# Howard’s Menzies



Once, before the Labor Party Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard ruled in Canberra, there was the Liberal Party Prime Minister John Howard. Now, Rudd and Gillard having retreated to publish books in which each describes the other as a traitor, there is still John Howard. He isn’t Prime Minister any more, but his prestige has increased, perhaps because a lot of people who once thought him unexciting have found out how exciting life can get when the throne-room in Canberra is alternately occupied by two people whose shared vocation is to spend tax revenue as if it belonged to the government.

After six years of erratic federal expenditure under Rudd, Gillard and then Rudd again (the episode is already being called RGR, as if it were a bad dream too potent to be named in full, and needed to be buried in a stencilled box), Howard *emeritus* now finds himself emerging as the very model of the effective Australian prime minister, accorded a measure of respect even by those who once regarded him as the sworn enemy of all human values. As the current Liberal Party Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, fights to keep his position against a hostile Senate, a hostile Labor party that can’t believe it lost, an almost universally hostile media establishment and swarms of hostile tweets, there is even the occasional voice to say that Howard, by contrast, knew what he was doing.

Following his election in 1996, Howard reigned as Prime Minister for eleven and a half years, during which period the Labor Party and its attendant commentariat in the mass media and the visionary left were consistently united in the opinion that the wave of history would demand that he be toppled at the next election, if not by next Monday. For how could his continued rule be tolerated, when he had nothing to offer his country except balanced books and nobody to approve of him except the electorate?

When, in 2007, he finally *was* toppled, it seemed to many – they were nearly all functionaries in the white collar worlds of the arts, academe and the media -- that an outrageous injustice had at last been mended. Then the fun started. In the next six years, Kevin Rudd was deposed in favour of Julia Gillard because it had become clear, even to his own party, that Rudd truly *was* unfit for office, and then Gillard was deposed in favour of Rudd because it was thought, again by her own party, that Rudd might have a better chance than Gillard of winning an election, even though the Labor Party itself had already testified to the electorate that he wasn’t qualified to hold the post he was now being asked to seek again. The whole scenario might have been written by Moliere in a mad mood.

Quiet in his retirement, Howard said little about these reciprocating shenanigans, contenting himself with writing and publishing his political autobiography *Lazarus Rising*. His more devoted enemies greeted the book as the kind of thing you might expect from an unrepentant racist, misogynist, CIA agent and neo-Nazi, but even they had to concede that it was neatly done. The reading public agreed (*Lazurus Rising* is the all-time best-selling book by an Australian politician) and the less blinkered of the reviewers guessed that he might be starting a second career, as a political historian. His new book, *The Menzies Era*, proves that they were right. Though the field of Australian political commentary is nowadays a happy hunting-ground for fantasists, it does have some exemplars of sober judgment, and Howard has already proved himself to count high among their ranks. Even those who thought that his lack of effervescence in government was a bourgeois insult to their own exciting personalities would be obliged to admit, if only under torture, that his unspectacular expository prose is a suitable instrument for recounting both the broad sweep and fine detail of Australia’s modern historical reality.

For Howard, as for the present reviewer, that reality began in the Menzies era. We were of the generation who spent our infancy under the Labor governments that fought the war and opened the way for the nation to expand after victory in the Pacific: the post-war programme for assisted immigration of European refugees was a Labor party initiative, honourably conceived and efficiently carried out, as Howard concedes. Then we were raised and educated under the succession of Menzies Liberal-Country Party coalition governments that continued the expansion. In the suburbs of the major cities, we were brought up in the predictable safety of the single-storey brick bungalow on a quarter of an acre of land, the prickling bindi-eyes in the carefully mown grass representing the only threat, except perhaps for a nest of funnel-web spiders in the wood-pile and a few hundred million Chinese people somewhere over the Northern horizon. Australia’s growing post-war success is still a set of personal memories to all of us who benefited from it. Often the memories come down to the rattle of the Hill’s Hoist rotary clothesline in the late-afternoon southerly wind and the shrill of the cicadas in the peppercorns and willows at the edge of the park.  We were often barefoot, but it was by choice.

