

THE KEVIN 07 STORY

Jason Aldworth finds that the story of Rudd's rise is better told than the story of Howard's fall

Inside Kevin 07

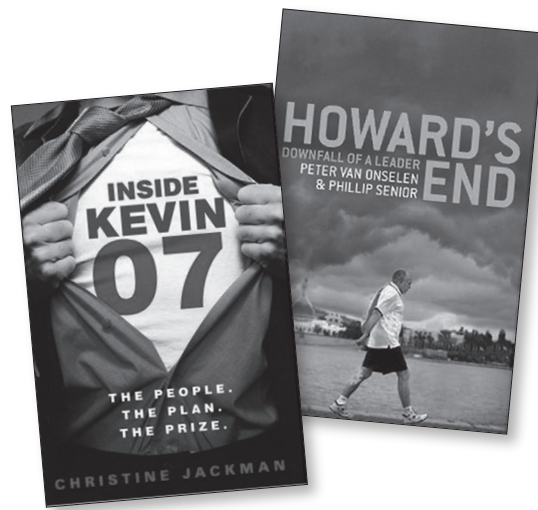
by Christine Jackman

Melbourne University Press, 2008
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Howard's End: Downfall of a Government

by Peter van Onselen and Philip Senior

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The first rule of political campaigning is that you must reinforce your base and win over the persuadable swing vote. You should use three key tactics. First, strengthen the positive perceptions that the electorate has about your candidate. Second, reinforce an existing prejudice that voters have about your opponent. Third, frame the election as being about issues that play to the positive perceptions of your candidate (and the negative prejudices held of your opponent).

In the 2008 United States presidential election, the strategic hinge of the Democratic campaign was to reinforce the prejudice, in an electorate that was yearning for a change of national direction, that a John McCain presidency would be no change at all. The Democratic campaign effectively handcuffed McCain to the electorally unpopular President George W. Bush, to neutralise McCain's image as a Washington maverick.

Conversely, the macro-level strategy of the Republican campaign was to reinforce the electorate's prejudice that a candidate who has never held an executive office is not ready to be the commander in chief of the world's most powerful country.

In the 2007 Australian federal election, the themes, perceptions, and prejudices were different, but the campaign principles of reinforcing your political base, persuading the swing vote, and framing the question remained the same.

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of the Labor opposition. But history was on the government's side. Ultimately, the election result overturned one of the great axioms of post-war politics: that governments don't lose when unemployment is low, the economy is strong, and the majority of people believe that the country is heading in the 'right direction.' Since that historic win by Rudd Labor on 24 November 2007, political commentators have conducted countless autopsies on this campaign orthodoxy.

Labor's political feat should not be underestimated. How it was achieved is worthy of study. And two recent publications, *Inside Kevin 07*, by Christine Jackman, and *Howard's End*, by Peter van Onselen and Philip Senior, each provide an account of how an opposition that was a political basket case just a year earlier was able to overcome the handicap of a sixteen-seat deficit to defeat a government that even its harshest critics grudgingly acknowledged had successfully managed the economy.

Political insiders and devotees will find that *Inside Kevin 07* does the best job of capturing the backroom machinations behind a national election campaign. Christine Jackman skilfully dissects and analyses the key elements of Labor's success. She also offers insights and previously unpublished details, which makes her work compare very favourably to that of Pamela Williams, the doyen of Australian political campaign book authors, whose *The Victory* chronicled the path to the Coalition's 1996 election win.

By contrast, *Howard's End* is a neat chronological summary of the events leading up to the election and the campaign proper, yet Peter van Onselen and Philip Senior fail to provide anything beyond what was already previously publicly known.

Labor's leadership

Jackman's account begins at the back end of Beazley's second stint as leader, when the Labor machine detected a 'perfect storm' brewing for the Coalition. Labor's macro-level strategy was to generate a mood for change in the electorate by using the Howard government's longevity to reinforce a perception that, after eleven years as Prime Minister, John Howard was closer to the end of his tenure than the beginning.

