

People, pundits and Prime Ministers

What biographies reveal about
Australia's political culture

Richard Allsop



At the time of the 2004 Federal Election, John Howard had been the subject of one biography. He faced an opponent, Mark Latham, who was the subject of several.

In 2007, the contest will be more equal. John Howard has managed to score a second while, compared with Latham, Kevin Rudd has only attracted a comparatively modest two biographers.

It has become something of a cliché to note a greater propensity for books to be written about Labor, rather than Liberal, political figures. This situation has been ascribed variously either to the political biases of authors and publishers, or to the fact that the book-buying public is not interested in books about Liberal politicians.

In fact, when one considers that John Hewson and Peter Costello both became the subjects of two biographies comparatively early in their parliamentary careers (while Kim Beazley and Simon Crean scored just one between the two of them), there is perhaps more to becoming a biographical subject than party affiliation.

One factor that publishers and authors obviously like is the idea of being the first with the full story on people who have recently assumed a role as a potential Prime Minister (they obviously did not see Crean in this light). This phenomenon is a comparatively new one in the Australian political scene.

The first Prime Minister to have been the subject of biography, before assuming the post, was Bob Hawke, about whom two books had been written (in 1979 and 1982) before his election win in March 1983. Before that, there had been only one example of a biography being published even early in a Prime Ministership—about John Gorton in 1969.

While some may scoff at the concept of the 'rising star' biography, one of Rudd's two recent biographers, Nicholas Stuart, asserts that 'we need to know about Rudd now'. While that is unarguably true, it does not necessarily follow that a biography is required for us to have an understanding of a politician. Most people had a fair idea of what John Howard was on about in 1996, without the need for a biography.

When a biography of Howard did appear the following year, *John Howard: Prime Minister* by David Barnett and Pru Goward, it was panned by the critics and quickly disappeared from bookshop shelves. While some of the criticism was perhaps more aimed at subject than author, there were unsatisfactory aspects to the book. The opening chapter took the reader from the arrival of John Howard's great-great

grandfather in Australia in 1855 through to Howard's election to Federal Parliament at the age of 34 in 1974, all in just 19 pages.

The new Howard biography, co-authored by Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen, expands this period of his life to 50 pages. This is better, but one is still left feeling that there must be more that could have been mined. In contrast, Rudd's life before he entered parliament, which admittedly took him beyond the age of 40, takes over 100 pages in each of his two biographies.

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Although they share some similarities, the two Rudd biographies also have significant differences. Rudd co-operated fully with the Robert Macklin book, whereas he 'told a number of people not to speak with' Nicholas Stuart. It is perhaps no surprise, given this situation, that Macklin's work is the one more prone to hagiography, while Stuart's retains a higher degree of scepticism. To cite but one example where they differ, Macklin says of Rudd's 1998 election in Griffith that Rudd 'out-poll[ed] the national trend', while Stuart states that 'out of the 27 electorates in Queensland, all but three had produced bigger swings to Labor'.

Macklin believes that Rudd offers 'an electoral asset of the most extraordinary potential'. He claims that any doubts he previously had about Rudd have gone, declares him 'the man for our time' and asserts that 'his election to the Prime Ministership of our country is vital'. This style of work is unfortunately not unprecedented in Australian political biography. Norman E. Lee eventually settled on the title *John Curtin: Saviour of Australia* for his 1983 biography only after a close contest with an alternative which he describes as 'equally true'—*John Curtin: Australia's best loved Prime Minister*. Walter Murdoch, the author of the first biography of an Australian Prime Minister admitted that he was 'an ardent admirer' of his subject, Alfred Deakin, while Deakin was alive and that his admiration 'has only deepened with the deeper knowledge of his life and character that has come to me since his death'. At least Lee and Murdoch were writing after the event.

In Macklin's case, what grates even more than his growing love affair with Rudd is the short throwaway descriptions of other characters. We learn that when Rudd, the diplomat, went to Beijing the ambassador was 'the respected Dennis Argall', until he was replaced by 'the highly respected Ross Garnaut'. Where Stephen Smith is described as a 'prodigious worker', Lindsay Tanner 'did not have a reputation for consistent hard work'.

Despite these irritations, Macklin's book does have some advantages over Stuart's. His access to the recollections of Rudd himself, his wife and siblings is clearly useful. However, the fact that Stuart had to look elsewhere for interviewees meant that he unearthed some interesting and important alternative voices. Examples include other members of the Eumundi community talking about what the town was like in Rudd's youth, political scientist Scott Prasser talking about his critique of Rudd's role in the Goss Government in Queensland and Kim Beazley talking about recent key po-

Richard Allsop is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs.

