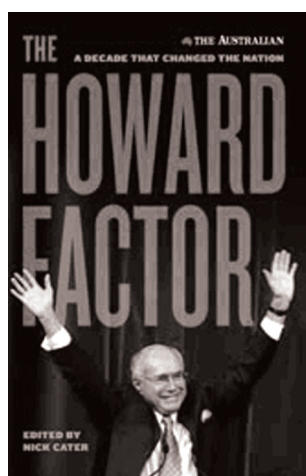


A Second Draft of History



The Howard Factor: A Decade That Changed The Nation

edited by Nick Cater
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Reviewed by Richard Allsop

If journalism is the first draft of history, then this book of essays, to mark the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the election of the Howard Government, could best be described as a second draft.

The Howard Factor contains twenty-one essays, all of them written by journalists or columnists from *The Australian*. There is also a 100 page timeline of events in the past ten years that provides a useful aide memoire, a few tables of statistics and 25 generally sympathetic photos.

The book's editor, Nick Cater, a senior executive at *The Australian*, came up with the concept of the book late last year and managed to get the finished product in bookshops a few days before the 2 March anniversary. The fact that the contributors were journalists, for whom tight deadlines were nothing new, no doubt helped all involved cope with the short gestation period. Further, they were all writing on topics with which they were familiar in their 'day

jobs'. A by-product of this, for regular readers of *The Australian*, is that there is little here that is radical and different—but that is not necessarily a weakness. The choice of subject matter in itself lets the reader see what the editor and contributors believe have been the seminal issues of the past decade. The nature of the book also lends itself to tracing broader themes than even the most substantial piece by a journalist in the weekend paper, reviewing what the press gallery has determined was the issue of the week.

A question of balance

While there have been previous books on aspects of the Howard decade in power, it is indeed rare to find one that would be sufficiently sympathetic

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for the Prime Minister to launch it and say of it that 'it's a very balanced book'. Of course, what John Howard considers balance may for others be overly sympathetic. This seems to have been the case for the book's publisher, Louise Adler of Melbourne University Press, who apparently complained to editor Cater that there was an absence of 'Left voices'. Three days before the book was launched, Cater used the opinion page of *The Australian* to deliver a pre-emptive public attack on Adler, for her apparent pitch to get Phillip Adams included as a contributor, in order to redress the imbalance she perceived. Cater seemed to be having a bob each way by on the one hand defending his selection of writers, but on the other saying that Phillip Adams would have been included if he had not been away when contributions were being sought. A typical irrational Adams rant would have added nothing to the book, however there may have been merit in including someone like regular *Australian* contributor Michael Costello, who could have provided a more intelligent critique of aspects of the Howard years. Also the inclusion of Christopher Pearson as the author of a chapter on 'Culture Wars' did seem a touch partisan, given Pearson's clear position as a participant on one side of those wars.

In the absence of Adams, the only Howard-hater who gets a run is *The Australian's* cartoonist Bill Leek. Leek starts off with some useful comments about how cartoonists go about drawing Howard before launching into an anti-Howard diatribe that concludes by attacking the Australian people as 'smaller, meaner and less attractive ... looking more like monkeys every day'. No wonder the Left struggle when this is meant to pass for intelligent comment.

For those who enjoy reading this sort of vitriol, the book provides another opportunity when Matt Price quotes a slab of Anthony Albanese's 'breathless and savage' 1998 critique of Howard. In part of the diatribe not included here, Albanese joined the common chorus of the time who criticised Howard for holidaying with his family every year at Hawks Nest—'same place, same flat every year for decades'. It seems extraordinary to think that the intelligentsia did not even seem to consider how many Australian families they were attacking by insinuating that there was something offensively insular with taking your summer holidays at a regular beachside location. If you keep attacking Howard for things that are commonplace for many Australians, is it any wonder you end up losing the debate?

