

---

## **REVIEWS**

---

### **Anatomy of a Radical (?) Government**

*Gwynneth Singleton (ed.), **The Howard Government: Australian Commonwealth Administration 1996-1998**, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000*

*Reviewed by **Peter Hay***

**T**his volume is the second in what promises to be an ongoing series of studies of Australian federal governments, and a very timely and valuable series it should prove to be. Though the back cover blurb promises 'the first comprehensive overview of the issues of the period', as the book's sub-title indicates, the emphasis is upon the institutional and processual reforms to Australian government administration rather than achievements and failures of policy. Even the chapters collected as 'policy issues' tend to be concerned more with institutions and processes than substantive policy, and of the three policy domains that characterised the first Howard Government in popular perception – indigenous issues and the complicating advent of American style backwoods populism, gun control, and workplace relations reform, only the latter is accorded a chapter in its own right. The turbulent issues of gun control and Hansonism are curiously marginalised concerns within the themes discussed here, whilst the chapter devoted to indigenous issues focuses upon the budgetary and institutional changes to ATSIC rather than the broader policy environment.

This is not to be entirely construed as criticism – indeed, given a caveat to be introduced below, it may not be a legitimate criticism at all. There is certainly a sense in which this is the book's great strength. We are reminded that some of the most profound, the most permanent and the most significant changes are not necessarily reflected in the mass media's selection of 'news' priorities. For those wanting succinct and insightful overviews of the structural legacy of the first Howard Government this is an invaluable source. None of the essays free-ride on its fellows; all provide excellent descriptive data, to which the best contributions add outstanding analysis of short and long-term significances.

Most contributors to *The Howard Government* are academics from the University of Canberra. Just two are practitioners. Centrelink's CEO, Sue Vardon, provides a clear account of her organisation's genesis, structure and operational norms. Given her position, it is not to be expected that this contribution would offer much in the way of critical analysis, and none is forthcoming. On the other hand, the one-stop-shop idea embodied in Centrelink also had currency in the Whitlam years, and is not likely to figure high on the objections list of even the most implacable critic of the Howard government. The other practitioner is Harry Evans, Clerk of the Australian Senate. Writing on the

Howard government's relationship with and treatment of the Commonwealth Parliament, his contribution *is* strong on critical analysis, and is one of the best pieces in the book. Employing an edgy, sometimes acerbic, prose, Evans renders painfully apparent the contrast between John Howard's pre-government rhetoric on the need to preserve the strength and integrity of Parliament and the reality. As with its predecessor, the Howard government's 'actual performance in relations with Parliament... reinforces the universal truth: governments prefer to control parliaments rather than answer to them' (p. 35). A two-page demolition of the notion of governmental 'mandate' is brilliant, and should be tacked to the wall, a stern corrective, of anyone misguided enough to invoke it.

The book's essays are arranged in two sections, 'Part One: The Institutions of Government' (seven essays) and 'Part Two: Policy Issues' (five essays) – though, as noted above, several of the 'Policy Issues' essays could as readily have been classified under Part One. The Varden and Evans essays are both in the first section. Also in Part One are strongly detailed accounts by John Halligan and Roger Wettenhall of the government's revolutionary approach to public sector management, Haig Patapan's perceptive description of the frequently uneasy relationship between a moderately activist post-Mason High Court and the government, and Christine Fletcher's similarly perceptive account of ATSIC's faring under a hostile government.