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litical events. He also unearthed a former Rudd staffer who described his ex-boss as 'hard, abrupt and exploitative'. More significantly in the area of public policy, he reminds readers that, in September 2002, Rudd stated emphatically that Saddam Hussein did possess weapons of mass destruction.

Lacking access to close personal interviews does occasionally lead Stuart into error, as when, for example, he refers to Rudd's Stockholm diplomatic posting as his first trip outside Australia—which indicates that he does not know about the year (1979) he spent in Taiwan.

The Stuart work is unusual for an Australian biography in that it does not include an immigration story. By contrast, Macklin tells an interesting yarn about Rudd's convict ancestor Mary Wade who 'arrived on the Second Fleet and became perhaps the most prolific matriarch of our short colonial history'. Both books naturally cover the issue of the Rudd family eviction from the property that his father had managed before his death. It appears that Rudd may have embellished the story a little, but it is hard to see how his opponents can make much political capital by attacking the recollections of an 11-year-old boy.

The death of Rudd's mother was also dragged into the political arena following the publication of Mark Latham's diaries. While not wanting to be an apologist for Latham in this instance, in more general terms, the expunging of his political existence by the Labor Party and the media is a distortion of the record. Three years ago, large sections of the ALP and the media saw Latham as the messiah. They cannot now simply dismiss him as mad and leave his assertions undebated. Macklin says of Latham's diary that 'there are thirty-six references to Rudd in the book, none of them favourable'. Well—let's have an assessment of them to see whether Latham sometimes had a point.

Macklin's book places an emphasis on Rudd's intellectual development, underscored by reprinting his article from *The Monthly* on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an appendix.

However, none of the three newly published political biographies goes anywhere close to a work such as Philip Ayres' *Malcolm Fraser: A Biography*, which devotes considerable attention to what books Fraser read at Oxford University and to the ideas contained in his essays. Ayres' focus on the development of Fraser's ideas is a constant throughout the book with, for instance, a detailed analysis of Fraser's 1971 Alfred Deakin Lecture. While John Curtin had a very different upbringing from Fraser's, his biographers still managed to chart his intellectual development despite its lack of formal academic training. Both Lloyd Ross and David Day describe the impact that Frank Anstey had upon the young Curtin from the time they met during Anstey's campaign for the State seat of Brunswick in 1902, through to the 'small gatherings of like-minded youths' which Anstey would host on Sunday mornings, where Anstey would 'lecture to them on socialist principles and debate the questions of the day'—something that continued even when they were living on opposite sides of the country.

While the Howard and Rudd books could have done more on intellectual life, they probably are limited when it comes to providing colour-

ful anecdotes about personal life. Errington and van Onselen raise 'rumours of infidelity on Howard's part', but conclude that these were 'simply slurs' on the basis that the only people giving them any credence were anti-Howard. When the issue of affairs and infidelity arises in Stuart's book, he comments that 'the point is that there is none of this talk about Rudd'. (Macklin is content with references to how much Kevin and Therese Rudd love each other.) Revised editions may need to mention the New York strip club visit.

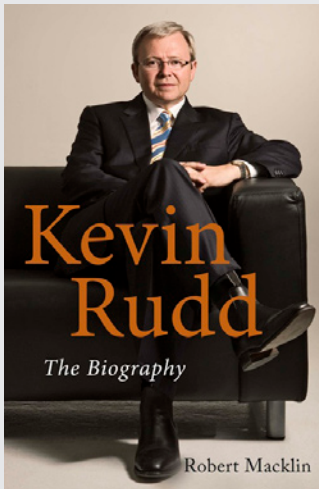
How political is the personal?

In the past, quite a few Australian political biographers seemed to be deliberately excluding the personal aspect of their subjects' lives by using terms such as 'A Political Biography' in the title. A good example is provided by John Robertson's *J.H. Scullin: A Political Biography*. Robertson states that Scullin's 1907 marriage 'caused little or no change in his political ideas'.

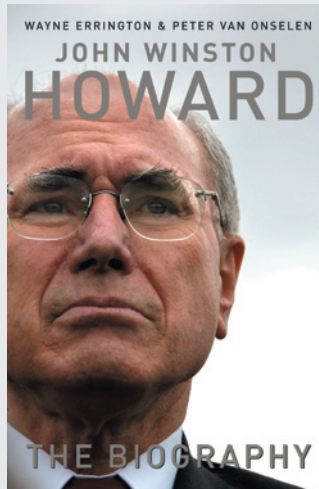
However, in more recent times, there has been a notable change in how marital and sexual matters are treated.

