

Ministers, Prime Ministers, Mandarins: Politics as a Job

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I am a political scientist. I seek to ask those political science questions at the core of any appreciation of how the political system works; especially the complexities and the different angles or perspectives. My first training, however, was in history. The combination of the two disciplines means that I have always been primarily interested in the way institutions work, the way power is exercised, the interactions between individuals and the institutions with which they work – institutions they often help shape and which in turn shapes them. I try to understand the capacity of people in a given timeframe and the opportunities provided by the institutions and events that confront them. Consequently I have written primarily about political practices and political processes, about the positions and office-holders in politics, the challenges they face and the frameworks that guide behaviour.

Over time I have written what can almost be called ‘collective biographies’, studies of ministers, prime ministers or senior officials — sometimes called ‘the mandarins’. I have tried to work out how they actually operate, how they conceive of their roles, how they approach problems and what opportunities and perils they see ahead. In the case of the mandarins I used some brief mini-biographies as illustrations of the themes I had identified.

I also wrote two book-length studies of individual actors — Malcolm Fraser, Liberal Prime Minister from 1975-83 and John Button, Labor’s Industry Minister from 1983-93 (1999). I am going to refer to both of them, even if neither is political biography in the conventional sense. Let me explain how I got there.

In the early 1980s I read a book by Robert Caro on Lyndon Johnson. Caro has now completed three volumes of this biography and Lyndon Johnson is not yet president. The third volume is a thousand pages. It is, in a sense, a study of the workings of the United States Senate as much as it is a biography of LBJ. What makes these books so good is the sense of place and circumstance: an understanding of Texas politics or Senate procedures that put Johnson in context. They describe not merely the crises of Lyndon Johnson’s life but the day-to-day activities and strategies that explain how and why he was so effective. Caro shows how LBJ campaigned for outcomes on a day-to-day basis. Caro goes beyond the fact that Johnson won an election to illustrate how he got the numbers in the Senate when he was majority leader of the Senate. It is those mechanics of power rather than the crises that I actually find so fascinating. It

is the routine, the daily grind, politics as 'a day at the office', which underpins great achievements. If Richard Neustadt (1960) talked of the president's power to persuade, Caro showed in devastating detail how one future president did it (Caro 1982, 1989, 2002).

But I could find no Westminster equivalent that could show *how* a prime minister or minister operated. I wanted to know the *hows* and the *whys* of the way that a cabinet operates to understand why the prime minister generally wins, whatever the circumstances are. What is the job of prime minister or minister, how it is translated into a series of meetings and decisions, all day, every day? Routine, not crisis, is the normal mode of ministerial life. Days are structured by meetings, not by seminars to discuss political philosophy. They make decisions, day in, day out, as part of a series of pragmatic, sequential issues that fall or are selectively isolated for their decision. They jump from topic to topic. Life is a mosaic of pieces that provides a pattern only in retrospect. Ask how they approach the job and the response will be that they did what the job required. That is what ministers or prime ministers do; there is choice, but within a context.

So, what I set out to do in the books on Fraser and Button was to ask questions about how these individuals operated, how they achieved what they tried to, what their objectives were. How did they operate within the institutions in which they found themselves in order to seek to shape the outcomes? That approach had some implications. In a sense I was looking at people through a prism of institutions, at people in context. I was interested in them as institutional actors, as prime minister or minister. That raised questions about what I was, or was not, interested in as part of my study. With Fraser, the title is *Malcolm Fraser PM*. That concentration on the office allowed me to limit my inquiries: when I went to see him the first time, he said: 'Well, should the Governor General have done it?' I said: 'Well, you weren't actually Prime Minister at the time so it's not covered in my scope, but since you ask, no'. He said: 'Yes he should have, but earlier'. I certainly have views on the ambush, but my principal concern was how the means of arrival in office affected his incumbency of it.

I took the view in both cases that when the office door closed, I lost interest. Quite consciously I was interested in them as politicians, operating as politicians; as long as it did not directly affect their performance, what they chose to do outside of that was none of my business. That was particularly so as they are both very much still alive and were very much still alive when I was writing. Does this make it less than a full biography? Of course. But as I was interested in people as politicians, I never pretended otherwise. Besides, I think subjects have a right to reasonable privacy. So I consciously said this is a public story. The subtitle to the book on Button is *A Labor life* because it was designed to show how John Button worked within the Labor Party rather than a biography

in the sense of from go to whoa (or woe). Not everyone appreciated the limitations I put on myself. But then, as I suggested at the beginning, I am more political scientist than biographer, and my interests were clear.

I used different ways of doing it. For Fraser I was interested in different institutions through which he operated so the book is divided into the arena in which he worked: the Prime Minister's office, the Cabinet, the Parliament, the Party. It examined the segmented sections within which a prime minister operated. But such segmentation is artificial as a prime minister works in all at once. The job is a single role with multiple challenges. I wanted to show what levers were available and where the limitations might be.