Telling the story, Howard necessarily repeats some of the autobiographical material from the early part of*Lazarus Rising*.  But this time he is getting not just into his own mind, he is getting into the mind of Menzies as well. Generations of Australia’s inner-city intellectuals were later to indulge the fond belief that Menzies had no mind at all, just a set of patrician instincts by which stole from the poor and bowed in the direction of the Queen. Some of them still do think that, but the opinion has become a dunce’s cap: a way of recognizing a poolside radical when you hear one. Nowadays anyone with an IQ above skin temperature is capable of realising that Menzies, if only for the results that he obtained, must have had something complex and interesting going on behind that magnificent set of eyebrows. But it is useful to have someone of Howard’s calibre analysing just how bright Menzies was, and doing it, moreover, without falling for Menzies’ papal air of infallibility.

Indeed Howard can be punishing about his subject’s early failings.  Just before his first prime ministership, which lasted from 1939 to 1941, Menzies was in Europe for some of the pre-war crisis, and he was in favour of appeasement. He spent three weeks in Nazi Germany, found the Nazis a bad bunch, but thought the Czechs should concede or be forced to. When the Nazis got their way, Menzies didn’t think appeasement had played the key role. He thought that the key role was played by Hitler’s leadership. It was a common opinion, but coming from an uncommon man it was a disappointment, and Howard is clearly disappointed even today.

But Menzies had the gift either of wiping his mental slate clean or else, more likely and better, of learning from his mistakes. After he lost power in 1941, Menzies also learned from watching the Labor Prime Minister John Curtin, of whom Howard penetratingly says that his “road to the top had been bumpier, which made him a better listener.” Menzies had a silver tongue but it could be woundingly sharp, and he had to learn to curb it. Howard usefully contends that Menzies’ pre-war preparations enabled Curtin to fight the battle against the Axis powers, but Howard doesn’t make the mistake of belittling Curtin in favour of Menzies: rather, if anything, the other way about. This high opinion of Curtin turns out to be typical of Howard’s readiness, throughout the book, to give the Labour parliamentary leaders his approbation when he thinks they deserve it, thereby making his disapprobation more effective when he thinks they don’t. As in *Lazarus Rising*, Howard seems wedded here to the proposition that it has taken both of the two main parties, each holding power for a fair share of time, to create the modern Australia. This is a position that few publicists for the current Labor Party wish to hold, but it can be argued that unless they can regain the concept they are doomed to infantilism, if not to oblivion.

Heart disease took Curtin out of the frame in 1945, but Menzies’ comeback had already started with his “forgotten people” radio speech of 1942. A born master of radio, Menzies was also a natural student of the public’s hankering for that suburban Elysium we were later to grow up in. The picture he painted wasn’t an airy vision, but a solid prospect of getting almost everybody into the middle class, so that the house my mother and I lived in, for example, would be not unrecognizably different from the house the Howard family lived in, even though John Howard’s father was an entrepreneur: he owned a garage. There were houses for rent that were built and owned by the Housing Commission, but they looked just as good as the house you might save up for and buy.

Invoking a universal vista of family homes, Menzies could be traduced as a sloganeer who was merely staving off the prospect of socialism with cynical rhetoric, but Ben Chifley, the Labor Prime Minister who succeeded Curtin, really was lumbered with slogans. Chifley, as a speaker, might have been chosen by the fates to make Menzies sound even more angelic: the voice of Menzies drew people to the lounge-room radio like iron filings to a magnet, whereas the voice of Chifley sent them scattering like dust. But Chifley was a formidably practical politician who had climbed to his prominence all the way from the foot-plate of a locomotive. He was stuck, however, with the visionary dogma that it might be a good thing to nationalise the banks, thus to put a brake on the historic process of the rich stealing from the poor.

Menzies had correctly decided that the way to make the poor richer was to make the whole country more prosperous. His defeat of Chifley was achieved not just because he, Menzies, was the superior orator, but because he had a realizable programme. Howard, however, might have said much more about Chifley’s genuine and transforming achievement in promoting the Snowy River scheme, the great upstream power project on which so many of the incoming European migrants worked, gaining a share in their new nation’s destiny by doing so. By saying that the Menzies government “energetically continued” the Snowy River project, Howard is really saying that it was well worth continuing. Still called “the Snowy” by those old enough to remember, the project was the first and biggest post-war indication of what the new Australia was going to be like, and Howard, usually generous to the other side when memorialising what they did, for once sounds niggardly in saying so little about it. There is half a page, but there ought to be half a chapter. Chifley, not Menzies, was the Man from Snowy River.

