

Howard's blueprint has hardly changed

November 23, 2012

Opinion

Nigel Bowen

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Five years ago, on November 24, the government changed, but the country didn't. Not nearly as much as people either hoped or feared it would, after John Howard anyway. Post-Howard politics has largely turned out to be the continuation of the Howard era by other means. Lazarus, it seems, just won't lie down and die.

Like his predecessor, Howard was given to warning his more fickle supporters that when you changed the government you changed the country.

As admonitions go, it seems uncontested; no one doubts Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke, Paul Keating or Howard himself imposed their vision on the nation they were elected to lead. But Keating and Howard have been proven wrong. Given the rosy glow of nostalgia enveloping what Tony Abbott now refers to as the golden age of the previous Liberal government, it was Howard first, daylight second when Essential Media Communications ran a poll on Australia's best prime minister earlier this year. It's worth recalling though just how over Howard most of us were by the end of his 11-year reign.

The electorate embraced Kevin Rudd from the moment he rolled the hapless Kim Beazley. Rudd was 10 points ahead of Howard as preferred prime minister throughout 2007 and at one point took the Labor Party to a 69-31 lead in the two-party preferred rating. Relations between Howard and mainstream Australia had cooled to such an extent that he even made a last-minute offer, albeit half-hearted and highly conditional, to stand aside in favour of his long-frustrated deputy Peter Costello.

As the nation's second-longest serving prime minister wrote in his best-selling 2010 autobiography *Lazarus Rising*, "The mood of the electorate in November 2007 was akin to that of a reader who had reached the end of an interesting, but rather long, book. He puts it aside satisfied with what he has read, but in the mood for something different."

Even back then, the electorate didn't want anything radically different; Rudd marketed himself as Howard 2.0, a church-going family man and economic conservative. Nonetheless, in those heady early months when the Kyoto Protocol was signed, an apology to the stolen generations given, and members of the nation's creative class - frequently dismissed as self-appointed cultural dieticians by Howard - invited to help formulate government policy at the 2020 summit, some on the long-dispirited left dared to dream Rudd could in fact turn out to be Whitlam 2.0. Howard's not insubstantial collection of critics - none more obsessive than Keating - pronounced themselves vindicated at long last. Even the Liberal Party seemed to be distancing itself from Howard by opting for Brendan Nelson, then Malcolm Turnbull, two moderates whose leadership styles couldn't have been more different than Howard's sober suburban solicitor persona.

The subsequent misfortunes of Rudd, Julia Gillard, Nelson and Turnbull do not need recounting here. Suffice to say, in contrast to his successors, Howard casts a mighty shadow across Australian politics five years after being unceremoniously expunged from Parliament. Labor has done little more than tinker at the edges of Howard's initiatives when it comes to health, welfare, indigenous and foreign policy. On refugees, it has gone back to his "Pacific solution". A carbon tax is in place but an emissions trading scheme would have long ago been implemented had Howard been re-elected. And, had he remained in office, it's not hard to imagine Howard backing schemes similar to the national broadband network and national disability insurance.

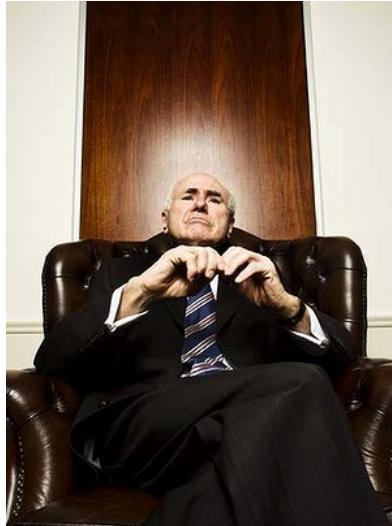
If, barring the odd mining super profits tax here and cut in defence spending there, so little of Howard's policy architecture has been dismantled two elections later, it's probably because the electorate is relaxed and comfortable about keeping the country as he arranged it; something that hasn't escaped the attention of the political class.

Howard's greatest achievement may be that, like Margaret Thatcher, he transformed not one political party but two. Certainly, as the next election approaches, the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader, as well as their only viable replacements, will be studying the Howard playbook intently.

Gillard will be hoping her Howard-esque indefatigability, unpretentiousness, and social conservatism on issues such as gay marriage, will win over middle Australia. Abbott will continue to soothingly promise to end the chaotic interregnum and recreate the stable government his old boss led. Rudd and Turnbull, if they are ever to experience their own Lazarus-with-a-triple-bypass resurrections as hinted at this week, will need to convince colleagues that, like the master, they've developed some people skills during their spell in the wilderness. Whoever ends up contesting and winning the next election, Howard can take comfort in the knowledge the times have not yet ceased to suit him.

Nigel Bowen is a freelance journalist.

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"Lazarus, it seems, just won't lie down and die". Photo: Nic Walker

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»And education, never ever forget education. Labor has earnestly protected Howard's school funding and school chaplains, to the extent of rushing through emergency legislation and emergency funding to bypass the High Court decision on the latter. «

»When Gillard grovelled to Charles and Camilla in Canberra just two Saturdays ago, Howard could almost have written her speech for her. 'The crimson thread of kinship', etc.«

»«

Stephen | November 23, 2012, 8:48AM

“ »«

»Didn't the new PM make a public apology to the Stolen Generation? That alone makes the incoming PM the polar opposite of Howard. He would have choked on that.«

»«

Caffettiera Moka | Sector 7-G November 23, 2012, 9:14AM

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»Symbolism without much follow through.«

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Ben Pensant | Sydney November 23, 2012, 10:08AM

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»"Polar opposite"? Hardly. Howard opposed making symbolic gestures to indigenous people because he was afraid they would lead to increased pressure to make material gestures. Rudd made the symbolic gesture as a way to distract attention from the material continuation of Howard's policies. So, it's a difference, but at the margins.«

»Nigel Bowen is correct - Howard still rules Australia from retirement. Only on industrial relations has he suffered a significant defeat, but even then not to the extent widely believed. The "Fair" Work Act kept 90 percent of what Work Choices legislated, as any active trade unionist could attest.«

»If you want to undo the evil of the Howard years, you need to look far beyond the ALP - and far beyond Parliamentary politics, too. We need a labour movement re-built from the ground up, on the basis of direct democracy, and opposed to all political parties. We need to be able to take on, not just the government of the day, but the capitalist class which sits behind it and issues its instructions via both the mass media and behind closed doors. We need to build a movement of the working class, not just in itself, but for itself.«

»THAT would be the polar opposite of John Howard's politics.«

»«

Greg Platt | Brunswick November 23, 2012, 10:20AM

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»I was in Melbourne's Fed Square when Rudd's speech was broadcast and the reaction was dramatic. I saw adults, young and old - including blokes - in tears, strangers embracing each other, and people cheering and applauding. It was not a symbolic moment because the feeling in the Square was genuine. Sadly, yes, the "follow-through" has yet to materialize.«

»«

Max Gross | Sapphire Coast November 23, 2012, 10:35AM

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»What do we have to apologise for? A country that we built, with our own hands, so good that people actually want to come here and live off our hard-earned cash? The industry, culture and technology of Western civilisation?«

»«

David V. | Sydney November 23, 2012, 10:37AM

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»David V. you obviously never had your children kidnapped by the State or family members shot by whitefellas.«

»«

Max Gross | Sapphire Coast November 23, 2012, 10:49AM

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»*David V, I agree, it's a great country we have here. Much to be proud of.*«

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