

Australia: Why the Howard government has remained in office for 10 years

By Laura Tiernan
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For masses of ordinary Australians, the 10th anniversary of the Howard government, celebrated this month by the Liberal-National coalition, has doubtless been met with a combination of anger, exasperation and disgust as well as complete disinterest. But such sentiments have found barely a reflection in the corporate news media's sycophantic columns, op-ed pieces and anniversary retrospectives.

The Howard government's nervousness about the occasion has been expressed in the muted character of its celebrations, with the PM warning his ministers to eschew extravagance and hubris. An element of spin has certainly been at work. But the subdued dress and demeanour of Liberal MPs, staffers and their corporate backers when they assembled at parliament's Great Hall on the evening of March 2, presented a stark contrast to the halcyon days of the 1980s, when the Hawke-Keating Labor leaders ostentatiously flaunted their pro-business agenda, rubbing shoulders at opulent black-tie dinners with the likes of Alan Bond, Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch.

"The sky looks reasonably blue at the moment," the prime minister told Kerry O'Brien during an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30 Report", "but it can cloud over. You can have a southerly change very, very quickly."

Howard is acutely conscious that on any number of fronts—rising global interest rates and the end of a decade-long property boom; a fall in primary exports to China; the ongoing decline of Australia's manufacturing sector and rising unemployment; rifts with the US over foreign policy direction—his government's fortunes can suffer an abrupt turn.

Any examination of these mounting contradictions, however, has evidently been off limits for the Australian media, with Howard universally hailed as a political giant. The anniversary became cause for a week of universal genuflection and deference: "Meet the Howards" ran the cover of the *Bulletin* magazine, with a homely picture of Howard and his wife Janette. "Critics left clueless as Howard hits his stride," wrote Piers Ackerman in the *Daily*

Telegraph, while Laurie Oakes, the Nine television network's political commentator, contributed "from an ungainly politician to a giant among leaders."

On the ABC's "7.30 Report" the worst kind of hagiography was on display. First, Howard received what amounted to a promotional slot by the program's political editor Michael Brissenden. Not once did Brissenden challenge the many crimes of Howard's government—its participation in the illegal war and occupation of Iraq; the ripping up of basic democratic principles including habeas corpus; the campaign of vilification against Muslims; the brutal treatment and mandatory detention of asylum seekers; acquiescence in the despatch of citizens—including Australians David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, to torture facilities like Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; support for the death penalty against young victims of the drug trade in Singapore and Indonesia; growing poverty and inequality; the destruction of working conditions; constant lies about the fraudulent "war on terror" and the regular stoking of fears about "terrorism".

The next evening it was Kerry O'Brien's turn. A former Labor staffer, O'Brien has previously come under fire over alleged anti-coalition bias. But a great deal of water has passed under the bridge since then and the program anchor gave Howard a predictably easy run. The new parliament building was the PM's "seemingly impregnable castle," and his successive electoral victories represented "the triumph of a plain man, an ordinary man, who says he's happy to be defined as an 'average Australian' ..."

Notwithstanding these accolades, the more conscious sections of the ruling elite are aware that Howard's policy "success" and his relative longevity, rests squarely with the role played by the "opposition" parties, and most particularly the Labor party.

Gerard Henderson, executive director of the right-wing Sydney Institute and a vocal Howard supporter let the cat out of the bag during an interview on "Lateline" on February 24. Henderson told presenter Maxine McKew that it would be a mistake to exaggerate Howard's role.

“[E]conomic reform started with Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. John Howard and Peter Costello have increased the pace and extended it.”

He continued: “Australia is dramatically different now from what it was 25 years ago, but it’s not dramatically different to what it was 10 years ago. And most of the policies, including the policies that a number of people disagree with John Howard about—industrial relations reform, mandatory detention—they were actually commenced in a different form by Labor. What we’re seeing is a continuity here. Bob Hawke sent the navy to the first Gulf War before the United Nations gave its approval. I mean, a lot of history is smudged here. There’s not such a huge difference.”

Henderson’s observations point to the source of the bi-partisanship, on every substantial issue—including the war on Iraq—that has characterised relations between Labor and Howard’s conservative coalition since 1996.

The dismantling of national economic regulation commenced by Hawke and Keating in 1983 and subsequently “extended” by the Coalition, was not simply the brainchild of the individuals concerned, but a by-product of deep-going processes within world economy. The economic and political upheavals of the 1970s and declining profit rates saw corporations in the major capitalist centres shift production offshore, looking for bigger profits from cheaper sources of raw materials and labour. As a result, every establishment party, whether nominally “right”, “left” or “center”, has been transformed into a political vehicle for implementing the agenda of international competitiveness: fighting to attract global investment by dismantling the conditions of the working class. Thus a yawning chasm has opened between official politics and the sentiments, needs and aspirations of ordinary working people.

In March 1996, mass hostility to Labor’s agenda of “restructuring” and “microeconomic reform” saw the Keating government unceremoniously dumped after 13 years in office. Howard rode to power on the crest of the largest anti-Labor vote since 1929. His government simply stepped into a political vacuum created by Labor’s collapse, appealing to “the battlers”, winning support in previous ALP heartlands and installing, to borrow a phrase from Karl Marx, a “grotesque mediocrity” in Kirribilli House, the prime ministerial residence.

Since then, the alienation and disgust felt by wide layers of the population toward the entire parliamentary apparatus has only grown. Anti-market sentiment has been augmented by opposition to the war on Iraq and to the government’s brutal treatment of refugees. As a result, Howard’s 10 years in office have been dominated by almost permanent crisis.

From August 1996, when his first budget was met with

furious protests and the storming of parliament house, the PM has walked a tightrope. In the late 1990s, growing hostility towards the government was reflected in the rise of the far right, populist Pauline Hanson and her One Nation party. A string of election defeats for the Coalition parties at both state and local level has reduced them to insignificant rumps in virtually every state.

And Labor’s plight is even worse. Its primary vote in federal elections has fallen from half of all voters in 1983 to just one in three today. At the same time, the Democrats, which previously served as a safety valve for the two-party system, have disintegrated, following their support for the regressive Goods and Services Tax, while the Greens have failed to make any substantial or lasting gains, reflecting their continuing collaboration with government policy.

Underscoring the essential role the Greens have played as loyal critics of the present political and social setup, Greens leader Bob Brown marked Howard’s 10th anniversary by telling journalists that, while Howard had fomented fear and insecurity, he, Brown, had nevertheless sent the prime minister a congratulatory card. “I’ll offer him a cup of tea and have offered him a cup of tea in the card I’ve sent and we’ll see. I’ll keep him a piece of chocolate cake.” Opposition leader Kim Beazley was just as accommodating, telling Matt Peacock on the “7.30 Report”: “... one thing you acknowledge is persistence. What I take and learn from John Howard is pursue your core views, make them salient in politics.”

The occasion of Howard’s 10th anniversary has served to reveal the advanced state of decay of the entire political system. The reaction of the media and the so-called opposition parties demonstrates the real basis of Howard’s longevity: the absence of any alternative within the framework of official politics. The deep-seated opposition among working people to the present state of affairs can be taken forward only on the basis of an alternative socialist and internationalist program and strategy—one that challenges the very foundations of the profit system itself.

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