

# Reflections on the ‘Howard Project’

John Howard’s former speechwriter  
on the successes and failures of the  
Howard message

**John Kunkel**

## Did John Howard have a specific ‘vision’ for Australia during the eleven and a half years he was Prime Minister?

I would say: ‘No’. For those who believe that governments should go about their tasks modestly, this was all to the good.

There was, however, a ‘Howard Project’ and, in a sense, a project is broader, more complex and more interesting than a vision. The Howard Project spanned the full spectrum of economic, social, cultural and international affairs. It reflected his distinctive blend of liberal and conservative instincts, ideas and values.

In a way no other Australian politician had attempted before, John Howard challenged many of the comfortable verities of late twentieth century Whitlamite progressivism so beloved by Australia’s self-proclaimed ‘public intellectuals’. He was, in an important sense, an anti-establishment politician. Perhaps the most salient feature of the Howard Project was the belief that the political class is no better than the rest of the Australian community; that it is not the role of government to ‘reform’ society by dragging it up to what the intelligentsia defines as an appropriately elevated moral plain.

If, as someone once said, a conservative is a person who doesn’t regard himself as morally superior to his grandfather, then John Howard was indeed a conservative. Of course, in other ways, the former Prime Minister was also

a radical. His economic liberalism in government may not have been pure, but it was a core part of his political make-up that, ultimately, tested the limits of what the Australian political system would bear.

Social and cultural issues were central to the Howard Project. John Howard didn’t ‘imagine’ a better Australia. He thought the country was pretty good as it was.

His touchstones were the views and values of what used to be called the ‘silent majority’. To that he welded a pugnacious preparedness to challenge progressive orthodoxies—on issues as diverse as education, drugs policy, the family, citizenship and multiculturalism and indigenous affairs. For this, he attracted unprecedented hostility—especially from left-leaning baby boomer intellectuals whose political heroes will always be Whitlam and Keating.

Part pragmatic realism, part projection of Australian values, Howard’s international policy was also the subject of barely disguised disdain from the ‘Wise Man’ school of Australian foreign policy—the likes of Dick Woolcott, Ross Garnaut and Hugh White. Here, too, Howard was an anti-establishment figure—prepared to challenge settled thinking.

One could almost hear the collective sigh of relief among the great and good on election night 2007—at last, again, one of their men was going to be in charge.

As his speechwriter for almost four years, I basically viewed my job as writing what I thought John Howard would (and should) write if he had the time. I had never tried my hand at speechwriting prior to working for the former Prime Minister. And, as a natural parliamentary orator, John Howard had never really felt comfortable with the idea of someone else writing his speeches.

While the principal needs to have control of the product, for the process to work the speechwriter needs to get something out of it as well, and to leave an imprint on what is said. Yet, I never regarded what was delivered at the end of the day as anything other than ‘John Howard’s speeches’. In settling into the role, I quickly came to the view that a speechwriter should try, to the extent possible, to get inside the speaker’s head. What made speechwriting for John Howard easier than it might have been was that he had been in public life for so long. This meant he had an enormous body of material on the record on pretty much every topic imaginable.

Wherever possible, I made a point of going back and look-

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*John Kunkel was the speechwriter for the Hon. John Howard from January 2004 to November 2007.*

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ing at his earlier remarks on an issue with a view to ensuring essential continuity. Consistency, after all, was a signature of the Howard brand.

On a personal level, too, John Howard was easy to work for. Unfailingly, he was calm, polite, professional and appreciative, assuming of course you had met his expectations and the work was delivered on time. And he was always conscious that you had a life (especially a family) outside of politics. If he called at home on a Sunday while I was in the middle of bathing my young son or changing a nappy, it was always: 'That's much more important; ring me back when you are ready.'

The actual speechwriting process would vary. In the early days I would try as much as possible to talk to him before starting work on a speech. But in the last couple of years it was not uncommon for me to simply present him with a draft so that he had something to react to.

I would borrow ideas liberally from whatever source I thought appropriate. It was sometimes said of John Howard that he was an instinctual rather than an intellectual politician. That's true as far as it goes, but he was always keen to inject ideas and themes from the 'broad church' of liberal and conservative political thought. Edmund Burke, Lord Acton, Michael Oakeshott, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Karl Popper—all got a look in over the years. (I once toyed with the idea of trying to get him to quote Salma Hayek, after Kevin Rudd's rather strained and unconvincing attempt in *The Monthly* to portray the former Prime Minister as the latter day incarnation of Friedrich Hayek.) Working for the former PM, and as someone who had spent the better part of a decade enamoured with American politics and history, I came to a much deeper appreciation of the richness of the British conservative tradition.