This is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the two biographies of Ben Chifley. In L.F. Crisp's volume, published in 1961, Chifley's secretary Phyllis Donnelly's name is mentioned only twice.

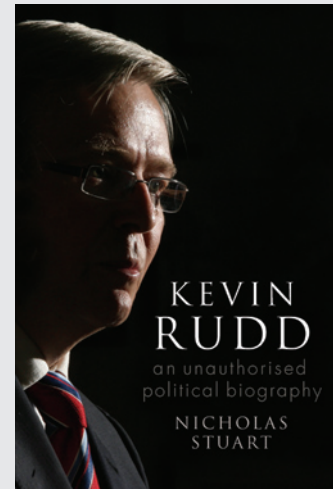
But when David Day wrote his Chifley biography 40 years later, he makes it explicit that Donnelly, as Chifley's mistress, had played a far larger and more significant role in Chifley's life than Crisp had acknowledged. Day further explained that he had married a woman 'who seemed never able to provide him with children or perhaps even the normal conjugal intimacies of marriage' and editorialised that it was thus 'not surprising that he would look elsewhere for sexual fulfilment'. Day does not seem to find it in any way worthy of negative comment that Chifley chose the unorthodox way of doing this not only by having a sexual relationship with Phyllis Donnelly, but also with her older sister Nell, confining the former to Canberra and the latter to Bathurst. Day certainly raised the ire of the Chifley family who, as he acknowledges, 'mostly deny the relationship'.



**Kevin Rudd:
The Biography**
By Robert Macklin
(Viking, 2007, 254 pages)



**John Winston Howard:
The Biography**
By Wayne Errington &
Peter van Onselen
(MUP, 2007, 458 pages)



**Kevin Rudd: An
unauthorised political
biography**
By Nicholas Stuart
(Scribe, 2007, 282 pages)

Before writing his Chifley biography, David Day had already written one about Curtin, giving Day the surprisingly unique position of being the only writer of biographies about two different Australian Prime Ministers. He finds Curtin's early sexuality a perplexing topic and says 'we can only speculate about the strains imposed upon Curtin by his priest-like devotion to the socialist cause and his abstention so far from romantic love and, apparently, the pleasures of the flesh'.

Day finds Curtin's middle-aged behaviour as Labor Leader more straightforward when he describes his friendship with the housekeeper of a Perth pub 'with whom he was apparently sleeping'. He also discusses whether Curtin had an affair with Hotel Kurrajong manageress, Belle Southwell, without coming to a firm conclusion.

Another biography written in the twenty-first century which brings a breezy tone to sexual peccadilloes, a style which would have been unimaginable in earlier times, is Ian Hancock's biography of John Gorton. Hancock is at pains to deny the existence of a sexual relationship between Gorton and his controversial 22-year-old Principal Private Secretary, Ainsley Gotto, but does acknowledge Gorton's 'having "two or three" extramarital relationships'.

Gorton's reputation for enjoying a drink was one which was shared by Bob Hawke and, in the case of the latter, it was clearly a significant issue before his assuming the position of Prime Minister. Blanche D'Alpuget's biography played a significant role in educating the broader public that Hawke had indeed had a problem with alcohol. In the 1970s, television reporters were doing what would be unthinkable today and 'covering up for Hawke and scrapping film of him recorded when he was drunk'.

The Australian biographic practice

With the exception of D'Alpuget, who was a novelist, and one or two others, almost all the biographies of PMs, or potential PMs, have been written either by journalists or by academics. Undoubtedly, with their experience of daily deadlines, journalists are well suited to the 'rising star' biography genre when speed is required. Macklin says that he had four months to complete his work and one assumes that Stuart had a similar timeframe.

With its much longer lead time, the Howard biography was more suited to academics. Academic biographers have generally been historians. Before Errington and van Onselen, the two previous political scientists to have written prime ministerial biography wrote psychological biography, rather than using the narrative style favoured both by journalists and historians. Judith Brett's study of Robert Menzies and Stan Anson's biography of Bob Hawke attempt to explain what they see as flawed public careers on the basis of the psychology of their subjects.

Chifley argued against academics writing about politics on the grounds that they were 'too remote'. This accusation cannot be made against Errington and van Onselen. In fact, the publication of extracts from their book in the newspapers virtually made them political players.

Their major coup was to get Treasurer Peter Costello to talk so revealingly about his frustrations. While there was not a lot new said about the current leadership issues, Costello offered quite an expansive critique of Howard's years as Treasurer, saying that he 'had not been a great reformer' and 'not a success in terms of interest rates and inflation'.

