

From the Executive Director

John Roskam

John Howard got the big things right. At the domestic level, he understood the importance of responsible economic management. At the international level, he knew that September 11 was an attack not only against the United States—it was an attack against every country that upheld liberal democratic values. He was not afraid to defend those values.

Over the eleven years of his prime ministership what most infuriated his opponents was the fact that he knew what he believed in. Not only this—John Howard also knew that belief in something was possible. This is a possibility denied by the postmodern left—for them belief is impossible, and there's nothing to believe in anyway.

John Howard's belief that human rights had a universal application to everyone, everywhere, all of the time angered the left. For the left, human rights protection is delivered via a mandate from the United Nations. If only the left concerned itself with what was occurring in remote indigenous communities in central Australia as much as it worried about what was happening in New York.

The Coalition's Northern Territory intervention was dramatic, sudden, and heavy-handed. The intervention was based on the premise that the life chances of a black child should be no different from the life chances of a white child. Howard viewed all of the discussion around 'culture' and 'tradition' for what it was in reality—an excuse for inaction.

We won't know the outcome of the Iraq invasion for years, if not decades. Into the future Iraq will most likely define the way history treats John Howard, Tony Blair, and George W Bush. The political reasons why Australia supported the invasion were complex and varied. Howard's personal reasons for the invasion came closest to those of Blair—although Howard never expressed them as eloquently as did Blair. For Howard and Blair if a people could be freed from totalitarian oppression they should be.

John Howard had a faith in the Australian people. He didn't talk down to them, he didn't preach to them, and he didn't take them for granted. Certainly he had assumptions about the Australian people—and it's true that some of those assumptions were grounded in his early life experiences. His affection for cricket was just a little bit fey—but he didn't think less of anyone because they didn't like cricket as much as he did. When Howard said that Australia was the best country in the world he meant it. When Menzies, Whitlam, and Keating finished in politics the first thing they did was head off overseas. It's difficult to imagine that Howard will follow them.

In his concession speech on the evening of the federal election result John Howard spoke of Australia being a more confident nation than when he came into office. His analysis was correct. While it is doubtful whether government itself can make people more confident, it is true that the decisions of government can make people less confident. One of Howard's achievements was to give people the chance to regain their own confidence. Individuals can only confront change with confidence if they and their families are economically secure.

This is John Howard's legacy.

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