. His perseverance doesn't necessarily come from some great moral strength. Howard's simple love of politics before all else other than his family (and possibly cricket) ensured that he battled on. He didn't have the interest (and perhaps not the capacity) to succeed in the private sector. This attribute will also militate against his retirement from the prime ministership. He has few disincentives to keep on keeping on. His carefully crafted line that '[i]f the Australian people do me the honour of returning my Government, I will go on serving in that position for as long as my party wants me to',²⁴ may well prove to be true.

Winning the 1996 election seems like a cakewalk from this distance. We need to remember, however, the eulogies for the Liberal Party that were published after the 1993 election.²⁵ Before Howard replaced Downer in the leadership in 1995, the Coalition was trailing the ALP in the polls. The January 1995 Newspoll, a matter of days before Howard replaced Downer in the leadership, showed the Coalition primary vote at 40 percent while the ALP primary vote was at 46 percent.²⁶ Howard showed enormous discipline throughout 1995

in keeping the focus on the government with his five minutes of economic sunlight mantra. His supposedly small target strategy included a proposal to sell one third of Telstra, hardly the smallest of platforms for an opposition. Howard knew that privatisation was not popular, but that Labor's attempts to attack that policy would lack credibility given their privatisation of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank.

The most important role for a conservative leader is to make judgements about which shibboleths to discard, which to embrace, and which to politely ignore. Just as the next conservative leader will pick and choose what to keep and what to throw away from the burst of social reform that will inevitably follow Howard's exit. If conservatives are masters of anything, it is the strategic retreat. Howard's reluctance to engage issues such as abortion and multiculturalism in the way some of his right wing supporters would have liked is typical conservative strategy. This is wedge politics in reverse, burying issues that might divide your own party.

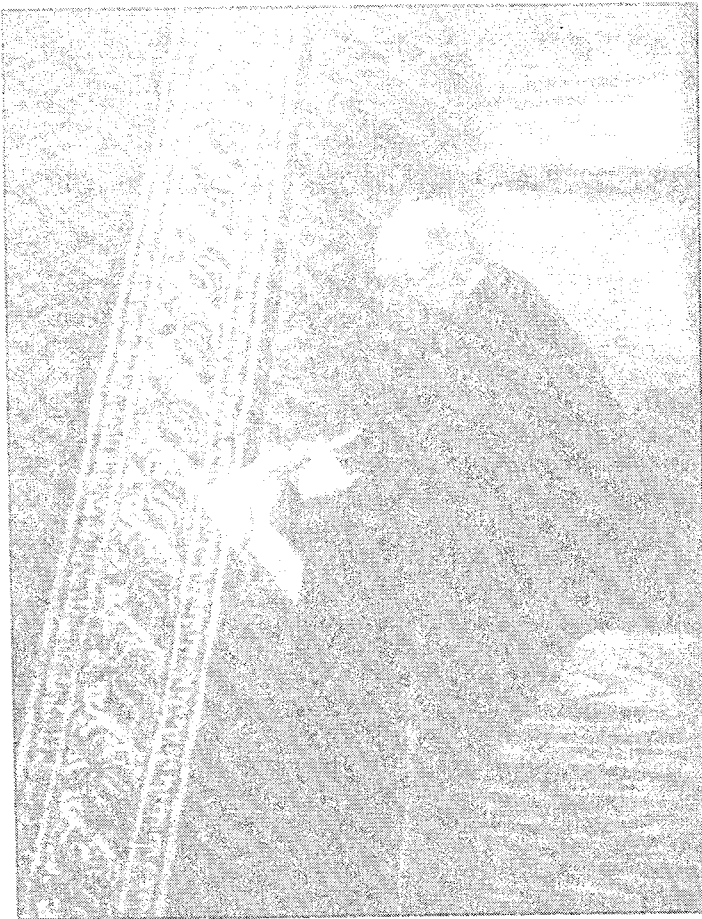
It's here that our interest in the prime minister lies: Pinning down the real John Howard somewhere between the ideologue and the pragmatist, between the conviction politician and the opportunist. After all, it took five election losses for the Liberal Party to concede that Medicare was popular with the Australian public. Even five election losses wasn't enough to convince a majority of Liberals to support Howard back into the leadership: He lost a post election vote to the wounded Hewson in 1993 and couldn't even muster enough support to take on the Downer/Costello dream team in early 1994. Howard only returned once all alternatives had been tried and failed.

Howard's politics are much more complicated than the oft-cited liberalism in the economic sphere and conservatism in the social sphere. The two spheres aren't so easily separated – hence the Liberal Party factional system built around personalities rather than ideas. Howard is certainly an ideologue, but not a pro-market ideologue. He is a creature of the Liberal Party, not a creature of right-wing think tanks, steeped in anti-Labor politics rather than conservative thought. He has pursued his economic ideology furthest where it coincides with Liberal Party interests in undermining ALP support bases; Telstra privatisation, outsourcing of the functions of the former Commonwealth Employ-

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ment Service, and industrial relations reform all fall into this category. Thus, public sector unions have been weakened without depriving the government of the electoral benefits of government largesse.