Generally, I would try and give him a draft of a speech at least four days before it was to be presented. Then we'd go back and forth, extra drafting or tweaking as required.

Usually it was all very orderly, though occasionally you would have to turn on a dime. One Sunday while I was putting the final touches to a Monday night speech, a rather sheepish Prime Minister rang to say that the speech on climate change was excellent but really we should be talk-

ing about the burning issue of the day—in this case, the Northern Territory intervention in indigenous communities which had been announced following a cabinet meeting the previous week. With the ABC-Fairfax media complex in mild apoplexy about the intervention, the subsequent speech at The Sydney Institute would be described as one of John Howard's more passionate and heart-felt addresses.

If an issue broke suddenly, John Howard never needed anyone to come up with 'a line'. He had a natural politician's ability to get to the nub of a topic, a strong compass of right and wrong, and unrivalled experience of dealing with 'events'.

Throughout my time working for him, John Howard still gave the bulk of his short speeches off the cuff, especially (but not only) at informal gatherings. Sometimes he would call you less than an hour before an engagement just to kick around some ideas.

One such occasion was just prior to the opening in Canberra of the national memorial to police officers—state and federal—killed in the line of duty. He asked if I had any thoughts.

On a somewhat abstract level, I said that I was always attracted to the idea that 'order' and 'liberty' were really two sides of the same coin; that we rely on a foundation of order secured by those in uniform for our essential freedoms. The former Prime Minister immediately launched into a word-perfect two minute oration which captured the idea and communicated it in simple, clear language. It was a humble reminder of why he did what he did and why I was a foot-soldier in support.

Howard's enemies, of course, invariably portrayed him as a dull and uninspiring speaker. Their failure to appreciate the effectiveness of his plain-speaking style was yet another example of how they underestimated him for so long.

Where I hoped to make a difference was in helping to better articulate the Howard Project in terms of what it was for, rather than what it was against.

My perception was that the early years of the Howard prime ministership had a somewhat defensive (at times negative) tone—Australia is not an Asian country; we're not a racist society; we will not apologise. Of course, there were positive strands too, but I felt the balance was somehow wrong; that it took too long to shake off the shadow-boxing with Paul Keating. To address this, I tried to understand better the intersection of John Howard's political instincts and ideas, and put them in more of a positive framework.

Part of the Howard brand was not to sugar coat issues, or to raise expectations about what government could deliver. While this was a strength, it also risked underselling the Howard Project's full ambition. Of all its strands, the economic dimension was

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the most developed. A strong record of fiscal consolidation, tax reform, workplace reform, waterfront reform and the like—all opposed by the Labor Party—provided a ready economic narrative of a government prepared to make difficult but necessary decisions.

Though often portrayed as a tribal politician, John Howard was scrupulous in giving credit to the Labor Party for its record of economic reform in government. No Labor politician has yet seen fit to reciprocate. For all the emphasis on economic reform, John Howard's proudest boast was the story he could tell of rising living standards for low and middle income Australians. This so-called 'child of Hayek' positively enthused about the degree to which the Australian tax-transfer system was geared to assisting the less well-off in our society. At the same time, there was a conscious effort to celebrate the bourgeois virtues—hard work, thrift, self-reliance, striving to get ahead, family orientation. Government was always the handmaiden, never the starting point, of a good society.

More emphasis was given in latter years to speeches setting out the breadth and coherence of Howard's view of the world. Again, in the early years, the coalition probably spent too long dwelling on the notion that whoever they were they were not Paul Keating.

The core strands of the Howard foreign policy on its own terms were perhaps best captured in the speech at the opening of the Lowy Institute in April 2005. It had several strands: Australia's place within the family of liberal de-

mocracies; why national strength abroad begins at home; why a dangerous world calls for a distinct blend of realism and idealism; why foreign policy should never be conducted over the heads of the people.

This last point was critical. Howard was far more comfortable with a democratic approach to foreign policy than most before him.

Tapping a new mood of national self-confidence—an Australia at ease with the world and with itself—became a more prominent theme of the Howard narrative. The speech that launched the renewal of Australian history teaching in schools—Australia Day eve 2006—tried to communicate this in terms of Australia having achieved a 'sense of balance' in the early twenty-first century (on political-economy, foreign policy and issues of national identity).