Also in Part One, the volume's lead essay in fact, is a beautifully written assessment of John Howard, Prime Minister, by David Adams. But I want to set this essay aside for the moment, and return to the analyses – by Halligan and Wettenhall – of the 'revolution' in public sector management. Halligan takes the Howard reforms of the public service proper for his subject matter, whilst Wettenhall's concerns are with the non-departmental organisation (NDO) sub-sector. Each contribution partakes of the high standards we have come to anticipate from these fine scholars. Halligan's essay should quickly become compulsory reading in courses in Australian public sector management. He notes that the agenda of privatising, downsizing, colonising public administrative theory with concepts taken from 'best practice' in the private sector, and reducing the scope of the public service's ambit of operation, was in place by 1983, and received powerful impetus in the early 1990s from the Hilmer Report on National Competition Policy. In this sense the Howard reform agenda was partly a continuation of a process of change already in place, though Halligan makes it clear that, even though they were somewhat slow to materialise, when they did 'the directions that emerged during the first term of the Howard government were fundamentally different from the initial decade of reform in important respects' (p. 60), particularly in the government's determined relegation of the public sector to the status of 'an adjunct to the private sector' (p. 60).

Halligan is impeccably detached; Wettenhall, by contrast, locates himself squarely within the debate: he laments, in his opening paragraph, the globalisation of the Thatcherite 'model', a model historically devised in response to failures specific to British public enterprise. Few other countries, he notes, have adopted Thatcher's inappropriately universalised 'model' in such 'gung-ho' fashion as

Australia (p. 65). Much of his essay (and it is the longest in the book) is devoted to defending the now unfashionable statutory authority form of NDO against the company form so enthusiastically embraced by the government in the wake of its enthusiastic endorsement in the 1997 Humphry Report. I think Wettenhall succeeds very well. He makes it clear, too, that the larger part of the preference for the company form is ideologically sourced, for 'things public are denigrated, things private adored' (p. 87).

Of the five papers grouped in 'Part Two: Policy Issues', three, Jenny Stewart's account of the faring of federalism under Howard; Chris Aulich's reprise of privatisation and outsourcing, and Don Fleming's piece on new theories and regulatory regimes of administrative law, could all have fitted within Part One. All three papers are cogent and intelligent. I was much taken with the force of Aulich's closing observation: that neither detractors nor defenders of privatisation have shown much stomach for moving beyond argument-from-assertion to rigorous analysis of the record. Stewart makes it plain that federalism has fared surprisingly badly under Howard, the conservative side of politics' longstanding commitment to federalism notwithstanding. Only when it has been in its clear political interests to do so – in the environment policy domain in particular – has Howard 'federalised' functional relationships. Elsewhere – in education, say – the shift has been *from* the states *to* Canberra. This should not surprise us. If, as I shall argue shortly, Howard's is the most radical government since Whitlam's (at least – possibly since Chifley's), it is to be expected that an inherited and potentially obstructive commitment to functional devolution to the states would be deemed dispensable.

In Stewart's chapter we are given a survey of the Howard record in certain prominent policy areas – albeit they are chosen instrumentally for their relevance to her focus upon federalism. We are left with two 'pure' policy chapters. One is a thorough, methodical account of workplace relations, with a concentration upon the debacle of the waterfront dispute, by the book's editor, Gwynneth Singleton. 'The word 'debacle' is not ill-chosen – it is apparent from this account that the outcome gave cold comfort for the Maritime Union of Australia, the apparent victor in the dispute (and there can be no doubt, of course, that the word 'debacle' accurately describes the outcome for the government).

The other is a curious piece by Greg Barrett on John Howard as economic manager. Barrett determinedly seeks to prove that Howard 'inherited' his 'market-oriented policies' from the Keating government, and that he 'did not produce a fundamental change in policy direction' (p. 133). The other piece that focuses upon Howard personally, the essay by David Adams that leads the collection off, and concerning which, it will be remembered, I earlier postponed consideration, also downplays the extent to which Howard can be said to represent a dramatic new future, a plunge into uncharted waters, to be a leader of a quintessentially *radical* government. For Adams, Howard is a 'formidable politician' (p. 13), but essentially one who dodges along approximately in tune with the public mood, sometimes misjudging it and falling behind or straying

ahead, but not a great definer of his times, a 'skilful' but 'prosaic' prime minister, 'never great but ever adequate' (p. 24).