Price's is one of many contributions that touch on Howard's persistence and the adversity he has had to overcome to get to his current position. As might be expected, Price's essay does this in the most humorous way, particularly as he traces the evolution of Howard's morning walk from 'national embarrassment to badge of success'.

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A real revolution?

Despite much talk of the difficulties Howard has overcome in his career, there is also a tendency to rewrite the years where Howard struggled as somehow now being all part of the grand plan. Glenn Milne writes of 'the political genius that has sustained John Howard in office for the past decade', but this is a rewriting of history. Having been underrated for so long, having gradually proved his critics wrong, some of those same critics seem to feel the need to make Howard both a present and a retrospective genius.

If one believes the theory that in life luck tends to even itself out then Howard must surely be exhibit A. Having been dogged by wretched luck in his first term as Opposition Leader and further misfortunes during significant parts of his first two terms as Prime Minister, Howard must often pinch himself as he looks back on his second five years as Prime Minister where almost everything that could go right has gone right. There will always be issues that a government handles poorly, but they have all seemed eminently manageable compared to earlier travails.

For those of us who grew up during the 1970s and 1980s, the pattern of this government is quite different to the governments that we saw in our formative years. At both federal and state levels, governments were invariably at their most popular straight after their first election and then at varying paces and for varying reasons they would unravel. One only has to consider the political trajectories of the Hawke and Howard Prime Ministerships to notice how Howard has re-written recent political history.

Any assessment of the Howard Prime Ministership will always look at 2001 as the key turning point in his political fortunes. While critics of the Howard

Government will always consider it to be the year that Howard used the asylum seekers on the Tampa for base political reasons, Tampa and 9/11 were, in reality, only parts of what made 2001 the seminal year for the Howard Government.

At the start of that year, almost everyone considered that it was to be the Howard Government's final year in office. Beset by policy problems such as soaring petrol prices and endless complaints from small business regarding GST compliance, political problems such as massive anti-Coalition swings in two state elections, the Ryan by-election disaster and being called 'mean, tricky and out of touch' by the Party President, Howard

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appeared to have hit rock bottom. Knowing that the odds are stacked against you can sometimes be a liberating feeling; nobody expects you to win so you have the space to find your form. Howard threw himself into the fray, fixing specific problems and getting the crucial morale boost of winning the mid-year Aston by-election.

Glenn Milne claims that to this day Howard lives in 'constant fear of failure'. By contrast, it seems to me that in early 2001 Howard stopped fearing failure and gained a new confidence that he has retained ever since. His tremendous energy levels that carry him through the day from his morning walk listening to the early bulletin of *AM* to eagerly watching *Lateline* at the other end of the day, are not because he fears failure, but because he loves the job and all it entails.

While the political fortunes of the Howard Government do split neatly into two halves (pre and post 2001) there are undoubtedly many policy themes that can be traced through the last decade. One of the underlying premises of *The Howard Factor* is that taken in their entirety the policy changes that the Howard Government has initiated in Australia amount to a 'quiet revolution that changed Australia forever'.

This is no doubt true in some areas of public policy, but less so in others. The sum probably adds

to significant change, but not to a 'revolution'. Part of the reason for this is that the Howard Government has not had a clear ideological position that embraces all areas of public policy. It has adopted a generally pragmatic mix of positions some of which highlight its ability to take tough decisions (GST, Iraq), while others show that it accepts the popular will (retaining Medicare, toughening up on illegal immigrants). What also underlines the non-ideological basis of much of what the Howard Government has done is the fact that a lot of the policy outcomes would have surprised many in 1996 and indeed may well surprise the ill-informed today—increased immigration, massively increased spending on welfare, and centralism exceeding that of John Gorton and Gough Whitlam.