Labor needed a leader who could carry a simple but effective message to an electorate that had become accustomed to a strong national economy and was prepared to flirt with change. As Jackman details, Labor's political hardheads, such as National Secretary Tim Gartrell and NSW General Secretary Mark Arbib, grew to realise in late 2006 that Kim Beazley was not the vehicle to carry Labor's message. In politics, if the person delivering the message has a problem, then the message has a problem.

Jackman captures the tectonic change to the political landscape that occurred with the emergence of Kevin Rudd as the leader of the Labor Party. Rudd's elevation had the effect of allowing voters to instantly reevaluate their assessments of the Australian political landscape. Australians intuitively knew the Howard era, as good as it had been, was drawing to a close. In Kevin Rudd, they suddenly had a credible alternative.

Unlike Mark Latham's elevation to the leadership three years earlier, Kevin Rudd's ascension was unencumbered by any negative perceptions of the new leader. When Latham finally seized the leadership from Simon Crean after a long, brutal campaign, a significant block of voters had bad impressions of Latham due to adverse publicity surrounding his physical altercation with a taxi driver and his insulting characterisation of the Coalition frontbench as a 'conga line of suckholes.'

Labor realised that voters wanted regeneration, but not radical change. In Kevin Rudd, they had a mostly blank canvas to paint on.

The Labor Party likes to demonise John Howard, but from the first days of his leadership, the Labor Party machine cast Rudd as John Howard lite. Rudd's repeated claim that he was an 'economic conservative,' and his reluctance to disagree with Howard on most policies, including the Northern Territory intervention, was no coincidence.

The Coalition's response to Rudd's imitation of Howard was to accuse Rudd of 'me-too politics'. But in hindsight, this labelling only served to give voters the confidence they needed that Kevin Rudd was a newer, younger version of John Howard and worth making an investment in for the future.

Labor redefines the state of the economy

As Jackman chronicles, the Labor machine knew they had to neutralise the Coalition's trump card—proven economic management. Jackman has a fascinating account of how the Labor machine war-gamed the Coalition's expected strategy, framing the election campaign as a debate about who was best to run the economy. The Coalition would emphasise its team of experienced leaders such as John Howard, Peter Costello, Malcolm Turnbull, Julie Bishop, and Joe Hockey, compared to the alternative, unproven team of Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan. The Coalition would also raise doubts about the extent of the union movement's influence on Labor's economic policy.

As both books note, Labor successfully reframed the issue by reducing the macroeconomic debate to a discussion about kitchen-table economics. While low unemployment, high economic growth, and comparatively low interest rates remained in the Coalition's favour, many Australians found them contradicted by cost-of-living issues such as the price of housing, petrol, and groceries.

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Labor's backroom operators also knew that by sticking to a careful and consistently repeated script, they could weaken the link in voters' minds between the Coalition and the strong national economy. Whereas voters once readily credited the Coalition for the economy's healthy condition, throughout 2007 Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan frequently claimed that it was really the minerals boom, and not the Coalition, that was to credit for the economic good times.

The issues

While Labor was careful not to be seen as offering a substantially different product to the Coalition's, they did offer the electorate differentiation on issues where their pollsters assessed there was advantage in doing so. The two big-ticket items

here were WorkChoices and climate change.

Strategically, WorkChoices was never the same as the Howard government's other controversial economic reform, the GST. Most voters accepted that the tax system was broken and needed reforming, but they didn't feel the same way about industrial relations. Compounding this problem, the Coalition failed to make the case for WorkChoices in the way it had with the GST—which involved a review, a recommended response, and the opportunity for voters to cast judgement on the proposed tax plan before it was implemented.

Inside Kevin 07 also gives some insight into how Labor used climate change tactically, as a symbolic issue on which Kevin Rudd could demonstrate that only he had the 'new and fresh ideas' needed to fix emerging problems. Climate change had become a personally relevant issue for voters because of the drought and consequent water restrictions. Howard committed himself to addressing climate change, but the Labor machine knew that the electorate was sceptical about his sincerity.

