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The Hawke Legacy
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*Gerry Bloustien*
*Barbara Comber*
*Alison Mackinnon*
Introduction

Gerry Bloustien, Alison Mackinnon
and Barbara Comber

This collection offers a timely look at the legacy of the Hawke era (1983–1991). As the Rudd Labor government considers its policies and directions, it is appropriate to consider the important lessons from history that might inform the present. The authors engage in a retrospective consideration of what was attempted and achieved by the Hawke government with the benefit of hindsight, considering ‘what have we learned?’, ‘what we have gained?’ and ‘where are we now?’ The collection represents the views of some of Australia’s leading scholars who reflect on the legacy of the Hawke era from a variety of disciplinary and activist perspectives at this key junction in Australia’s political history.

Bob Hawke, the man

Who is the man, Robert James Lee (Bob) Hawke, AC and whence comes such a legacy? Born 9 December 1929, Bob Hawke was Australia’s twenty-third prime minister and he became the longest-serving Australian Labor Party prime minister. He led his party to four federal electoral victories in 1983, 1984, 1987 and 1990.

Born in Bordertown, South Australia, where his father was the Congregational minister, Hawke spent his early years in the country and suburban life in South Australia and then Perth. His uncle, Albert Hawke, an active member of the Labor Party during Bob’s early life, became his political mentor and influenced his own attraction to and membership of the party at age seventeen.
He was by all accounts an excellent and popular student, achieving highly at the academically prestigious Perth Modern School and going on to graduate in economics and law at the University of Western Australia. In 1953 he was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University where he completed his studies, undertaking a thesis on wage fixing in Australia.

Back in Australia in 1956 he took on a research role for the Australian Council of Trade Unions, and he was elected president of the ACTU in 1969. Hawke was ACTU president for ten years, and he has been acknowledged as being integral to the transforming of wage fixing in Australia and as the system’s best advocate. He developed good relations with unionists but also with his opponents, the employers and government representatives, and this power of negotiation and persuasion, together with his wide national and international networks, were to stand him in good stead in his later political career. Under his stewardship and by his example, the ACTU became heavily involved in international injustices, such as the plight of the ‘refuseniks’, Jewish people unable to get permission to leave the Soviet Union, and the anti-apartheid demonstrations against the tour of the South African Springboks rugby union team.

In 1971, elected to the federal executive of the Australian Labor Party, Bob Hawke’s skills as an effective negotiator, working to resolve industrial disputes through consensus, quickly became his trademark quality. He continued to be active in international labour issues, and in Australia became the most prominent figure in the union movement. He was elected federal president of the Australian Labor Party in 1973, representing the labour movement and the Labor Party on governing and advisory bodies. His belief that trade unions were effective instruments of social reform led him to revitalise the ACTU and widen its scope. A 1975 poll declared him ‘the man most wanted as prime minister’.

Hawke’s move into federal politics occurred in 1980, when he was elected to the safe Labor seat of Wills. Two years later he challenged Bill Hayden’s leadership of the parliamentary Labor Party. Although he lost that bid he had to be taken very seriously as the potential leader who would be most likely to lead the party to victory at the next election. In 1983 Hawke did lead the party to victory in
the March elections, promising to bring about a centralised wage-fixing system and national reconciliation between employers and unions. These themes are clearly still evident in the discussions of his legacy below.

The Hawke legacy

In this collection, we bring together the views of scholars and contemporaries from a range of disciplines including politics, education, history, sociology and anthropology to give their analysis of the Hawke era. The majority of these writers are connected in various ways with the University of South Australia’s Hawke Research Institute and the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre – two bodies established to recognise the Hawke era by educating the public and fostering new collaborative research based on his perspectives and concerns with social justice. The authors, including two former members of the Hawke government, have drawn on their personal knowledge of and access to Bob Hawke and to his papers in the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library.

In 2003 Susan Ryan and Troy Bramston published a retrospective collection on the Hawke government (Ryan and Bramston 2003). They claimed that ‘the period was and remains enormously significant for Australia’ (p. 1). They hoped that through their work the Hawke legacy could ‘form the building blocks for the next Labor government’ (p. 3). Ryan and Bramston wrote during the Howard years, a period characterised by Hawke as ‘not simply the most conservative in our history but, more alarmingly, the most dangerous’ (Hawke 2003, p. vii). Now several years later the election of Kevin Rudd and his Labor government offers new scope to pursue policies akin to those espoused by the Hawke government. It also allows us to reconsider those ‘building blocks’ and revisit the notion that the Hawke era remains significant in the present. There are very differing ideas in our community about the nature of that legacy, as our writers attest. In the midst of global financial turmoil Hawke and Keating’s economic reforms are seen as key to Australia’s relative financial stability: these were reforms that a conservative, even neo-liberal, government could condone and build upon. On the other hand, some argue that the Hawke era reforms to women’s
rights have been consistently eroded by a conservative government, occasioning strong comment from critics and some of the authors in this book. It is not yet clear if those rights will be returned and built upon by the Rudd government, although the large number of progressive women in Cabinet offers hope.

