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How They Shortened the Odds

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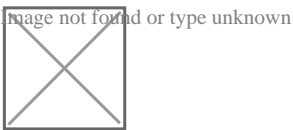
This article from the [Winter 2020 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by barrister, Stuart Wood.

I have known Bill Shorten—distantly—half my life. We went to school and university in Melbourne at the same time and thereafter parallel careers in industrial relations. Mine at the Bar and his in the union movement.

He was an obvious star: charming, confident, clever and clearly going places. To give but one example: out of roughly 1,000 witnesses I have cross-examined, two have beaten me. This is not humble-bragging as the rules are all in the barrister's favour. When I cross-examined him (on inflated union membership figures, no less) he slaughtered me in a performance that was as captivating as it was clever. From that time on I thought his rise inexorable and that he would copy Hawke—a child of the union movement, with support in business—and would occupy the centre for a decade.

Labor's failures were substantial and policy based.

So what went wrong? Aaron Patrick, who knows Shorten more intimately than most, tells us the story in his new book, *The Surprise Party: How the Coalition Went from Chaos to Comeback*. The Shorten that Patrick describes is far removed from the man I know: arrogant, dismissive and verging on contemptuous towards the very voters upon whose support he needed to rely.



The Surprise
Party: How the Coalition Went from Chaos to Comeback
Aaron Patrick
Black Inc, pp256,
18 Nov 2019

According to Patrick, Shorten as the would-be king treated the campaign trail as his coronation tour. In Chapter 18, 'Inflection Point', Patrick describes what he believes were Shorten's key failures during the campaign. Treating the press as stakeholders to be played off and treating the public as mugs, he ignored requests to detail his policies, avoided hard interviews and refused direct questions. Leading to an event I hadn't seen during the campaign: a train-wreck press



conference with Channel 10's Jonathan Lea. Patrick's description of it is so good that the reader is forced to watch it on YouTube, and it is hard to work out what is more compelling: the video record or Patrick's analysis of it. In writing *The Surprise Party*, unlike the many who had foreseen the result and then had to re-write their books, Patrick commenced his analysis after the poll. As one of the few journalists to keep an open mind during the campaign, he was well placed to do so.

In fact, in his role as political correspondent at *The Australian Financial Review*, less than one month prior to the election, he penned a piece titled '*How Morrison could still win*'. It mapped an unlikely path for the Coalition, suggesting it "could survive a four or five-seat loss and pull off the greatest political comeback since Paul Keating destroyed the 1993 front-runner, John Hewson". He was right. And he was alone. In the dying days of Malcolm Turnbull's leadership, the new Laurie Oakes, the *Herald Sun*'s James Campbell, espoused a widely-held view: "Changing leaders would be futile. They've played that card. The sad fact is that Malcolm is their least-worst option."

During the campaign, Dennis Shanahan of *The Australian* wrote that the Coalition was "handing Bill Shorten government well into the 2020s". Nine's newspapers all published numbers suggesting a huge six percentage point win for Labor. Ipsos, Newspoll and the betting markets all tipped the opposition. Remarkably, at 5.19pm on election day, the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggested a sharp fall in Coalition support.

Patrick is no stranger to disinterested analysis. His two previous works were *Downfall: How the Labor Party Ripped Itself Apart* and *Credlin & Co: How the Abbott Government Destroyed Itself*. In the first he applied his forensic skills to Labor; in the second the blowtorch was focussed on the Liberals. While Shorten is a star of all three books, in this latest one the limelight is shared with Chris Bowen, Scott Morrison and Josh Frydenberg.

Not only is Patrick unbiased, he writes beautifully. Indeed one of the reasons for Michael Stuchbury's success in turning around the *Financial Review* has been his recruitment and promotion of journalists who can make a typewriter sing: e.g. Joe Aston, Jennifer Hewett, Christopher Joye, Aaron Patrick... the list goes on and on.

My favourite chapter was the eleventh, which was serialised post-election in the *AFR*. It describes how Frydenberg and Tim Wilson outplayed (the then treasurer-in-waiting) Chris Bowen. Prior to reading it, I did not realise Frydenberg and Wilson played such a large part in pushing Bowen into a corner on the issue of franking credits.

But even more telling is Patrick's description of Bowen:

Smart answers to tough questions sometimes ended with a smile at his own cleverness. In a pre-election magazine interview that celebrated Bowen's intellectual and political talents, the pixie-like subject humblebragged: "I look back and think, 'Why did I get that high distinction average [at university]?' It means nothing to me now. I should have dated more girls and had more fun."

According to Patrick, Labor's failures were not just presentational—as bad as Shorten and Bowen



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were—but rather were more substantial and policy based. He quotes an analysis after the campaign found that the richest 20 per cent of Australians had swung *to Labor* (by about 2 per cent), whereas the bottom 80 per cent all swung *to the Coalition*. Indeed the second-poorest quintile (Patrick defines them as the lower-middle classes) swung to the Coalition by a huge 2.4 per cent.

Relatedly, Patrick says:

Anyone living within 10 kilometres of the centre of the capital was more likely to change their vote to the Labor Party. The further out voters lived, the more likely they supported the Liberal or National parties.

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Labor supporters react to election results on May 18, 2019. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

The significance of that for the Liberal Party could easily be the subject of another study. Indeed, former PM Abbott's concession speech on election night posited reasons for this change.

One thing that comes through is how carefully Morrison mapped his path to victory.

Winners being grinners, Patrick praises the Liberal machine and in particular Scott Morrison: seemingly underestimated by everyone but himself. One thing that comes through is how carefully the PM Morrison mapped his path to victory. To pass on but one of dozens of examples given by Patrick is the scene of John Howard's mobbing by timber workers in 2004, Bass and Braddon in the north of Tasmania: lost in the Rudd-slide; won back by Abbott; casually lost by Turnbull (Get-Up spent a relative pittance to turn them), were back in real focus with Morrison. So much that PM Morrison was there on election morning—before flying back to Sydney—trying to eke out the last votes. He won both seats.

Patrick contrasts Morrison's chesting of the tape with Shorten cruising to victory: using the last days to pack his house and celebrate the late great Bob Hawke, who had died two days before election day.

The Surprise Party reminds me in tone of *The Victory*, Pamela Williams' record of the Coalition's 1996 election success. With his access to the key players; his intimate knowledge of the rhythm of the campaign; his reluctance to pigeonhole his subjects, and the fact that he started this book after election result was known, this book is the best of the post-election offerings. And as Bill Shorten has been the star of all three of Patrick's political books, it ends with a quote from Shorten, "I never give up". I don't doubt that and when Patrick comes to write his fourth political book, I imagine Bill Shorten will be a star of that one also.



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