Evaluating the extent of John Howard's political genius

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Abstract:
Opinion on the sources of the Howard government's political success remains polarised. Some see political genius operating: ruthless pragmatism and a centrally controlled, disciplined machine permanently in campaign mode. Others see only sheer luck - a prime minister and government that would have been short-lived and little remembered were it not for the September 11 attacks and the MV Tampa episodes as the 2001 election drew near. We argue that Howard has had his share of good and bad luck, but has also shown high levels of discipline and political learning. He learned the right lessons from his first, unsuccessful leadership period and John Hewson’s 1993 'unloseable election'. He also learned from many early mistakes his government made, including losing a series of ministerial colleagues, and increasing nursing home fees among other policy blunders. More recent policy developments employ a range of political and bureaucratic resources to ensure that the government balances consistent references to the national interest with carefully selected appeals to sectional interests. This is, however, a political balancing act that can quickly become unstuck, leaving Howard or his successor with an exhausted supply of political capital were, for example, new industrial relations laws to test the electorate’s patience.

Introduction
Veteran political commentator Mungo McCallum once wrote that the chronicler of the Howard years would need ‘a strong stomach’ (2004: 73). Mungo was right, but not necessarily for the reasons he intended. John Howard polarises opinion. In attempting to locate John Howard the political leader, we have had to wade through a remarkable amount of vitriolic criticism and ungainly praise. A single, obsequious biography of Howard (Barnett 1997) sits alongside a host of volumes critical of his government (and,
less explicably, half a dozen biographies of failed opposition leader Mark Latham). The extensive criticism of Howard is unsurprising given some of the divisive debates over which he has presided, from waterfront reform to asylum seekers to the war in Iraq. Yet, Howard was a polarising figure long before he became prime minister, and the tumult that surrounds him makes a stark contrast to the mild-mannered image that he cultivates. A decade into his prime ministership, a majority of voters sees Howard as a divisive leader (*The Sydney Morning Herald*. 20 February 2006).

The vitriol surrounding John Howard’s tenure as prime minister plays itself out in the nation’s media on a daily basis. Howard’s cheer squad of conservative newspaper columnists are undeterred by the many compromises he has had to make as prime minister. Right-wingers who admit to their disappointment in Howard’s pragmatism are more likely to be found in obscure think tanks or weblogs than on the front lines of political debate. On the other hand, Howard’s tenure has seen record numbers of prominent citizens declare their shame at being Australian. ‘I have never before been ashamed of my country,’ Fraser government minister Peter Baume told *The Australian* in early 2006. ‘Now I am.’ (17 January). Strangely, many of these newly-ashamed people lived through the White Australia Policy, the stolen generations, and the Fraser government’s recognition of Indonesia’s genocidal occupation of East Timor. It took John Howard’s prime ministership to move them to express their shame of their country. Clearly, for small ‘l’ liberals, John Howard’s triumph offended their sense of progress. Progressives believed that Australia had moved beyond the racism of its foundation. How does a leader stuck in what Donald Horne called the ‘Dreamtime Fifties’ (2001: 2) win elections today? Unsurprisingly, theories of Howard’s electoral success are as polarised as any other aspect of his administration.

**Political Leadership**

For Robert Tucker (1987: 15), political leadership is the act of giving direction to a group or community. Blondel (1987: 25) sees political leadership as consisting of actions designed to modify the environment. By these measures, leadership is not so much a journey as a changing of the social and political landscape for which leaders are the overseers and instigators. Yet, conservative prime ministers, in particular, tend to be
measured by their electoral success rather than their legislative achievements. Leadership can still be measured by the attainment of goals, but the goals of conservative and progressive leaders differ quite markedly. After his fourth consecutive election victory, the polarisation of opinion about John Howard took an interesting turn. Words like legacy, history and greatness were suddenly employed to describe a man who had plumbed the depths of Australian political life earlier in his career. Opinion was no less polarised than before on the sources of Howard’s success as a political leader, but there was a sense that Howard was now a significant prime minister. Rhetoric surrounding the prime minister gained the added significance of helping to shape the way the nation would perceive an important actor in Australian political life.

Analysis of political leadership tends, as Ronald Heifetz observed, to arouse passion (1996: 13). It can be deeply subjective. All too often, leaders are judged by the virtue of their intended goals and the nature of their promises, rather than their delivery. Howard is not the first Australian prime minister to polarise elite opinion, but he has polarised it in an interesting way. In this paper, we illustrate the range of analysis about Howard’s leadership skills, including that from both supporters and critics. We divide these views into those centred on luck as a determining factor, and those emphasising political skill. It is worthwhile considering the role that luck can play in our perceptions of political success. For that reason, we highlight an important turning point in the Howard government’s tenure, the events leading up to the 2001 election. On the other hand, analysis of a prime minister seemingly dominant in his fourth term in office, particularly analysis which posits political skill as an important variable, tends to gloss over the various errors and scandals that are inevitable in any government. We examine a number of serious errors of political judgement made by Howard as a leader, and discuss the way in which he has learned from those errors and changed the way he goes about policy-making as a result.

