

Australia's Bob Hawke: Misunderstood in Memoriam

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*What a cheeky way of going. Death is rarely a matter of good timing but it can be part of a good career move or, as **Robert J. Hawke's** passing might prove, the perfect conclusion to his political party's attempt to reclaim office. Having shuffled off his mortal coil a few days out of an Australian federal election, his Labor counterparts will hope so.*

At a time when Australian politics suffers from dull atrophy and an entrenched dreariness, Hawke, virtue and vice, seems nostalgically stellar. He cried on public occasions; he bellowed at his opponents with fury; and was fundamentally vulnerable to the usual failings: drink and women. He wore his errors and his broken promises (with notable exceptions, particularly towards his treasurer and ultimate usurper, Paul Keating), lending himself to a whole assortment of descriptions.

Rather gratingly, the term [larrikin is being used](#), or misused, in describing Australia's twenty-third prime minister. Originating in the Australia of the 19th and early 20th century, the word was hardly flattering, alluding to the hooliganism and violence of youths who came together in "pushes" and wrought mayhem upon the citizens of Melbourne and Sydney. The taming, and domestication of the larrikin was an Australian historical achievement. Urbanised and turned to sporting mania, Australian society vanquished the larrikin, only to see the form re-appear in hologram form and shoddy cultural analysis.

Hawke was careful of his image, nursing and adjusting it for the negotiating muscle needed for the worker's movement. His stint at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar minted him as candidate for the political establishment, a Commonwealth man, if you will. Not that he would mention it. Stress was placed, instead, on the macho, the Herculean: Hawke could drink you under the table and down a yard glass in record time. As he remembered, revealingly enough, in his autobiography, "The feat was to endear me to some of my fellow Australians more than anything else I ever achieved." In 1954, he made it into the Guinness Book of Records downing 2.5 pints of beer in 11 seconds.

He became an exaggeration of the common man with gifts, the everyday man with other worldly talents. But many of his instincts were standard political attributes: vanity, a lust for power, a desire for the top position. As the Labor government of Gough Whitlam shuddered through its short burst of occupancy between 1972 and 1975, Hawke was having meetings with US embassy sources.

This was hardly accidental. He smelled trouble, and wanted to put his oar in; with Whitlam's days numbered, Hawke sowed the seeds of confidence: any future Labor leader, namely himself, would be more accommodating to Washington. Embassy officials, and a few US intelligence personnel, had gotten edgy over Whitlam's concerns with the US-Australian

alliance in various respects. Fears were floated that the leasing arrangements of the joint [Pine Gap facility](#) might not be renewed; the Nixon administration also [pondered](#) the prospect of downgrading its relationship with Canberra. US embassy accounts, revealed through cables available via WikiLeaks, show Hawke, then the federal president of the ALP, keen to rubbish his doomed prime minister.

In a cable dated August 12, 1975, Hawke's agitation is clear. Whitlam had left the party in "bad financial shape"; credibility had been "eroded by 'Whitlam stupidity'." The prime minister was deluded, incapable of appreciating the imminent "parliamentary disaster" he and his party "surely faces at the next election". Subsequent [embassy cables noted](#) the tense relations between the two men, with Whitlam seen as the dreamer before the apocalypse, and Hawke, the level headed realist in waiting.

When it became clear in the early 1980s that the Liberal Party's Malcolm Fraser was winding down his government for the fall, Hawke saw his chance: the opposition Labor Party, nurtured by then leader Bill Hayden, would have to make way for him. This was bruising to Hayden – Hawke had only been a member of Parliament for three years; Hayden was a tried, loyal veteran. It also showed the other side of Hawke avoided, and forgotten in the tear-watered eulogies: Hawke as brute and political slayer. While Labor's return to power in 1983 after being banished in the crushing election defeat of December 1975 was seen as a glowing achievement, a memorable remark by Hayden remains: even a drover's dog could have won that election.

Yet for a person described by punters as "a voice for the working man", Hawke saw Labor go along the way of its equivalents in other countries: embrace neo-liberal canons, the sawdust of micro-economic reform, and succumb to the temptations of privatisation. Selling the public silver had one fundamental trickledown: governments at every level in Australia began doing it to balance the books and grab some ruddy cash.

The floating of the dollar, the cutting of tariffs, and the deregulation of the stodgy Australian banking system signalled the yielding of government responsibility to the irresponsibility of the corporate boardroom. The commonweal would be tied to the corporation. As this was happening, Hawke was attempting to boost the social welfare state, marked by universal health care, and encourage an accommodation between the interests of business and labour, in what became known formally as the Prices and Incomes Accord. Consensus, not bludgeoning, was the solution.

With the body still warm, Australian politicians from across political affiliations have been reflecting. "He was true to his beliefs in the Labor tradition and defined the politics of his generation and beyond," [claimed](#) the conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison rather blandly.

Prime Ministerial aspirant Bill Shorten [spoke](#) of the saluting, by the labour movement, of "our greatest son". "The Australian people loved Bob because they knew Bob loved them." But it was in Hawke's collaborator, rival and foe Keating, that we get one of the better reflections of Hawke's stewardship in political life. The Hawke-Keating partnership of the 1980s is seen as one of farsightedness mixed with stab-in-the-dark modernisation. Keating [recounted](#) "the rationale we employed in opening Australia to the world." Less than a larrikin, Hawke was an all-seeing politician and gifted performer, a ventriloquist of the Australian mood. He could be consummately venal when he wanted to be and tenacious in what he thought was realism. It came with its far-reaching consequences.

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