Perhaps Howard soft-pedals the Snowy story because it depended on building dams, which are currently so out of favour with the Australian intelligentsia (passionate about “the environment”, as if the rest of us were not) that it is thought a crime against Gaia even to mention the possibility of raising the upper reaches of a river beyond their natural height. But it isn’t like Howard to be silenced by fashion, and it certainly wasn’t like Menzies either. When he took over, he kept the immigration scheme going because he believed in it. If he had been the Anglocentric throwback he was later painted as, he might have tried to put a stop to it. Even he could not have dreamed that the Australian post-war population of seven and a half million would increase in the course of a single lifetime to the twenty-four million of today, but he had no reason to fear a bigger electorate, as long as all its members could see a future for themselves. Believing that he had the common people behind him even if the professional thinkers weren’t, he was always confident in his use of power.

He got too confident when he tried to ban the Communist party. His arguments were good: in those days, retreating now into the loosely remembered past, the Communist parties in the free countries were agents of Soviet foreign policy and exclusively dedicated to industrial sabotage. But the arguments for democracy were better. Most of the press backed Menzies on the point, but the public could see that if Menzies won the referendum he would be able to put anyone at all in the dock and oblige them to prove themselves innocent. Charmingly, Howard records that his mother thought that Menzies was seeking too much power. My own mother thought the same, even though she thought Menzies’ opponent, H.V. “Doc” Evatt, was yet another Labor leader sent to prove that Menzies sounded like an angel.

Menzies had overreached himself. Evatt momentarily had the ascendancy, but he had a secret drawback: he was mentally unbalanced. He also had a public drawback: a gift for doing the wrong thing on a large scale. When a Soviet diplomat called Petrov defected, there was a media uproar. Even in those days, when the 24-hour news cycle was still only a gleam in a madman’s eye, most Australian media uproars were on the level of man bites dingo, but this uproar was a real one, especially when it became clear that the Soviets would kidnap Mrs Petrov if they could. In the middle of the melee, Evatt took it upon himself to send a letter to Molotov, who duly reassured him that there were no Soviet agents in Australia or, indeed, anywhere. In Moscow, they must have thought Evatt had gone nuts, and they would have been close to the truth. Evatt was clever but erratic, and Menzies found it easy to outshine him.

Menzies outshone everyone for years to come, and perhaps got too used to it. Towards the end of his parliamentary career, he almost lost the 1961 election to Arthur Calwell. Howard says that Menzies had made the mistake of thinking of himself as a natural ruler, but forgets to say that he, Howard, made the same mistake when he lost the 2007 election to Kevin Rudd. Rudd had little to offer except visions, some of them transparently wild even at the time, and nearly all of them to become disasters later on. Though Howard was contending with the problem that he, like Menzies, had been in the driving seat for an irritatingly long time, the credibility he had accumulated as a manager would have come in handy for any successor that he cared to nominate. His able deputy Peter Costello might have beaten Rudd quite easily, given time to prepare answers to Rudd’s policies, most of which were straight out of a draft script for *Duck Soup*. But Howard didn’t nominate Costello, or anyone. He had come to believe himself indispensible, and the public spotted it. In*Lazarus Rising* he doesn’t fully face this possibility, and plausibly he doesn’t face it at all here, because he is supposed to be talking about Menzies. But a personal discussion of the point would have added weight to his account of events. Howard, however, is pretty good, perhaps too good, at not fretting about his personal example, although one can detect a note of envy when he describes how Menzies retired undefeated. It’s the way to go.

Surprisingly early in a hefty book, Howard gets done with the Menzies career path, thus leaving room for two more main subjects: a summary of what Menzies achieved, and an account of what happened next. In the 1950 and 1960s, a period still notorious for its inhibitions and stuffiness, a lot happened – a lot was made to happen – that would lay the foundations for the all too unstuffy Australian social texture that we know now, now that the voice of the tattooed libertarian shakes the welkin in the land that once banned books. For the first time, there was true economic engagement with Asia; though the financial and labour markets remained desperately over-regulated, trade was diversified so that prosperity was no longer entirely dependent on primary produce; the mining industry began the boom that still goes on despite RGR’s kamikaze move to cripple it with putatively anti-capitalist taxes; tertiary education, through the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme, was made more accessible to the less well-off; the middle class burgeoned and the New Australians went on arriving like a benevolent flood, all of them grateful to get a job and none of them planning to live on welfare, although they couldn’t help regarding the basic wage as a blessing when compared with the circumstances they had left behind. Several of these initiatives were inherited from Chifley but in the main they were brought about by the Menzies government. Howard could have taken the Menzies era to that point and drawn a line under it. He has preferred, however, to extend it into the time that elapsed between Menzies’ quietly triumphant retirement and the clamorous enthronement of Gough Whitlam as the supposedly unprecedented embodiment of the free society that today’s intellectuals would like to think sprang from his forehead like Athena from the forehead of Zeus.

