

---

# Michelle Grattan review of Tom Frame (ed.), *The Ascent to Power, 1996: The Howard Government*

---

(Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press, 2017), 352 pp., PB \$39.99, ISBN 9781742235288

More than a decade after he lost office and his own seat of Bennelong, the Liberals still regularly ask John Howard to campaign. It is a mark of the respect in which the former prime minister is held by his party, which has him on a pedestal only a little lower than the one reserved for Robert Menzies. It is also a judgement about the drawing power he is thought, rightly or wrongly, still to command in a section of the electorate.

Howard's reputation comes not just from his government's longevity (nearly 12 years), its signature achievements (gun control, the GST) and his management of a sometimes fractious backbench. It is also that he greatly benefits by comparison with his successors. The next Liberal prime minister, Tony Abbott, was deposed by his followers, while at the time of writing Malcolm Turnbull had a mixed record in governing. As well, although we should be wary of romanticising the Howard years—there were dramatic ups and downs, tensions within the government, and the reform record was less than that of the Hawke–Keating period—they do represent for the most part a more orderly, positive period of politics than we have had since, under either Labor or the Coalition. There was pressure on Howard's leadership from his deputy Peter Costello, but even when defeat loomed, his party stayed behind him. In contrast, the political execution of prime ministers was a regular feature of the following years.

*The Ascent to Power, 1996: The Howard Government*, volume 1 (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017), edited by Tom Frame is the first of a series of four books on the 1996–2007 government, drawing on Howard's official papers, which are now held at UNSW Canberra. While much has been written on the period, Frame says Howard's government 'is now being consigned to history', which allows and requires a different perspective to the 'commentary' appraisals made closer to the time. 'Commentaries can deal with matters of historic significance, but commentary is not history', Frame says, although some would argue for a more nuanced distinction, taking into account that the good contemporary appraisals were the so-called first drafts of history, benefiting from personal access and the bird's eye view.

The book is in five sections, covering the mood running up to the 1996 election, the election's outcome, assuming government, the achievements and challenges of the first year, and a look forward as well as an assessment of those first days. Its contributors are drawn from both observers and participants. There are chapters from Howard and then-deputy prime minister John Anderson, and a range of academics. The collection includes some niche pieces—John Nethercote on the public service 'history wars' and Andrew Blyth on radical activist Albert Langer's challenge to the voting system.

Howard came to the leadership just over a year before the March 1996 election, long after he had been written off following the 1989 coup that toppled him in opposition. He had learned much, and changed, in the intervening years, but some things remained steadfast: his core conservative values (albeit tempered by pragmatism), his policy commitments in areas such as taxation and industrial relations reform and, above all, his determination to be prime minister, which equalled the Liberals' desire to wrest back power. The party had failed to win the so-called 'unlosable' 1993 election; its desperation not to let opportunity slip through its fingers again facilitated a smooth transition from its accident-prone leader Alexander Downer to Howard.

The sweeping 1996 victory was widely attributed to the shift to the Coalition of the 'Howard battlers', mainly blue collar workers and their families who had previously been Labor supporters. But in his chapter Ian McAllister, director of the Australian Election Study, an academic survey of political attitudes done after each election, challenges the conventional claim about the battlers' movement in 1996. He argues that:

The evidence based on large-scale public opinion surveys conducted immediately after the 1993, 1996 and 1998 elections, suggests that the conventional interpretation of battlers winning the election for the Liberals is an attractive myth.

The bulk of the battlers' political migration happened in 1993; the Coalition retained the overwhelming majority of them, and topped up, in 1996.

David Kemp looks through a long lens: Robert Menzies's forgotten people and Howard's battlers were not identical but overlapped, and both 'shared a fear of declining opportunities and jobs':

With the gradual 'middle classing' of Australian society over the past five decades, the blue-collar vote has moved towards the Liberals although the party's success in winning traditional Labor voters varies from election to election. In 1996, a well-conceived and finely executed campaign capitalised on this trend.

In his chapter, Howard notes his surprise at the size of the Coalition win, which gave him a 45-seat majority, while the 1998 result—in which his government, campaigning on its proposed GST, just clung on while losing the popular vote—‘was much closer than I had expected’. It is a reminder that, despite all the polling, election results can vary from expectations, as happened in 2016, when Labor came closer to ousting the Turnbull Government than had been previously anticipated. The big majority meant Howard went into his first year with strong momentum. This was significant for both his radical gun law reform—his response to the Port Arthur massacre in April 1996—and the tough 1996 Budget. Anderson notes the importance of timing in politics, arguing that:

The two Coalition parties would not have been as accommodating of the need for change had Port Arthur happened a year later. By then, the Coalition’s ‘honeymoon’ was over ... and regional members would have been in a far more argumentative frame of mind.

The 1996 Budget, delivered by treasurer Peter Costello, with its pathway back to surplus, set up the Howard Government for later successes. It stands in stark contrast to Joe Hockey’s 2014 Budget, the first after the 2013 Coalition return to power. That budget began the demise of the Abbott Government. Both were harsh, but the Hockey one had more political blind spots and gave minimal heed to the issue of fairness. There were, however, other big differences that contributed to one budget being a success and the other a disaster. In 1996, the voters were already distrustful of politicians but this had worsened by 2014. The 24-hour news cycle gave a louder voice to the aggrieved. And the Senate held the whip hand over the Abbott Government, so it suffered the pain of proposing unpopular measures without the gain of being able to implement them.