We argue that it is crucial to reflect on some of those errors (more so than moments of luck or election victories) because it is often the lessons that political actors take from such episodes that are the true markers of political leadership. We offer our own analysis of Howard’s strengths and weaknesses as a leader. Howard’s strengths include pragmatism and an ability to learn from past mistakes. Howard is also adept at reading
the mood of the electorate and he uses opinion polling to assist with this practice. Although important, due to word limit restrictions these strengths are not the subject of this paper. Perhaps Howard’s greatest strength as prime minister has been discipline. This strength manifests itself in a number of areas. The discipline of Howard’s ministry and his mastery over his backbench has been much remarked upon. It is also present in his personal habits, such as the regularity and intensity of his early morning exercise. When combined with his ability to learn from his many mistakes and compensate for his many weaknesses, Howard’s discipline has been his strongest contrast with most of the Labor leaders he has defeated.

**Strengths**

John Howard’s discipline is his greatest political quality, and one that earns him the respect of the electorate and even his opponents. It wasn’t always a hallmark of his leadership, however. Howard’s greatest piece of luck was losing the 1987 election. At that time his weaknesses as a political leader likely outweighed his strengths. On a range of issues, Howard had yet to show the pragmatism that would be the hallmark of his prime ministership. For example, Howard learned from the controversy surrounding his comments on Asian immigration to moderate his political rhetoric. Most importantly, though, he persevered. You can only be in the right place at the right time in politics if you don’t quit before your time arrives. Few leaders would have suffered the blows from his own side of politics that Howard did, and stick around for more. His perseverance does not necessarily come from some great moral strength. Howard’s simple love of politics before all else other than his family (and possibly cricket) ensured that he battled on. He didn’t have the interest to succeed in the private sector. This attribute will also militate against his retirement from the prime ministership. He has few disincentives to keep on keeping on. His carefully crafted line that ‘[i]f the Australian people do me the honour of returning my Government, I will go on serving in that position for as long as my party wants me to’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 2004), may well prove to be true.

Winning the 1996 election seems like a cakewalk from this distance. We need to remember, however, the eulogies for the Liberal Party that were published after the 1993
election. Before Howard replaced Downer in the leadership in 1995, the Coalition was trailing the ALP in the polls. The January 1995 Newspoll, a matter of days before Howard replaced Downer in the leadership, showed the Coalition primary vote at 40 percent while the ALP primary vote was at 46 percent (Newspoll Market Research, 2005). Howard showed enormous discipline throughout 1995 in keeping the focus on the government with his ‘five minutes of economic sunshine’ mantra. His supposedly small target strategy included a proposal to sell one third of Telstra, hardly the smallest of platforms for an opposition. Howard knew that privatisation was not popular, but that Labor’s attempts to attack that policy would lack credibility given their privatisation of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank.

The most important role for a conservative leader is to make judgements about which shibboleths to discard, which to embrace, and which to politely ignore. The next conservative leader will pick and choose what to keep and what to throw away from the burst of social reform that will inevitably follow Howard’s exit. If conservatives are masters of anything, it is the strategic retreat. Howard’s reluctance to engage issues such as abortion and multiculturalism in the way some of his right wing supporters would have liked is typical conservative strategy. This is wedge politics in reverse, burying issues that might divide your own party.

It is here that our interest in the prime minister lies: Pinning down the real John Howard somewhere between the ideologue and the pragmatist, as well as between the conviction politician and the opportunist. After all, it took five election losses for the Liberal Party to concede that Medicare was popular with the Australian public. Howard’s politics are much more complicated than the oft-cited liberalism in the economic sphere and conservatism in the social sphere. The two spheres aren’t so easily separated – hence the Liberal Party factional system built around personalities rather than ideas. Howard is certainly an ideologue, but not a pro-market ideologue. He is a creature of the Liberal Party, not a creature of right-wing think tanks, steeped in anti-Labor politics rather than conservative thought. He has pursued his economic ideology furthest where it coincides with Liberal Party interests in undermining ALP support bases. Telstra privatisation, outsourcing of the functions of the former Commonwealth Employment Service, and industrial relations reform fall into this category. Thus, public sector unions have been
weakened without depriving the government of the electoral benefits of government largesse.

Howard’s discipline and attention to detail make him the perfect leader in the perpetual campaigns in which modern politics is fought (Mann and Ornstein 2000). Through his private office and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Howard keeps tabs on activities across his government. His centralist style of administration, both within his party and ministry, and with respect to Commonwealth-State relations, puts the onus on Howard to appear well briefed in public on an enormous variety of issues.

