
This edited collection of essays, interviews, and reflections is a product of the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library and Research Institute in Adelaide, South Australia. This was the second such prime ministerial centre in Australia—the first being devoted to Labor’s wartime prime minister John Curtin—and, along with the establishment of an Australian Prime Ministers Research Unit at Old Parliament House in Canberra, represents something of a new departure for the study of political culture in Australia. All of these centres and libraries have been established in the last decade or so, and thus symbolise an increasing fascination with the role of national leaders. Although modeled on the American system of presidential libraries, these centres for the most part eschew grandiose statements about “leadership” and have instead looked to develop key research themes that emanate from the politician’s own life and interests.

This book continues in that vein, and its ambition is broad: to not only assess the legacy of Bob Hawke’s term as prime minister (1983-1991), but also to establish a set of questions and challenges for the Rudd Labor government, elected in November of 2007. In their introduction, the editors argue that the challenges facing Kevin Rudd as prime minister rivalled those that Hawke confronted in 1983, but the rapid and brutal dissolution of Rudd’s leadership in mid-2010, which the authors could not have foreseen, now lend that aspect of the discussion a certain dated quality. Nevertheless, there is much inherent value in the attempt to come to terms with Hawke’s style of governance, his policy record, and the legacy he has bequeathed to both party and nation.

Hawke remains Labor’s most successful prime minister, winning four elections and, as speechwriter Graham Freudenberg notes in this collection, restoring a much-needed sense of legitimacy and

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credibility to Labor as a party of national government. It is only in the last few years that his time in office has begun to capture the attention of scholars—a previous collection of essays edited by Troy Bramston and Susan Ryan covered a broader range of issues and ideas but was essentially aimed at laying “the building blocks” for a future Labor government. A recent treatment of his time as prime minister by Hawke’s second wife, Blanche D’Alpuget, was not well received, and a full scholarly treatment of his life has not yet been attempted.

The book under consideration here is thus much less a biographical treatment of Hawke as a politician or prime minister than it is a consideration of key policy reforms and initiatives during his term in the nation’s top job, and a signpost to policymakers highlighting the work left undone by both Hawke and the governments that followed. It is, in essence, as much a work of advocacy as it is a study of his approach to policy and its outcomes.

The book is divided into four parts: the first deals with the idea of “consensus” government and Hawke’s personality; the second with equity, education, and inclusion across a broad range of policy areas—including higher education, gender equity, multiculturalism, and indigenous education; the third with health, housing, and the environment; and the final section with the economy, work, and industrial relations, including an exploration of the critical Accord between the government and trade unions. The subject matter is comprehensive, such that the book offers a useful overview of the Hawke reform agenda. It is unfortunate that there is no treatment of Hawke’s foreign policy record, and the authors miss an opportunity to connect the discussion on higher education and multiculturalism to the policy imperative of engaging with Asia. The *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* discussed comprehensively here by Alan Mayne was one of four reports that the Hawke government initiated in the 1980s—all of which in many ways had the goal of Australia’s comprehensive engagement with Asia in mind. The others were the Ingleston report on Higher Education, the Dibb report on Defence, and the Garnaut report on the North East Asian economic ascendancy. In
an interview printed here, Hawke himself stresses key foreign policy achievements: the achievement of greater independence within the US alliance, improved relations with China (up until 1989), peace in Cambodia, and the inauguration of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation).

Perhaps the most persuasive part of the book relates to Hawke’s pioneering path in shaping a new approach to governing at a time when he and treasurer Paul Keating were instituting radical and sweeping economic reforms that would not normally have been associated with a Labor administration—floating the dollar, financial deregulation, foreign bank entry—and marrying these reforms to a social policy that enshrined a social safety net for those most in need. In a stimulating short essay which opens the book, political scientist Carol Johnson argues that Hawke was ahead of his time in trying to find a middle path between unrestrained neo-liberalism and old-style Keynesian welfare liberalism. As such, he became something of a trendsetter for Tony Blair in the UK and Gerhard Schroeder in Germany. Curiously, when Kevin Rudd tried to deal with the global financial crisis, he virtually disowned this aspect of the Hawke legacy.

The interviews with Hawke and his speechwriter Graham Freudenberg will be of greater interest to the future biographer—Hawke speaks of his early frustration with Australia’s policy of racial exclusion and his efforts to reach out to Asian students on the campus of the University of Western Australia. He also discusses at length the way in which his previous experience in economics distinguished him from previous prime ministers. As a trade union leader in the 1970s he “was in a very detailed sense involved in what was happening in the Australian economy,” (18) and was as a result appointed by governments to sit on key inquiries into the national economy before he became leader and prime minister. He speaks of his frustration at not achieving the desired breakthroughs on policies relating to the nation’s indigenous peoples, and his close relations with China—even going so far as to claim that he had a “closer relationship to the Chinese leadership than any other western leader.” (19-20) His recounting of a meeting with two young British
Labour MPs in the early 1980s will intrigue: the two visitors were none other than Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Speechwriter Graham Freudenberg, who wrote for previous Labor leaders Arthur Calwell and Gough Whitlam, devotes much of his reflective essay to Hawke’s management of Cabinet, and attributes much of his political success to his ability to chair and direct this central decision-making body. Indeed, it is almost a truism to suggest now that the two most successful governments in Australia in the past thirty years have been run by astute Cabinet managers—John Howard and Bob Hawke. And it was the complete breakdown of the Cabinet system under the prime ministerships of Kevin Rudd and Gough Whitlam that played no small part in their ultimate political demise.

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