For Button, quite deliberately, I tried a more traditional chronological approach, partly just to see if I could do it. It was just an interesting exercise. I had written other sorts of books, so, could I write a book like that and did I like writing such a book? There was partly a personal challenge to find out what I was capable of doing. It was much more chronological and much more concerned with tracing his rise through the Labor Party and explaining how someone who, by all the rules of the Labor Party, should never have got anywhere close to Parliament or power. After all, the Labor Party in Victoria in the 1960s was dominated by the far left and John Button was certainly not of that ilk. Yet he managed to win and retain a position in the Senate without having been a member of any of the major factions. He was leader of the Labor Party in the Senate for nearly 13 years, a remarkable stint, and he was a senior minister for 10 years at the same time. By all the unwritten rules of the Labor Party, he should not have been there at all.

I was trying again to explain the way he charted his way through. As anyone reading the book will know, I was not terribly interested in the details, for instance, of his ten years as Minister for Industry. I was interested in how he learnt to be minister but exactly what his industry policy was, was not part of the story I wanted to tell. It goes back to Jim Walter's question: unless you have some interesting questions, something that drives the story, what are you doing there? And my questions were about the way that he worked on those sorts of exercises.

The nature of the evidence changes, too, if these 'collective biographies' into political leadership are the type you wish to write. There are two reasons. If you actually want to know who wins on a day-to-day basis, you do not find it in the newspapers. You do not find it in most traditional histories. History by nature is more concerned with the big events and the exciting factors than it is with what goes on in a cabinet meeting. It is not concerned with why, day after day, Fraser could win or Button could win and why they achieved what they did. You then start by necessity; you have to use interviews. Second, the documents are not available for much of the time. Although Fraser, quite remarkably, said

to me: 'Well, would you like to see my papers and the cabinet documents?' And I said: 'Oh yes, please'. He said: 'Well, I'll check them out. I'll read them first and then decide what you can see'. Then he, I think, realised what was involved and said: 'Oh hell, just see them'. And when I used to interview him, he used to say: 'Go and check the papers. See what they have to say'.

Neither Fraser nor Button asked to see a copy of the manuscript.

Fraser gave me access to the cabinet papers up to 1983 which is better than the 30 year rule imposed under the Archives law. But that is a little unusual. And they were fascinating. I did not get the cabinet notebooks unfortunately. They have not been released yet although at one stage Geoff Yeend did offer to read them to me, but never had the chance to do so. You did at least get an immediacy which you then could cross-check with interviews. Usually there is no such option. For current work you need to rely primarily on the public record.

Interviews are cumulative; you talk to one person, they say such and such happened, and you think, that is interesting. You talk to three people and they are still saying it happens and then you feel perhaps there is something to it. And you talk to 15 people and they all say the same thing or give the same impression; by that stage you reckon you have pretty well got it nailed. Towards the end you have talked to people, not because you expect to find something new but it is a case of adding to the evidence, one story upon another, until you actually are reasonably sure that this is the way the system worked in cabinet or this is the way that Malcolm Fraser operated. Interviews are for routine, an alternative to documentation because it is the routine that tells you how and why people win. For that you have to do it with the living. No-one sits down generally and details these sorts of things in their memoirs, and besides, there are no follow-up questions in memoirs, as there are in interviews. You have to talk to people about how the prime minister did it or how did they usually do it in those circumstances. It is the nature of the evidence about writing, the recent events.

I started both books after the relevant person had left power. It would be very, very difficult, I think, to do it while they are currently in power. A biography of Howard written now would be difficult because the big question is: how did he leave power. A number of people, including me, were asked by *The Age* to rank the top ten prime ministers since the war, to put them from 1 to 12. Unwritten in that exercise was the problem that we do not yet know what happens to Howard in the end. As a result, some people put him further down their rankings. I had him higher up but there was always this sort of unwritten proviso: what happens at the end?

But with all the caveats, interviews do serve very useful purposes. Without them the picture we have would be greyer. I have now got interviews of ministers and mandarins going back to 1978, and I will give them to a library if they want

to take them. They provide a bank of changing experience. But we also need to be aware that they, as much as any memoir, are concerned to paint an image of the role of the speaker that by itself should not be taken as given. Check one against another, calculate the bases, appreciate the angles, and they are as useful, and as fallible, as any written record by the same person.

In the end I hope that I presented an account that gave some idea of the challenges that the subjects faced and, at the same time, portrayed the structures within which they worked. They did not re-invent the roles of prime minister or minister; they took them on. They may have shaped the jobs they filled, but there were expectations they had to meet, too, routines they had to follow. Like everyone else they went to work and did their job. We need to understand what that job was because their decisions as incumbents may affect us all.