This collection presents a challenge to the Rudd Labor government, and to a prime minister with an approval rate rivalling that of Hawke, to reconsider the Hawke era and to continue its legacy. As our authors note, while much was achieved in the Hawke terms of office there is still much unfinished business. While much of the Hawke legacy stands firm – significant economic reform, groundbreaking legislation in the area of health and equal opportunity, for example – other gains were seriously undermined under the Howard government. In some ways the sheer scope of the challenges facing the Rudd government rival those facing the new Hawke government in March 1983.

Hawke came into office facing formidable economic obstacles. Rudd faces even stronger economic challenges. Hawke confronted challenging foreign policy issues, as does Rudd, not least of which is calibrating relationships with countries such as the United States in accord with Australia’s national interest. And while Hawke put in place major environmental policies, in relation to the Franklin Dam and Antarctica, for example, the Rudd government has to deal with the looming threat of climate change and the very real disaster of the destruction of the Murray-Darling Basin ecosystem.

The editors of this collection are all involved with the Hawke Research Institute at the University of South Australia, which is the research arm of the Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre. They sought to bring together key researchers in a volume that would reassess the period as outlined above. A workshop was held with many contributors, including two members of the Hawke government who have had continuing involvement with the Hawke Research Institute and the Hawke Library at the University of South Australia – and the rest, as they say, is history. The editors see it as history for not only a new government but for the next generation for whom the Hawke era, indeed anything before the Howard era, is the dim dusty past.

The collection is organised around four main areas for which the Hawke era is renowned in terms of policy action and change:
Consensus and governance; equity, education and inclusion; health, housing and the environment; and the economy and work.

Consensus and governance
The first section deals with the way in which Hawke governed, his well-known emphasis on consensus, and his acknowledged ability to bring differing groups to the negotiating table. Carol Johnson, a widely published author on political matters, dissects Hawke’s distinctive style and sees his ability to overcome the divisiveness of the previous years as a key element in achieving change. That success, she argues, was in combining social democracy with the emerging neo-liberalism and its support for market-driven economies. She makes a strong case for Labor’s innovativeness, arguing that ‘long before Blair’s Third Way or Gerhard Schroeder’s “Neue Mitte” in Germany, Australian Labor governments were trying to find a way between extreme neo-liberalism and old-style Keynesian welfare liberalism’. Johnson’s claims are supported in the following chapter, an interview with Bob Hawke by Pal Ahluwalia and Greg McCarthy. Ahluwalia and McCarthy characterise Hawke’s politics as ‘the politics of intimacy’, arguing that Hawke’s ‘particular form of political and populist sentimentality links intimacy to a shared narrative of equality … vital in producing … a national-popular collective will’.

The interview is striking as it allows Hawke, as he approaches his eightieth birthday, to reflect on his achievements and to canvass his current concerns. Hawke is proud of the ‘new conceptual framework’ his government produced linking social democracy with a new economic framework.

In the following chapter Gerry Bloustien talks with Graham Freudenberg, Labor historian and one-time speechwriter for Bob Hawke, who also reflects on Hawke’s achievements. He claims that Hawke’s major achievement was restoring the legitimacy of the Labor Party as a party of government in Australia. That legitimacy had been lost, he argues, through the Cold War and the split in the Labor party over the Vietnam War.

This opening section sets the scene for the chapters that follow, where authors from a wide range of perspectives examine particular policies in detail, testing the strength of the consensus approach –
and the new conceptual framework developed by Hawke and commented on by Johnson and Freudenberg. The reader can also assess the way in which the 'politics of intimacy' and the 'new conceptual framework' manifested themselves in various policy areas.

Equity, education and inclusion
The first five chapters in Section 2 examine particular policies that were concerned in various ways with equity, education and inclusion. These accounts are followed by a personal reminiscence from former Senator Rosemary Crowley, whose lively depictions of life ‘in the corridors’ reminds us that the final product of parliamentary deliberation was often fiercely contested behind the scenes.

Alison Mackinnon opens this section with an overview of equal opportunity from Hawke to Rudd. She argues that significant legislation was put in place under the Hawke government which, drawing on the strength of the 1970s women’s movement and the determination of key ministers, notably Susan Ryan, moved the world forward for women. Many would argue, Mackinnon included, that that legislation was groundbreaking and continues to have a powerful effect: others such as Anne Summers have lamented ‘the end of equality’. Brennan and Reid argue that under Hawke conditions were put in place to achieve legitimacy for a national role in school education, working from a strong ‘needs-based’ equity value position. After the first Hawke term this ‘equity’ position was firmly tied into the economic agenda and federal educational infrastructure, particularly under John Dawkins, which ironically put in place the means by which equity issues could be stripped out of education in the Howard decade.