Howard's discipline and attention to detail make him the perfect leader in the perpetual campaigns in which modern politics is fought.²⁷ Through his private office and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Howard keeps tabs on activities across his government. His centralist style of administration, both within his party and ministry, and with respect to Commonwealth-State relations, puts the onus on Howard to appear well briefed in public on an enormous variety of issues. Yet, he rarely puts a foot wrong in his extensive dealings with the media. While Howard has often been found wanting during the formal campaign period, losing televised debates against Beazley and Latham, the ground work that the government (or, in 1996, the opposition) has put in during the months and years leading up to the formal campaign need to be underlined. Winning the 1998 election while losing the two-party preferred vote was an indication that the Coalition had finally caught up with Labor in the area of marginal seat campaigning. While incumbency makes this easier, Howard's attention as leader, to both political strategy and policy detail have been important contributors. Close



5/2/98 - Constitutional Convention Canberra. PM John Howard makes for a lonely figure on the front bench during the morning's debate. (AAP/IMAGU/Michael Jones)

observers of Howard's election campaigns frequently come away uninspired - and surprised that Howard manages to win. Doubts about Howard's campaigning skills arise from not taking into account things such as the extensive party advertising carefully tailored to both reinforcing long-term Coalition messages and deal with the daily issues of the campaign.²⁸ In stark contrast to Mark Latham's 2004 campaign, Howard works closely with the party organisation to ensure a seamless campaign. Again though, it is difficult to separate strategic victories by the Coalition from the strategic mistakes of the opposition, when assessing Howard's leadership.

The remarkable discipline in the Coalition party room over the decade of Howard's administration can partly be accredited to the leader's renowned carrot and stick approach to executive promotion. Less publicised is Howard's willingness to give a hearing to all points of view. In interview, Victorian MHR Petro Georgiou indicated that John Howard's manner in party room discussions is courteous and open to various points of view. He identified Howard's controlled manner as one of his strengths when interacting with colleagues. This is an interesting observation from one of the senior moderate figures inside the parliamentary Liberal Party. At least in the media, hostility between Georgiou

and Howard is much talked about. Georgiou indicated he certainly doesn't always see eye to eye with the prime minister on certain issues, but he has a very high respect for Howard's approach to party room discussions.

It is the perception of his determination and strength that allows Howard to score high popular approval ratings in spite of his pursuit of unpopular policies such as privatisation, deploying troops to Iraq and industrial relations. While never as popular as a charismatic figure such as Bob Hawke, Howard's approval rating has been more enduring. After ten years as Prime Minister Howard's personal approval ratings were as high as ever and even during the Rudd ascendancy in early 2007, Howard's approval ratings remained good.

Political Learning

Howard may have been ready to lead the Coalition to victory in 1996, but neither he nor his frontbench were ready to govern. The first two terms of the Howard government were inept in the extreme. Ministers resigned over trivial points of public accountability, (seven members of the executive in all, three for failing to divest shares in their portfolio areas, four over the travel rorts affair), back-flips were many, and 'non-core promises' entered the political lexicon. In its first budget, the government announced a number of changes to aged

care, including an accommodation bond for residents entering nursing homes (an early attempt to deal with an ageing population). To raise the bonds, many people would have had to sell their homes.²⁹ It's difficult to think of a policy that could ring more alarm bells in Australian politics – broken election promises, alienating the grey vote, undermining home ownership, retrospective revenue-raising.

Aged care reform was the type of policy that an alert bureaucracy can hand an unsuspecting government. The policy appealed to the government's ideological predilection for self-reliance and small government. It was, in the context of an era of economic and social reform, arguably the type of decision that a government in its first term with a big parliamentary majority should undertake. It was also political poison. Within a month of the implementation of the policy, a new minister announced the scrapping of the bonds.³⁰ This was not a work of political genius. Yet, public policy for a conservative leader is a process of trial and error as much as anything else. Hence, the many back-flips over Howard's career.

After a landslide victory in 1996, then, the government's honeymoon was short. Howard approached every subsequent issue with caution. The GST was a circuit-breaker, if not a vote-winner. It showed that Howard could be pro-active in policy and politics. The important thing is that Howard learned on the job. Having been shadow minister for industrial relations, Howard learned a number of different lessons from the leadership of John Hewson. While he certainly saw the pitfalls of an opposition leader making a giant political target out of the party platform, he also saw the way in which *Fightback* allowed Hewson to set the political agenda. When the government was floundering in its second term, Howard turned to the failed *Fightback!* campaign for inspiration. Instead of Hewson's ideological zeal, however, Howard stressed the consensus between business and welfare groups for tax reform. He turned a major negative for the Coalition in 1993 into legislation in just seven years.