This stress upon the Howard government's degree of continuity with its predecessor, and upon Howard's personal ordinariness, is misleading, in my view. It masks the real character of the 'Howard revolution'. Admittedly there is some tension over this portrayal within the book. Thus Singleton, in her Introduction, notes 'how close the [major] parties have become on significant policy issues' (p. 9), but on the question of Howard's political persona she appears to take a somewhat different position from Adams, noting 'the strength of purpose and tenacity with which Howard factored his philosophy to the policies of his government', and that 'he led his government down the pathway to significant reform in a range of policy areas in which he had a personal interest and philosophical view' (p. 4). Tension then – but the general mood of the book militates against a characterisation of the government as radically discontinuous with what has gone before. Personally, I am not much interested in the question of whether the government's radicalism carries John Howard's personal signature or whether it is the collective creation of his powerful senior ministers. What is significant is that this is a government that has generated a degree of passion and abhorrence not seen since the Whitlam years – over its approach to Aboriginal reconciliation, over its seemingly blatant class partisanship at the time of the waterfront dispute (and workplace relations generally): and more generally, but most appositely, over the change it represents to hitherto ingrained and esteemed elements of the national political culture, values such as fairness, compassion and the social virtues, all scrapped in favour of the claims of individual self-reliance, enlightened self-interest and the private life. It is in this territory that a strong case can be made for characterising the Howard government as one of the most radical in Australia's history.

I have said that the strength of this book resides in its focus upon little-understood changes in structures and processes of government. But this is simultaneously a weakness, for it promotes a mistaken 'sense' of the government. This would have been apparent had more attention been paid to the wider policy environment in 1996-1998. But here I must introduce that caveat foreshadowed in my second paragraph. It is this: it is not legitimate to criticise a book for not being some other book one would rather have read. A book should only be reviewed within the terms of its own intent. I have already said that, as an assessment of the impact of the first Howard government on the structures and machinery of government, this book does outstandingly well.

But a different sort of book would, I think, have given a different overall picture of the first Howard government, one less concerned with continuity and placing more stress upon difference. The book I would like to see would include, along with much that is in the present volume, a more forthright assessment than Singleton provides of whether, and if so, the extent to which, in the waterfront dispute, the government did conspire with its favoured party to the dispute, and to what extent it was driven in its actions by ideological consideration. It would consider the reconciliation process in broader context. It would test the reality of

the Howard government's much-vaunted commitment to family values, looking at the extent to which added work stress stemming from the loss of job security, and added physical and psychological exhaustion stemming from the job productivity targets built into workplace contracts, contributes crucially to the strains within families. I would like a chapter on environmental policy, and a consideration of the extent to which the hot-spot 'bandaiding' approach, as represented by the National Heritage Trust, is an adequate policy response as against an approach that starts from identification of the structural causes of environmental degradation. I would like Aulich to expand upon his tantalising hint (pp. 170-171) at the expanded potentiality for patronage and outright corruption entailed in contracting out government services, particularly when lucrative multi-department, ('cluster') contracts are involved, as has been the case, most controversially, with IT services. I would like more detailed consideration of the portentous questions to which Halligan merely alludes in his conclusion on 'the future of the public service': the devaluation of professional skills, the loss of corporate memory, the loss of a public service culture (for example). And I would like a chapter on the issue of gun control, an issue, in my opinion, of unsurpassed importance, an issue which would have been beyond Labor's capacity (because it could not have taken the conservative states with it) and one upon which Howard delivered spectacularly well.

But most of all I would like to see consideration of the impact Howard's changes have had on Australia's political culture, and, via consideration of the clash of values between the politically adept and the politically alienated - the latter embodied in the bizarre phenomenon of Pauline Hanson, concerning which only this specific manifestation has now been eclipsed, not the conditions that created it in the first place - an assessment of the legacy of the first Howard government in terms of what it means for the very future of the democratic consensus.

*Peter Hay is Reader in Geography and Environmental Studies at University of Tasmania.*