The remarkable discipline in the Coalition party room over the decade of Howard’s administration can partly be accredited to the leader’s renowned carrot and stick approach to executive promotion. Less publicised is Howard’s willingness to give a hearing to all points of view. In interview, Victorian MHR Petro Georgiou indicated that John Howard’s manner in party room discussions is courteous and open to various points of view. He identified Howard’s controlled manner as one of his strengths when interacting with colleagues. This is an interesting observation from one of the senior moderate figures inside the parliamentary Liberal Party. At least in the media, hostility between Georgiou and Howard is much talked about. Georgiou indicated he certainly doesn’t always see eye to eye with the prime minister on certain issues, but he has a very high respect for Howard’s approach to party room discussions.

It is the perception of his determination and strength that allows Howard to score relatively high popular approval ratings in spite of his pursuit of unpopular policies such as privatisation, deploying troops to Iraq and industrial relations. While never as popular as a charismatic figure such as Bob Hawke, Howard’s approval rating has been more enduring. After ten years as Prime Minister, and in the middle of a damaging inquiry into the Australian Wheat Board’s dealings with Saddam Hussein, Howard’s personal approval ratings were as high as ever.

Weaknesses
Howard’s weaknesses as a political leader are closely related to his strengths. The line between discipline and stubbornness can be a thin one. For example, after losing so many ministers due to various indiscretions in his first term, Howard clearly decided that his ministerial code of conduct was proving to be too disruptive of his government. However, political learning that succeeded in stemming the disruptions to the government that continual ministerial scandals had provided has become stubbornness in refusing to sack ministers unless their actions were directly brought into question. After losing too many ministers in his first term for trivial offences, ministers now tend to be like limpets, making a mockery of the concept of ministerial responsibility. Howard learns on the job, but he hasn’t learned everything.

Political learning was important to Howard because he had a lot to learn about the limits of Australian politics. Howard’s use of political and economic ideas was an important part of his campaign for the leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1980s. His pursuit of those ideas helped make him the unofficial leader of the economic ‘dries’. Whatever their value inside the party, however, Howard has had a number of problems making his favoured ideas work in electoral contests. Both his social conservatism and economic liberalism caused upset to important key sections of society at various times of his career. His comments on Asian immigration in 1988, the decision to turn around boats carrying asylum seekers, his refusal to allow parliament to apologise to the stolen generations, and his denial that Australia has underlying racism all cause disquiet among the media and university educated middle classes. Speaking on the Cronulla riots of late 2005 Howard said: ‘I do not accept there is underlying racism in this country’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 12 December 2005).

On the other hand, Howard’s approach to privatisation and industrial relations undermines his support among the ‘battlers’ upon whom he relies for his election victories. The sum total of Howard’s pragmatism, in spending billions of dollars on election promises and making expensive compromises to push through legislation such as Telstra privatisation, has been high levels of taxation and government spending. Simon Crean’s single contribution to political debate was to label the Howard government the highest taxing government in Australia’s history. This fact will ultimately prove to be a disappointment to many of his supporters, and probably a point of difference for future
leadership aspirants, regardless of how many elections he manages to win. Clearly, however, his ability to calibrate his political messages has improved over time, regardless of criticism from those he considers elites. He can deflect concerns about his credentials as an economic reformer by pointing to his record of privatisation and tax reform, and point to record number of Muslim immigrants as proof of his racial tolerance.

We need to assess, though, how much of Howard’s political discipline has arisen from political necessity, most notably a Senate minority for the first time in his prime ministership, and how much is Howard’s expert judgement. The government majority in the Senate from 1 July 2005 may reveal the answer, as Howard from that point enjoyed the freedom to legislate almost as he pleased, with an eye only to the next election, and perhaps to posterity. For example, neither the $50 million advertising campaign nor continual appeals to the national economic interest could convince the electorate that Howard’s most famous ideological axe – deregulation of the industrial relations system – was a good idea. It is here that Howard may have found the limit of his ability to earn public respect as a ‘battler’ by championing unpopular policies. All governments lose office eventually because their unpopular policies are, well, unpopular.

Conclusion

Change the government, change the country, Paul Keating warned us in 1996. Yet, multiple election victories don’t necessarily presage great changes in national sentiment.

It may be that Howard’s legislative legacy may be eclipsed in short order once he steps aside from the country’s leadership. Such is the fate of conservative leaders, even very successful ones. An ageing Howard is less fearful of defeat. Robb indicated that in 2001 he thought Howard feared losing – going down following the introduction of the GST. Robb didn’t think Howard feared defeat in 1998. Rather, he faced it head on with all his fighting qualities to get the GST through. But failure in 2001 would have devastated Howard, because he would have left his party out of power in every state and territory as well as at the national level.

John Howard is everything his supporters and critics say he is, and more, and less. He has had his share of luck, and shown moments of tactical genius. He is both a zealot and an arch-pragmatist. Howard is all of these things at different times. The balancing act,
however, has not always been carried off with perfection. He has also made a lot of mistakes, and shown clearly that he learned from the consequences. His most important strength is his determination, yet even that strength poses its own problems when it ‘morphs’ into stubbornness.

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Footnotes

\(^1\) For example, Chris Puplick’s (1994) _Is the Party Over?_ (Melbourne, Text).