In talking about Australian values, Howard very deliberately inserted a few lines of praise for the values of what he called 'the old Australia'; which progressives regularly portrayed as backward, racist, sexist and generally unsophisticated.

To the former PM, the Australia he grew up in was a place of decency and virtue. No apologies there.

When it came to the culture wars, John Howard and I never really discussed how to portray 'the left'. The speech for the 50th anniversary of *Quadrant* magazine in 2006 became ridiculously overanalysed as a statement of Howard's supposedly ideological bent. All it did was recount the

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sorry record of the left—at home and abroad—during the Cold War. Our targets included Manning Clark and Doc Evatt's former foreign affairs sven-gali, John Burton. To my amazement, Burton (who I thought was dead) wrote an angry letter to the *Canberra Times* where he attacked the 'fascist' Menzies government and basically substantiated our main charges. Another singular achievement of that speech was having a frustrated David Marr (in a subsequent debate with Gerard Henderson) describe Manning Clark as no more than a fringe academic.

One of the eye-opening things I encountered was the degree to which people who supposedly report national politics didn't pay much attention to what the former prime minister actually said.

The case of indigenous affairs was a good example. Some who did listen, like Noel Pearson, started to better appreciate where John Howard was coming from. This, in turn, helped develop one of the more interesting relationships in the latter part of the Howard years.

I recall once joking with Howard about what a coincidence it was that those who were regarded as 'public intellectuals' in Australia were invariably of the left. We both readily agreed that Noel Pearson was in fact a person who could genuinely be called Australia's leading public intellectual in that his ideas were new, challenging, and confronted the real issues confronting the nation.

Did John Howard have political heroes? To the extent he did, the *Quadrant* speech singled them out as Reagan and Thatcher, together with Pope John Paul II. I don't think he ever looked for heroes though. His appreciation of Reagan certainly grew over time. I think we both thought, however, that Thatcher is in some ways even more

significant given the task she confronted in Britain in the late 1970s.

It's fair to say that by 2007 it became increasingly difficult to 'freshen up' the Howard brand and to gain political traction through speeches. More than once, we pondered how to get people to listen again.

As usual with the former PM, the instinct was to take an issue on directly. With climate change, for example, he decided to challenge the notion that it should be elevated to the 'moral challenge of our time', recognising that the same crowd who ran this line would have spoken about indigenous disadvantage in the same terms the week before.

We tried to highlight the inevitability of trade-offs and sought to make the moral case for economic growth and social mobility—ensuring a bright kid from a disadvantaged background could get ahead—as being just as relevant as ever. For this we were rewarded with the headline in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'PM cool on climate'.

On industrial relations reform also, we tried again to talk in moral terms and to highlight the trade-offs that confront society. As the former Treasury Secretary Ted Evans once said, high unemployment is a choice. Howard's very success—that high unemployment was increasingly remote from peoples' memories—made it harder to establish the links.

To the extent there was a failure of renewal on the part of the former government, I put this down to a combination of two things: first, the Howard Project had reached a natural high tide where it was hard to redefine and extend. Just as importantly, the new generation of Liberals had failed to pick up the mantle and define what post-Howard liberalism would look like.

In the context of speechmaking, perhaps the greatest failing was in

not doing more to connect the Howard Project to the idea of a good society—one characterised by virtual full employment, rising living standards, improving social indicators, increased community involvement in areas like volunteering and broad-based national self-confidence.

Still, for all that it is now understated, the Howard legacy remains substantial. It lives on in a transformed economic landscape—everything from the GST to the rise of a new breed of 'enterprise workers' basically uninterested in union-based collectivism. The Howard years extended Australia's commitment to economic reform through a decade when the politics of reform were both harder in the community and tougher in the parliament. It opened up new horizons of choice for Australians on modest incomes, especially in areas such as health and education.

The Howard legacy is to be found also in a new determination to speak candidly and to act boldly in the teeth of social breakdown. Does anyone seriously believe a Labor leader would have had the guts to launch the NT intervention?

Finally, it resides in a renewed spirit of national self-confidence. Echoing Barack Obama's remark about Ronald Reagan, John Howard 'changed the trajectory' of Australia in a way few prime ministers can claim.

As the former PM said on election night last year (unscripted of course), the Australia he bequeathed to his successor was a 'stronger and prouder and more prosperous country' than it was eleven and a half years before. Notwithstanding the result of last year's election, the silent majority of Australians would doubtless agree with this assessment.

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