The campaign

By the time the election was called, the Coalition's fortunes could only be saved by a near-perfectly executed campaign. If the central issues could be a choice between teams, with the economy and its management centre stage, the Coalition could win. But if it came down to Rudd versus Howard, Labor would likely win. Sadly for the Coalition, the campaign was too often framed as a personality contest—in which, on published opinion poll measures, Kevin Rudd was clearly voters' choice.

Christine Jackman's access to Labor research on, and reactions to, the possibility of a Costello leadership prior to the election is captivating. Such a change, feared Gartrell, may have gone to the heart of Labor's ability to reframe the economic debate, while smashing the framing of the election as old, tired ideas versus new and fresh ideas. Of course, we'll never know if this assessment was correct, so reports of Gartrell's worries over sleepless nights are probably as close as we'll ever get finding out what a late change of leadership might have achieved for the Coalition.

Though Jackman's account is highly detailed, I still would have liked to see more insight on the behind-the-scenes interactions between Gartrell and Greg Combet from the ACTU. Most political pundits accept that the Labor machine and the unions worked hand in glove throughout the pre-campaign and election periods, and Jackman provides some limited background on the relationship between them. Although many in the Labor movement have denied close coordination, for political professionals it beggars belief that Gartrell and Combet were not in daily contact leading up to the election, sharing polling and research information, media-buying programs, and advertising concepts.

Conversely, we still lack deep insight into what was going wrong in the Coalition campaign headquarters, which had previously been known for its absolute discipline. That media reports indicated Howard spent days there mid-campaign implies a deeper problem in the Liberal Party's campaign machinery and Howard's relationship with it. That senior ministers were running contradictory messages on the economy—either that it was going swimmingly, or that there was a tsunami about to hit that only the government had the experience to manage—suggests that there is still more to tell.

It is disappointing that *Howard's End* could not tell this inside story. Peter van Onselen appears to continue his habit of trading as a Liberal Party insider, based on his (short) tenure as a junior staffer for a high-profile Liberal MP. But for all his claims that he understands the internal dynamics of the Liberal Party, unlike Jackman he could not get access to new campaign information.

Compared to Labor, the Liberal campaign was under-resourced. For more than a year before the election, the unions had hundreds of operatives on the ground waging an anti-Coalition campaign, including twenty-two full-time campaigners in key Coalition seats. Labor and the unions outspent the Coalition by over 150% on advertising. Labor's and the union's TV advertisements were designed to make Australian families worried about their jobs. A strength of Labor's negative ads was that they were restrained. Perhaps the two most effective advertisements of the campaign—the 'hairstylist' and 'the motor mechanic'—fell short

of overtly taking the baseball bat to Howard, with the taglines '... sorry mate, not this time,' and, 'Sorry Mr Howard, you've lost me.'

But what is clear from Jackman's book is that the real genius behind Labor's win was not Kevin Rudd, but the machine men: Tim Gartrell, Mark Arbib, and ALP assistant national secretary David Feeney. While it would be premature to put them in the same pantheon as Andrew Robb, Mark Textor, and Lynton Crosby, there is no denying their remarkable feat of creating a product in Kevin Rudd that was able to effectively deliver, ad nauseam, well-scripted lines that persuaded critical swing voters.

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While there is an expectation that the now-senators Feeney and Arbib will continue to have some strategic input into Labor's next election, their absence from the campaign frontline, combined with Gartrell's departure to a corporate job with research giant AusPoll, could become a fundamental problem for Kevin Rudd in his bid to win reelection.

Overall, Peter van Onselen and Philip Senior's book, while a good read for the casual political observer, is not one for the political aficionados. The research behind it appears superficial and the analysis is too simplistic. By contrast, Christine Jackman's book helps fill the gaps left by *Howard's End*. While, for Liberal supporters, *Inside Kevin 07* lacks the happy ending of Pamela William's 1996 classic, Jackman's book will sit comfortably beside it on my bookshelf.