There are other revelations. Apparently, in 2001, when

the government's fortunes picked up, Peter Reith seriously reconsidered his announced retirement. This was 'unknown to Howard' who, in an interview with the authors, said that he wished Reith had told him because he would have 'twisted his arm' to stay.

The interviews provided by Janette Howard also give us a much clearer insight into the often speculated degree of influence she wielded over her husband. The fact that those close to Howard were prepared to be interviewed for a book which, on balance, is a negative for him, either displays a refreshing openness or a political misjudgement.

Aside from its newsworthy aspects, the book has other strengths. It highlights the crucial role of key staff in the Howard office and provides an excellent description of how the Cabinet process has worked in the Howard Government. It also shows an interest in, and some understanding of, the key role that the 'dries' played in changing the intellectual climate in which politicians operated from the late 1970s onwards. The input from John Hyde is a very valuable aspect of the book. The authors recognise that, in government, Howard has been far from a free-market ideologue, pointing out the absurdity of Kevin Rudd's claim that Howard is a disciple of Hayek. As they note, 'the true disciples of Hayek were distraught about Howard's economic record'. They are also clever enough to recognise that there is a distinction between being pro-business and pro-market.

They also understand the fact that many 'who early in Howard's government had seen plenty to criticise, soon found themselves defending Howard from the worst excesses of his critics'. These critics have never been able to decide whether Howard is a rabid ideologue or a poll-driven opportunist. As Errington and van Onselen point out, he is never attacked by the Left for a classic piece of opportunism—banning guns in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre.

However, there are also problems. There are occasionally sweeping statements such as 'economic reform, while successful on its own terms, had left an emptiness at the nation's heart'. Given how inconsistent

this is with some of the other sentiments expressed in the work, one even wonders if the co-authors brought somewhat different perspectives to the table. The chapters on the Howard Government, in the words of *Australian* journalist George Megalogenis, 'try to cover too much ground and struggle with the balance between policy and politics'.

The balance that Howard has chosen between policy and politics has proved difficult to categorise throughout his career. Just when one thinks that Howard has run a generally responsible government, he flies into Devonport and announces a bad piece of public policy at the local hospital. Commenting on Howard's centralisation of power, Errington and van Onselen note that 'a future Labor Government will enjoy pulling the levers of power that Howard has centralised in Canberra'.

The lack of respect for traditional boundaries between the Commonwealth and the states is but one manifestation of how Howard has altered the way in which politics is conducted. Stuart's Rudd biography has a fascinating paragraph where a Beazley-supporting member within the Federal Labor caucus condemns the undoing of Beazley brought about by his Rove McManus/Karl Rove gaffe. The unnamed individual argues that 'leaders don't need to and shouldn't comment on every bloody thing anyway'. She argues that it leads to politicians becoming just another part of celebrity culture and 'the dumbing down of political discourse'. I am not sure if the female caucus member would agree, but in my view it also inexorably leads to ever bigger government, as no problem in society is deemed to be outside the legitimate range of interest of the federal government.

The trouble with writing any sort of book about contemporary politics is that it quickly gets overtaken by events. Those pre-2004 election Latham biographies all looked a bit silly within a year of their publication.

Before the new Howard biography, the best book about the Howard Government was the collection of essays by *Australian* journalists, *The Howard Factor*. It probably still retains that status. When it was published, in early 2006, it appeared

that the basic Howard narrative was of the battler made good, confounding his critics. Eighteen months later, with the Government trailing 41–59 in the most recent Newpoll, Howard is back looking more like the failing figure of his first spell as Opposition Leader or of his early Prime Ministership. The Howard story will be told very differently if he loses the upcoming election and, in particular, if he suffers the humiliation of losing his own seat.

Maybe when Howard does go, his critics may begin to appreciate how absurd their anti-Howard rhetoric was.

As Errington and van Onselen state, 'John Howard's Australia, with its high levels of immigration, close ties with Asia, booming wages, record workforce participation for women, record taxation, and record spending on health and welfare, is a long way from the country imagined by his critics'.

Perhaps the post-Howard critics will be those who hoped to see significant further free market reform and smaller government. They may well turn on Howard in a similar manner to that which (correctly) greeted Fraser after his March 1983 defeat. As the authors comment, 'Howard's departure will once again spark a debate about the direction of the Party'.

Liberal Party members remember the period after the defeat of the Fraser Government as the worst of times; policy-driven types recall that time as actually being quite exciting.

Whatever happens at the coming federal election, there will certainly be the need for more Howard biography; despite Errington and van Onselen's best efforts, there is still much analysis to be done of this hugely significant character. Only a Labor victory will produce the need for more to be written about Rudd; between them, Macklin and Stuart have done their more limited job well enough.

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