

Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir by Gareth Evans

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When I search Gareth Evans on the non-tracking, non-customising web browser DuckDuckGo, the first three results are for a minor Welsh film director, born in 1980, ‘best known for bringing the Indonesian martial art *pencak silat* into world cinema’. The fourth result is for Australia’s Gareth Evans, born in 1944, ‘international policymaker and former politician’,¹ whose connections with matters Indonesian are rather more substantive.

Upon succeeding Bill Hayden as the Hawke Government’s foreign minister in 1988, Evans found Australia’s relations with Indonesia in something of a trough as a result of Australian media reports of suspect financial dealings by the family of Indonesia’s then president Suharto. As is often the case in diplomacy, personal amity opened a path to potentially improved relations. Evans ‘clicked’ with urbane Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas. In *Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir*, Evans quotes Alatas’ version of their initial ministerial meeting:

The first thing (Gareth) said to me was ‘Why don’t we stop making a fuss about the relationship [...] We should just get on with it.’ I said ‘I’m game. You do it on your side and I’ll do it on mine.’ (145)

Foreign relations are always inflected with tensions, contradictions and complexities, as the history of Australia’s relations with Indonesia so acutely shows—a vast, vital and controversial topic in and of itself. Evans’ account of the successes, problems and controversies of this relationship is a personal as well as a political history of one ordinary Australian’s lifelong drive to make the world a better place.

1 ‘Gareth Evans (politician)’, *Wikipedia*, last modified 23 October 2018, accessed at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gareth_Evans_\(politician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gareth_Evans_(politician)).

It is poignant to hold in one's hands an object of increasingly artefact status, a book that contains the story of a type of person now almost unrecognisable in the political landscape: an intelligent, capable, educated and energetic citizen with a sustained commitment to doing good through public life. That the algorithms of the contemporary world rank a minor Welsh film director with Indonesian martial arts connections ahead of a serious contributor to Australia, the Asia Pacific and the wider world for over half a century underlines what we are collectively up against in the twenty-first century.

Incorrigible Optimist concerns Evans' efforts, 'sometimes partially successful but more often frustrated', to 'nudge' Australia and the world 'in better policy directions' (i), and to explain the motivation for doing so through politics. 'What is it in our genes or mental wiring, or experience', Evans asks, 'that makes us expose ourselves to the inevitable stresses, and almost certain pain, of public life? And why do at least some of us go on doing it when so often our hopes and expectations are disappointed?' (i). These are important questions, especially when the need for good and capable people to go into, and stay in, politics, despite the onslaught from internal and external competitors and media critics, is so pressing.

The simple answer is that Evans is an optimist and optimism is self-reinforcing. He contrasts this with the self-defeating nature of pessimism while also noting that optimism is not self-fulfilling, by which he means self-executing. Optimism is not enough: action is required too, as is a practical formula for dealing with the 'depressing and difficult'. Evans deployed TINA ('there is no alternative') tactics: 'there is no alternative but to try actively to remedy them in every way one realistically can' (350). A mantra from student protest and labour circles was his lifelong mainstay. 'On the eve of his 1915 execution in Utah, on a probably trumped-up murder charge', he writes, 'the union agitator and songwriter Joe Hill wrote to his colleagues: "Don't waste time mourning, organize!"' (350).

This is a marvellous—a heroic—instinct. Combined with irrepressible energy, wit, self-deprecating humour and consistent social democratic values, it conferred tremendous likeability and ability to get things done, though behind the scenes staff had to push back on his tendency to browbeat under pressure.

Incorrigible Optimist is a rigorous and vigorous account of what Evans tried to do, and how and why he tried to do it, across a career that stretched from legal academic, cabinet minister to eventually, as Cambridge academic Christopher Hill puts it, ‘a kind of stateless foreign minister’ in his post-politics life as head of the International Crisis Group.²

It is a remarkable set of achievements, crowned by the diplomacy of the Cambodian peace agreement, for which Evans was nominated for the Nobel Prize, and the conclusion of the UN Chemical Weapons Convention after years of deadlock. As international relations theorist John Ikenberry puts it, Evans was a ‘charismatic and indefatigable presence’, ‘rallying the forces of internationalism to work toward genocide prevention, conflict resolution, social justice, and nuclear disarmament’.³ One could add up the foreign policy achievements of all of Evans’ successors—Alexander Downer, Stephen Smith, Kevin Rudd, Bob Carr, Julie Bishop and Marise Payne—and the comparison with Evans’ achievements in the portfolio is modest indeed.⁴

Crucially, this was a career enabled by, and embedded in, a specific historical moment which has all but passed: one of effective cabinet government, operating on traditional Westminster principles of accountability, underpinned by a properly functioning bureaucracy—and in which strategic policy positions were developed steadily over time rather than dodged up overnight for short-term political gain. Evans also possessed historical consciousness of the Labor strand within the Australian foreign policy tradition, long and short run. He looked back to the internationalism of two flawed, but brilliant Labor figures, HV Evatt and Gough Whitlam, as well as to Bill Hayden’s more immediate legacy shifting Australia from a prone to independent position within the US alliance and patient work on intractable Southeast Asian tensions, which provided nascent footings for the Cambodia peace initiative. Evans’ story is from another world, one that contemporary political operators would little recognise and likely care less about. This is tragic. It makes *Incorrigible Optimist* a time capsule for those who at some future point

2 Christopher Hill, ‘Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir’, *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018), 221–23; doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix264.

3 John G Ikenberry, ‘Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir’, *Foreign Affairs*, 4 October 2018, accessed at www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2017-12-12/incorrigible-optimist-political-memoir.

4 At the time of writing Marise Payne was Australia’s newly installed Minister for Foreign Affairs.

might become interested in how things (imperfectly) used to work in a system that on average yielded much better results than the empty husk of the same system in place does today.

Evans was human and there were missteps. He accounts for some and not others. Compared to the more comprehensive expectations of autobiography, memoir gives the author greater latitude to pick and choose their material, and Evans has chosen his mode wisely. Against the backdrop of unrelenting optimism, awareness of the memoir's gaps heightens awareness of, and empathy for, Evans' bruised and bruising heart; less so for its political consequences.

An important implication of this book is just how brilliant and worthy a career is to be had as a senior cabinet minister in a high-performing government, rather than necessarily as prime minister. Evans arguably lacked that indefinable something—or was it perhaps deficient *pencak silat* skills—to make it all the way to The Lodge, but his career and contribution was no less glorious or, according to his own account, less enjoyable for it. As a primer for a long, constructive, substantial political life, *Incorrigible Optimist* is an inspiring read. As Joe Hill once said, 'Don't waste time mourning. Organize!'

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