Weaknesses

Howard's weaknesses as a political leader are closely related to his strengths. The line between discipline and stubbornness can be a thin one. For example, after

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losing so many ministers due to various indiscretions in his first term, Howard clearly decided that his ministerial code of conduct was proving to be too disruptive of his government. However, political learning that succeeded in stemming the disruptions to the government that continual ministerial scandals had provided has become stubbornness in refusing to sack ministers unless their actions were directly brought into question. After losing too many ministers in his first term for trivial offences, ministers now tend to be like limpets, making a mockery of the concept of ministerial responsibility. Howard learns on the job, but he hasn't learned everything.

Political learning was important to Howard because he had a lot to learn about the limits of Australian politics. Howard's use of political and economic ideas was an important part of his campaign for the leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1980s. His pursuit of those ideas helped make him the unofficial leader of the economic 'dries'. Whatever their value inside the party, however, Howard has had a number of problems making his favoured ideas work in electoral contests. Both his social conservatism and economic liberalism caused upset to important key sections of society at various times of his career. His comments on Asian immigration in 1988, the decision to turn around boats carrying asylum seekers, his refusal to allow parliament

to apologise to the stolen generations, and his denial that Australia has underlying racism all cause disquiet among the media and university educated middle classes. Speaking on the Cronulla riots of late 2005 Howard said: 'I do not accept there is underlying racism in this country'.³¹

On the other hand, Howard's approach to privatisation and industrial relations undermines his support among the 'battlers' upon whom he relies for his election victories. The sum total of Howard's pragmatism, in spending billions of dollars on election promises and making expensive compromises to push through legislation such as Telstra privatisation, has been high levels of taxation and government spending. Simon Crean's single biggest contribution to the political debate was to label the Howard government the highest taxing government in Australia's history. This fact will ultimately prove to be a disappointment to many of his supporters, and probably a point of difference for future leadership aspirants, regardless of how many elections he manages to win. Clearly, however, his ability to calibrate his political messages has improved over time, regardless of criticism from those he considers elites. He can deflect concerns about his credentials as an economic reformer by pointing to his record of privatisation and tax reform, and point to record numbers of Muslim immigrants as proof of his racial tolerance.

We need to assess, though, how much of Howard's political discipline has arisen from political necessity, most notably a Senate minority for the first time in his prime ministership, and how much is Howard's expert judgement. The government majority in the Senate has provided some answers, as in this term Howard has enjoyed the freedom to legislate almost as he pleased, with an eye only to the next election, and perhaps to posterity. For example, not the \$55 million advertising campaign, nor continual appeals to the national economic interest, could convince the electorate that Howard's most famous ideological axe – deregulation of the industrial relations system – was a good idea. It is here that Howard may have found the limit of his ability to earn public respect as a 'battler' by championing unpopular policies. All governments lose office eventually because their unpopular policies are, well, unpopular.

Conclusion

Change the government change the country, Paul Keating warned us in 1996. Yet, multiple election victories don't necessarily presage great changes in national sentiment.

In contrast to Robb's claim about Howard's overarching influence, it may be that Howard's legislative legacy is eclipsed in short order once he steps aside from the country's leadership. Such is the fate of conservative leaders, even very successful ones. An ageing Howard is less fearful of defeat. Failure in 2001 would have devastated Howard, because he would have left his party out of power in every state and territory as well as at the national level.³²

John Howard is everything his supporters and critics say he is, and more, and less. He has had his share of luck, and shown moments of tactical genius. He is both a zealot and an arch-pragmatist. Howard is all of these things at different times. The balancing act, however, hasn't always been carried off with perfection. He has also made a lot of mistakes, and shown clearly that he learned from the consequences. His most important strength is his determination, yet even that strength poses its own problems when it morphs into stubbornness.

Winning the Senate was, as Paul Kelly would say, a poisoned chalice for Howard. He is enough of a political genius to know that the genius John narrative is overblown. Fighting the next election will be risky for him even as Rudd's early good polling attests to. Conservative governments don't usually lose by landslide margins, but an activist legislator like Howard runs the risk of losing big once the often contradictory forces that have kept him in power for a decade become too difficult to manage. When the electorate tires of the irritating accoutrements of contemporary politics – spin, unaccountable ministers and the like – the Howard government will appear well past its use-by date. The question for the next election is: Can the Coalition retain enough of its sixteen seat majority to go on governing beyond 2007? If it does Howard will retire on his own terms and the government will enter a phase of rejuvenation to counter that which Labor has already engaged in.