The Howard hybrid

The book is at its best when it is confronting stereotypes and analysing some of the curious hybrid policy positions that the Howard Government has adopted. Dennis Shanahan refers to this by calling his chapter 'Two Howards', in which he describes how Howard 'ditched the baggage from his doctrinaire days of policy purity'. George Megalogenis (who has the unique distinction of having two chapters in the book), draws attention to how some perceptions of the Howard Government are far from the reality. He conducted an interview with Howard for the purpose of this book and records that Howard reacted with delight when confronted with the statistic that the percentage of Australians born overseas passed 24% for the first time since the 1890s. Megalogenis also shows how Asian migrants have become an increasing part of the growing intake, a far cry from what might have expected in the 1980s when considering the prospect of a Howard Government. The chapter takes readers through the history of both how the Government has handled immigration in general and illegal immigration in particular and how 'Howard has enjoyed the best of both worlds since he turned back the Tampa'. Megalogenis touches on Pauline Hanson in his chapter, and it is a topic that is treated in more detail in Nicolas Rothwell's 'Please Explain', a chapter which also discusses the type of Australian identity that Howard is attempting to build. Rothwell also makes one of the rare references to the 1999 republic referendum, a curiously light treatment given *The Australian's* strenuous campaigning on the issue at the time.

Megalogenis himself becomes the subject of the discussion in Kate Legge’s chapter entitled ‘Jumping the White Picket Fence’. Megalogenis, in a previous work, claimed that ‘Howard had sought to benefit single-income families but these fistfuls of dollars were ultimately too small to keep mothers at home’. Legge parades a variety of individuals who have been close to Howard to dispute the fact that this was ever his intention. That is believable, unlike the other claims in the chapter that the 1988 *Future Directions* document was a success for Howard. It wasn’t.

Sam Maiden presents very clearly the odd hybrid that Howard has developed between a market-based approach to health and education and a socialised approach. The Howard Government has provided incentives for people to take up private health insurance and has also encouraged the trend of parents sending children to private schools. However, while the Government is promoting choice and increased private sector activity, it is also pouring in large amounts of taxpayers’ money, the end result of which means, according to Maiden, that ‘traditional boundaries between public and private funding are collapsing’.

Both Pearson and Shanahan make the point, which is then expanded into a full chapter by Stuart Rintoul, that there is no area where the government itself has played a larger role in moving the debate onto its terms than in Aboriginal affairs. The current state of the debate would have been almost unthinkable ten years ago.

While the Government is no doubt pleased with how the debate has moved in Aboriginal affairs, there is no doubt that the bedrock on which the Howard Government has built its success is the economy. In *The Howard Factor*’s main chapter on the economy, entitled the ‘The Golden Years’, Alan Wood asks the obvious question—‘How much can John Howard, and his Treasurer, Peter Costello, claim credit for?’

It is important to remember that in any discussion of a government’s handling of the economy there are two distinct, albeit sometimes overlapping, areas. One is economic management and one is economic reform.

It is hard to argue that Howard and Treasurer Costello have not been good economic managers. In the aftermath of the 2004 election, it became the conventional wisdom that Labor had failed to talk about the economy enough. However, as Labor were opposing a Government that had never had a

recession, had delivered low inflation and interest rates, and had unemployment at 30-year lows, it remains unclear exactly what Labor could have said to turn the economy into a winning issue for them.

More legitimately, it was argued that Labor had failed to take sufficient credit for the reforms of Hawke and Keating in the 1980s. This was true up to a point, but it also failed to recognise that Labor’s opposition to almost every piece of economic reform proposed by the Howard Government in the past ten years would make any attempt to grab the economic reform mantle appear quite opportunistic. This is where Howard is on very solid ground for, as he has pointed out many times, and as Wood quotes John Quiggin as saying here, Howard deserves credit for supporting Labor’s reforms in the 1980s ‘attacking Labor only on the grounds that it was not going far enough’.