Howard writes that while managing the Senate was a challenge in his government’s first few years (he later got control of it, causing other problems but that is another story) he had less difficulty with the upper house than either Abbott or Turnbull:

The big difference was the outlook of the principal crossbench party: the Australian Democrats. Although the Australian Democrats were closer to Labor than the Coalition, we knew where they stood on most issues and could take a moderate position on a range of issues.

In the government’s initial year, it was able to negotiate a package of substantial industrial relations changes with the Democrats. In its second term, the centre party would give it the GST, after insisting on big changes. For the Democrats, their reasonableness became a slow poison, a major factor in their eventual death. Abbott faced a fragmented, publicity-seeking, idiosyncratic Senate crossbench; crucially, however, he lacked the necessary negotiating skills that Howard possessed. Under the Turnbull Government, more deals got done with the Senate than the Abbott Government could achieve.

The Howard Government dealt with the fiscal adjustments it needed to make faster and more effectively than its Coalition successor. Despite the budget ‘black hole’ it inherited from Labor, the ALP had left a good legacy for the next government. ‘Policies introduced by the previous Labor Government were generating benefits by the time the Coalition won office in 1996’, Warwick McKibbin writes. Then:

The prudent fiscal policy of the early Howard years produced a vital financial cushion for a small open economy whose income was highly dependent on the value of commodities. And while a good fiscal position was essential from a risk management point of view, fiscal prudence also made tax reform a real possibility.

When he had available revenue, Howard’s attitude was that a good amount of it should be spent—on tax cuts, family benefits and the like—often to the frustration of Costello. One of the criticisms in later years of the Howard Government was that it did not put the largesse of the good times away as insurance, or spend more it on productive infrastructure. Howard was always unrepentant about his priorities.

As Frame says, the 1996 election of the Howard Government ‘marked a turning point for Australia’. Just as did Bob Hawke’s victory in 1983. In each case, this was not just because the incoming prime minister would prove strong and effective in governing, but also because the times were changing. In the 1980s, Australia was facing irresistible pressures to open its economy, and the Labor Government proved up to the challenge. In the mid-1990s, economic reform was still an imperative. However, by then the social landscape was transforming, bringing identity politics and culture wars. Howard resisted social change, was a cultural warrior and set his jaw against ‘political correctness’. He struggled with how to respond to Pauline Hanson, who won a House of Representatives seat at the 1996 election as an independent after being disendorsed by the Liberal Party for racist remarks. Moderate Liberals were critical of Howard’s failure to quickly confront the challenge she would pose. He argued his approach was strategic; others read his motives as less pure. Paul Kelly writes: ‘When Howard looked at Hanson supporters he tended to see them as Howard battlers’.

In his ‘With the benefit of hindsight’ chapter, Frame considers the start of the Howard administration and concludes that: ‘The government had not done enough in 1996 to ensure it would be re-elected. Conversely, it had done nothing that would seriously imperil its chances’. There had been the problem of breaking ‘non-core’ promises and the first losses for breaches of the code of conduct. But the bad times for the government were still ahead, as were important successes.

This collection contains interesting material but there are some gaps. It would have been enhanced by a more thorough look at the media landscape of the time, before its transformation, which continues to proceed apace. On the economic side, a pick-apart of the 1996 budget process would have been fascinating. So would a breakdown of the first Howard ministry, in terms of gender, occupations before

parliament, education and other variables. Indeed, a closer look at the parliamentary 'class of '96', which included a reasonable influx of women—the size of the 1996 swing helped female candidates who were running in marginal seats—could have been valuable. It is easy to forget, now that the right is so shrill and assertive, that the parliamentary Liberal Party of those days was much more ideologically mixed. Finally, the volume could usefully have included more detailed analysis of Howard's style, which is touched in many pieces, including those by Anderson and Michael L'Estrange. The latter writes of his observation from the vantage point of Cabinet secretary that Howard:

Brought clear authority and strong leadership to the functioning of Cabinet. But he also brought a deep sense of collegiality, pragmatism, openness to compelling arguments consistent with the Coalition's vision for government, a focus on the political management of important policy decisions, and effective chairmanship in the broadest sense of the term.

Howard's evolution from the 1980s to the mid-1990s is a story of growth and resilience. The qualities of leadership always form a rich lode for historians and politician scientists. In Hawke and Howard, Australians had two leaders with whom they identified. While they were totally different—the larrikin Hawke, the straight-laced Howard—they possessed one implant essential to successful leadership: the ability to inspire trust. Deep dives into Howard's personality and mode of political management, with case studies of decision-making helped by the cache of documents available at UNSW Canberra, should feature in future volumes. The final volume, I am told, will focus on Howard's style and the government's culture, so it may be a case of the best coming last.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:  
*No. 1, 2018*, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.