One sees Howard’s point: the intervening Liberal Prime Ministers were the intellectual progeny of Menzies, as indeed, eventually, was Howard himself. Whitlam was a visionary and they were not. Menzies was where they got not being visionaries from: Menzies was well aware that the USA was Australia’s indispensible ally but he preferred to centre his historical loyalties on Buckingham Palace rather than the White House. The British monarchy had always been there, and Menzies, long before he was invested with the sumptuous robes of a Knight of the Thistle, was wedded to the concept that what it is not necessary to change should not be changed: a conservative attitude which is always the baseline for true progress, however radical. He was a traditionalist. He had good reasons for getting into Vietnam – after all, the Malayan Emergency had been successfully settled, and the struggle against falling dominoes was an understandably popular idea at the time – but some of his successors might have done better to be even more traditionalist than he was. Britain stayed out of Vietnam but Australia followed America’s lead further and further into it.

The subsequent youthful social turmoil – it had all the American features but the hortatory musical numbers were even worse – is remembered, by those who still worship Whitlam, as the ecstatically creative jubilee preceding his advent. Nobody among the *bien pensant* today wants to remember that Whitlam, after the Dismissal, might have been quickly restored to power, but that the people, having had experience of his profligate inability to run a government, wanted no more of him. The believers would rather blame his fall on a conspiracy, perhaps instigated by the CIA. (Even a man as smart as Peter Carey can still be heard endorsing this theory to clueless American cultural reporters who wouldn’t know Gough Whitlam from Walt Whitman.) Whitlam himself, to do him credit – he was a dreamer, but not a fool – was always careful, in subsequent years, to say that the CIA had nothing to do with it. But he was up against his own admirers, who did not want to be confused with facts.

Perhaps the most resonant fact was that the Prime Minister who abolished the last vestiges of the White Australia policy was not Whitlam but Harold Holt. Whitlam gets the credit because of the power of myth, which plays a worryingly large part in Australia’s politics and in its writing of history. In my view – which is admittedly only the view of a cultural critic, and an expatriate as well – the intellectual life of Australia since the Whitlam years has been increasingly weakened by the reluctance of almost the entire educated population to deal with past events whose implications might undermine their heartfelt views. The event doesn’t have to be very far in the past either. In the RGR period, more than a thousand boat people drowned on their way to Australia, and all because of the government’s strange eagerness to have a policy different from Howard’s, which had drowned nobody. After RGR had run its course, Abbott restored Howard’s policy, and the drownings returned to zero. Already, by publicists for Labor, it is thought spiteful to mention this sequence of events: the facts, that is, should be either shaped to fit theories or else forgotten. Howard doesn’t do that, and might, in what looks like being a fruitful old age, provide a sign-post to the way back from psychobabble. Whatever you think of his handling of the *Tampa* incident, or of his decision to help with the US intervention in Iraq, Howard is a realist. It could be said that he was never thrilling enough to be anything else.

At Gough Whitlam’s splendid memorial service in Sydney Town Hall in November of last year, many an excellent speech was made, all of them attesting to the departed giant’s stature. There were no awkward moments apart from a farcical initial passage when some hapless factotum tried to seat Julia Gillard next to Kevin Rudd, which would have been like seating Marie Antoinette next to Robespierre. Otherwise, all was dignity, even grandeur; but for the watcher from afar there was more than a whiff of mythopoeia. In other words, and in uncustomarily polite voices, Australian politics were being pursued, even by Noel Pearson, the Aboriginal leader who has done so much to define and re-focus the question of the nation’s duties to its Aboriginal citizens. Probably the finest political analyst in Australia of whatever background, and an orator of Periclean attainments, Pearson has managed to make a compulsory talking-point of exactly why and how Aboriginals should take responsibility for themselves. Anglo-Celtic pundits who could once count on burbling learnedly onward with their complaints about the Stolen Generation find themselves obliged by Pearson’s fact-based eloquence to be more specific in their arguments, even if they still find it psychologically impossible to cease denigrating Australia as a racist country.