Wood gives credit to two early reforms of the Howard Government that saw the adoption of the *Charter of Budget Honesty* and the enshrining of the independence of the Reserve Bank through its 1996 *Statement on the Conduct of Monetary Policy*. Wood treats the major tax reforms, headlined by the introduction of the GST, in 2000, surprisingly briefly, and notes that since then there has been ‘no further attempt at fundamental tax reform’. One of the issues that constrains Wood and indeed anyone writing on the topic, is that the Howard Government is still a work-in-progress, with further tax changes in the May 2006 budget.

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For many readers of *Policy*, the Howard Government’s failure to reduce the size of government would be a significant cause of criticism. It certainly appears that Howard and his senior ministers have accepted, maybe reluctantly, that they gain a greater political benefit in churning payments through the tax system and back out to the middle class as family payments, first home owners’ grants and baby bonuses, than they would if they provided universally lower taxes. In the first of his two chapters, Megalogenis details exactly who

have been the winners and losers in the Howard Government's dividing up the tax pie, while Mike Steketee contrasts increased support for the middle class through family payments with tougher treatment for more traditional welfare recipients on social security or unemployment benefits.

Most would agree that the Howard Government has made significant changes to Australia's industrial relations system. Brad Norington claims they are an example of Howard's 'dogged commitment to a political philosophy'. The chapter details the changes to workplaces delivered in the first term and in 2005, once control of the Senate was gained. What would have made this chapter more interesting is some discussion as to why the Government went down the prescriptive route it chose, rather than seeking to establish a more laissez-faire environment with less government regulation.

Considering the significant role it has played, particularly in the second half of the Howard Prime Ministership, foreign affairs gets comparatively brief treatment in *The Howard Factor*, with three chapters, as opposed to nine on domestic policy and nine on general political matters. Despite the smaller number, there is a fair amount of overlap, with Greg Sheridan providing an overview, Patrick Walters writing about the war on terror and Roy Eccleston discussing the US alliance. The latter two provide largely factual contributions whereas Sheridan laces his writing with many more subjective comments. He says that in foreign policy 'Howard started poorly after the 1996 election' and quite strongly criticises how Howard handled Hansonism and how this played out in Asia. However, after an 'absolutely remarkable' journey, Howard is now a 'formidable figure abroad'.

Suburban man

Having dealt with economic, domestic and foreign policy in three sections the book returns to another section of political essays. Imre Salusinszky describes how Howard has 'perfected the tone of the cautious, understated, suburban man and elevated it to an original and—above all—successful political lexicography'. Salusinszky goes further and claims that it was only Howard's reassuring language and social conservatism that 'created the climate in which potentially unsettling

liberal economic policies could proceed'. It was one of three chapters that Howard singled out for praise when he launched the book. Another was Caroline Overington's chapter entitled 'South Park Conservatives' that claims that Howard is doing surprisingly well with younger voters. While there is no doubt quite a bit of evidence that on issues like Anzac Day, Generation Y is closer to Howard than their baby boomer parents were, it is very easy to exaggerate this point.

As much as his use of language or his increased appeal to younger voters may have helped him, a key part of Howard's success has been the travails of the Opposition. Steve Lewis gets what might be considered the booby prize of charting the Labor Party's last ten years. The chapter is headed 'Losing the Plot', which is uncannily similar to the title of Annabel Crabb's recently published book on Labor in Opposition, *Losing It*.

The third chapter that Howard praised was actually the first of the book—written by Paul Kelly, it is titled simply 'How Howard Governs'. Part of it looks at the mechanics of how the Prime Minister operates through Cabinet and the public service and how this compares to his predecessors. Kelly then touches, all too briefly, on some of the key policies and events of the past decade. It is a reminder that Kelly seems to have a unique ability to place the philosophical and policy threads of the modern era in their true historical context.

The brief nature of Kelly's contribution makes one wish for a companion volume for his *The End of Certainty*, published after a decade of the previous Labor Government. Alternatively, there is a desperate need for a decent Howard biography to be published. However, while we await either of these, *The Howard Factor* does go some way to filling the void in serious analytical and balanced writing about John Howard and his Government.