

***The Australian Moment*
By George Megalogenis**

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When former Prime Minister Robert Menzies retired in 1966 after 16 years at the top, he left a considerable challenge for the Australian Liberal Party. Australian Conservatism had been weakened by fundamental shifts in Western society. Traditional politics were being transformed by the post-War changes to the British Empire with the de-colonisation of Asia and Africa and the emergence of successful nationalist movements. Combined with the rising post-World War II generation's concerns with social and cultural change in the 1960s, the Liberal Party was caught in a political pincer movement and would fail to reinvent itself and lose the support of the Australian electorate in 1972.

George Megalogenis' latest book, *The Australian Moment*, takes up the political history from the emergence of the Whitlam government in 1972 and identifies the economic reforms over the next four decades that would gradually reposition Australia as a global economic citizen. It outlines the regulatory reforms to Australia's central financial institutions and the accompanying social changes.

Megalogenis identifies the policies and reforms that enabled Australia to survive the 1973 oil crisis, the 1990s dot.com boom, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the 2008 global financial crisis. He studies the core economic and political changes over these decades, including the floating of the Australian dollar and the exchange rate, taxation reforms such as the capital gains tax and the GST, and their robust defence of the Australian economy. Megalogenis sets himself an admirable task that he vigorously pursues in a comprehensive coverage of the major political events.

In covering 40 years of Australian political and economic history from Whitlam to Gillard, Megalogenis intersperses political commentary and raises important issues such as the media revolution, Australia's embrace of Asia, and the workforce

restructuring. He then chronicles and recounts important events such as federal election campaigns and results in detail. Unfortunately, being teased with broad arguments followed by a sustained chronicling of often already well-documented political events in other works is disconcerting to the reader. The book reads like history but without the scholarship required to support the larger historical themes it raises. It is more a journalistic account of events with political commentary woven through a recollection of those events. The thesis of the book is compelling but lacks historical depth of discussion to be convincing.

The Australian Moment is also unbalanced and lacks credibility in its analysis of the two major political parties. For example, in the 40 years from Whitlam to Gillard, Conservative and Labor governments were each in power approximately half the time, yet Megalogenis' analysis devotes only six chapters out of the 20 to the Conservative period in office. Seven chapters analyse the Hawke and Keating governments, more than the entirety allocated to the Fraser and Howard governments, which governed for 20 years of the book's timeframe. Conversely, three of the seven chapters examine Paul Keating's struggle with Bob Hawke.

In contrast, the Conservative side receives less detailed attention. For example, little is said of the uncontested transfer of leadership from Alexander Downer to John Howard in 1995, which proved to be a seminal event in the future leadership of the Liberal Party. Howard and Andrew Peacock had been in a continually contested crisis throughout the 1980s, practically immobilising the Liberal Party, whereas the Downer-Howard partnership, later joined by Peter Costello, provided the stable leadership platform that would sustain the Liberal Party in power for another 12 years. This remains unexamined.

Megalogenis allows personal commentary to intrude to the point of unsubstantiated national generalisations. He opens Chapter 17 with the statement, 'Our instincts were telling us not to follow the United States.' With a consistent anti-American thesis pursued in *The Australian Moment*, it is understandable Megalogenis has little to say about one of the Howard government's major achievements in the national self-determination of East Timor and the subtle yet influential role played

by the United States. Following 23 years of Australian bipartisan deference to the Indonesian military's influence over East Timor, the stalemate was broken with the arrival of the presidency of B.J. Habibie and the opportunity this provided for Downer and Howard. There is minimal analysis of the crucial geopolitical changes this introduced and the reweighting of the Australian-Indonesian relationship.

One of the more interesting sections of the book are the interviews with former prime ministers. Megalogenis has been able to gather them all, except Whitlam, to address old grievances and unfulfilled agendas through their comments on each other. However, it may have been more valuable to support the major themes of the book by using these interviews to provide further probing research that looked behind the reforms, or lack of reforms, they achieved. This would have provided a more integrated analysis linking the events, commentary, themes and evidence in a coordinated argument. As it stands, the book is a somewhat disjointed project.

Underpinning *The Australian Moment* is an uncritical acceptance of issues around a progressive consensus. This is what D.S. Nineham describes as 'assumptions felt as facts'—that unless one is changing society with progressive reforms, it's not worth examining. Perhaps this is why Megalogenis considers the Liberal years not worthy of larger quantitative and qualitative analysis in the book.

To achieve balance, there needs to be further critical appraisal of the complete policy landscape of the Howard government and its Burkean conservative framework. This would include, for example, the way in which Howard reinvented liberalism in the 1990s, as Menzies did in 1949 after his first failure as prime minister in 1941, with what Howard describes as 'the Australian achievement' through more vernacular language, tapping the Australian legend, and leaving behind the Anglophile focus of the 1960s.

Megalogenis has captured the Labor side of politics effectively in *The Australian Moment*. Moreover, he has interwoven the social changes Labor has been able to combine with economic reform that the Gorton and McMahon governments failed even to begin. The book is generously endorsed by progressive left writers such as David Marr, Annabel Crabbe, and Paul Keating's speechwriter Don Watson. They are effusive in their praise, with Watson saying the book is 'likely to become the essential short work on modern Australia.' Whether it captures the complete picture is another question.

**Reviewed by
Paul Brown**