But Pearson is no saint, and those of us who would like to see him as Prime Minister had better be careful, lest our dreams come true. When, in the peroration of his soaring encomium to the lost paragon, he described Whitlam as the only Prime Minister he had ever met who was entirely without race prejudice, he was being cruelly rude to both Howard and Abbott, who must have thought that they could hear that kind of thing in Parliament House without having to put on their best suits.

Howard once made the mistake of saying that too many Asians were coming in, by which he really meant that too many drug-dealers were Asian; but generally he could be called a racist only by those who regarded Australia’s dominant culture as an insult to its minorities. (By that measure, Australia is perhaps the world’s most alarming proof of Pascal Bruckner’s idea that multiculturalism, as an ideology, is the racism of the anti-racists.)  With regard to the Aboriginals, Howard had always shown genuine concern, and Pearson had thanked him for it, while pointing out that Howard’s otherwise commendable emphasis on practical help rather than on symbolic gestures needed to be amplified in this case, because symbolism would count.

Howard listened to him, reluctantly agreed, and although he did not promise to make the same kind of Apology that Rudd was promising, he did promise, during the 2007 election debate, that he would add a clause to the Constitution which would recognize the Aboriginals as a special case.  Howard lost, Rudd made the Apology, and a fat lot of good it did anybody. Pearson, well aware of all that, wants more from Abbott: a constitutional preamble which will mark out the Aboriginals as a unique people, plus their own parliament to which all matters concerning them would have to be referred. Those who think that a special status for a cultural group is a questionable idea for all, and almost certainly a bad idea for the group, are probably destined to lose the argument. The pseudo-humanitarian media barrage is waiting, with its horrible new weapon. Where once the news cycle made stories out of gotcha moments, now it makes gotcha moments out of tweets: the blog-trolls have come into their kingdom, and the ABC’s female army of presenters find themselves conducting solemn discussions of a ten-word opinion from some dolt whose sole achievement in life has been to wear a pair of flip-flops without their falling off. Almost invariably the discussion culminates with the confident suggestion that Abbott will soon be eaten alive by his own party. Abbott, who spends so much time with the Aborigines that even Pearson must be satisfied, has a way of giving up even on those points where his beliefs are firm, so he might well cave in, comforting himself with the thought that the desires of the compassionate have been served.

Just how compassionate the compassionate are is an abiding question. Until recently, in Australia, every ethnic group that came in was assimilated if it wanted to be: the Muslim extremists are the first consignment of immigrants to hate western civilization almost as much as the resident intellectuals do. The only group that was ever kept out consisted of North Vietnamese boat people, who were kept out by none other than Gough Whitlam: he thought, and even said, that having had experience of a left-wing government they might vote against him. For understandable reasons this wasn’t mentioned at the memorial service, where everyone was too busy being impressed by the information, advanced by an incandescently lovely Cate Blanchett, that because of Whitlam she had received her education for free.

She would been granted the same favour by Menzies, who sent us all to university, even those of us who barely matriculated. After we all got out, swots like Howard became lawyers, while malingerers like myself became artists. The lawyers were more likely to have some idea of the objective nature of truth, but in those days there were still a few journalists and commentators capable of realising that a society in which clever people who started off with all reasonable aims fulfilled might one day dream of fulfilling unreasonable aims, such as justice for all mankind, or controlling the climate by dismantling industry, thus to allow a return to the Rousseauesque ideal by which the common people could bake their own bricks, grow their own vegetables and do their own dentistry.

Howard never lost his grip on reality, and might well have felt vindicated when, at the end of the Whitlam event, he was photographed chatting amiably with Bob Hawke, the Labor Prime Minister who managed to deregulate the Australian economy, borrowing formulae that had been developed by Howard in his role as Shadow Treasurer. Greater in physical stature than Howard only because of an Art Deco abundance of wavy silver hair, Hawke is Howard’s true opposite number in the history of modern Australian politics: two men who were divided by party loyalties but united by a sense of what was possible and just. They got that from Menzies, who knew exactly why it was ridiculous to send a letter to Molotov: because the Soviet Union, proud of having been chosen as the instrument of history, would never, for as long as it lasted, offer its people a single day of the freedom that Australians enjoyed by right, or the prosperity that they enjoyed not just by luck, but by design. John Howard, in this important book, takes us back to an era when there was a proper language in which to speak about such things. It’s time travel. Maybe he’s not so unexciting after all.

--- TLS, April 17, 2015