Brennan and Reid distinguish between the regimes of education ministers Susan Ryan and John Dawkins – the first animated by notions of equity, the second by a more economically focused agenda. The following authors Davey and Ware, writing about a key moment of change in higher education, also make that distinction. They argue that higher education ‘was transformed from small-scale, collegial institutions to a major force in the economic and social life of the country, with an immense increase in the emphasis on student access and equity coupled with a push to strengthen ties to business and industry’.
Both of these education chapters argue that attendance levels, at secondary school and at university, increased enormously during this period, endorsing Hawke’s evident pride, manifest in his interview, in the increase in educational opportunities under his government. The access of women to education also rose significantly, an aspect noted in both education chapters.

Taking further the concern with equity at a time of economic reform was the Hawke government’s approach to Aboriginal affairs ‘progressing the notions of self-management and self-determination by Aboriginal peoples through practical, representative bodies that were able to influence government policy more significantly than Aboriginal voices had ever done before’, as Peter Buckskin writes.

Buckskin claims that, while Hawke was not able to fulfil all his promises to Aboriginal people, he did open a vital new era of listening to Aboriginal representative groups and of taking seriously Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The issue of equity for people of diverse cultural backgrounds is also spelled out by Alan Mayne in his chapter on multicultural Australia. Mayne argues that those responsible for framing the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia in 1987–89 produced ‘a document that would work, that could be a handbook for all governments and all Australians’. Mayne believes that the agenda endures as the cornerstone for social inclusiveness and tolerance in a culturally diverse nation, concluding: ‘It is a credit to Bob Hawke that he initiated, championed and implemented the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.’

The chapters in this section all give credit to the Hawke government for much-needed social reform to further equity and diversity within late twentieth-century Australian society. It is these issues that help maintain the social fabric, which contributes to a sustainable society. Yet, as the chapters also document, there was much unfinished business, presenting challenges for a new twenty-first-century Labor government.

Health, housing and the environment
In Section 3 we also hear accounts of policy successes and a sense of unfinished business. Donato outlines the steps by which Medicare, a system of compulsory, national health insurance, came to be accepted
on both sides of the Australian political divide, arguing that what was put in place by the Hawke government was eventually accepted by the Coalition in the 1996 election. Yet problems remain; there is business still to be attended to. Specifically Donato mentions ‘the complex division of powers and patterns of joint involvement in the funding, provision and regulation of healthcare services between Commonwealth and state governments’.

Brian Howe, formerly Minister assisting the Prime Minister on Federal–State Relations and Minister for Social Security in the Hawke government, and later Housing Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the Keating government, gives both an insider glimpse and an academic coverage of the problems faced by the Hawke government in its determination to improve housing affordability as part of the social wage. Howe notes the innovative formation of COAG and credits Hawke with providing the vehicle for making housing reform part of a national agenda. More, however, remains for the Rudd government to do to increase housing affordability.

While much more also remains to be done in environmental policy and practices, Joan Staples reminds us of the considerable progress made by the Hawke government, particularly during Environment Minister Graham Richardson’s term of office. Staples, herself an Australian Conservation Foundation national liaison officer in that period, points out that most of the significant environmental decisions of the Hawke era were made during Richardson’s three-year term. Indeed in 1989, Environment Minister Graham Richardson took a submission to Cabinet for a 20 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2005. This did not happen. It is interesting to speculate where Australia would be in international leadership on environmental matters had that submission been adopted.

The economy, work and industrial relations
In Section 4 we turn to the changes for which the Hawke government is most commonly invoked today: changes in the economy and industrial relations. Martin Shanahan’s chapter provides ‘a brief overview of the major economic policy changes initiated under the Hawke government, and emphasises the change in economic thinking that became accepted during this time’. As Shanahan
remarks, changes that now seem inevitable were not so at the time and required considerable courage and negotiating skills such as those Hawke exhibited in the Accord. The shift to a more market-oriented economy through such mechanisms as floating the exchange rate, taxation reform, trade and financial reform, and restructuring key institutions did not come easily.

Barbara Pocock focuses on issues of employment and industrial change. She also looks closely at the Accord, that centrepiece of consensus, whose ‘merits for different classes of interests are contested, [but] there can be no doubt of its political success in allowing the Hawke government to exercise considerable power in restraining wage growth and significantly reshape social policy, not least the health system’. Pocock outlines the transformation of employment during the Hawke years, including the growth of part-time and casual jobs, the increasing participation of women and ironically, given Hawke’s background, the decline of unions.

Rhonda Sharp’s chapter on the superannuation revolution argues that, ‘during the thirteen-year era of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, Australia’s retirement incomes system was transformed through the establishment of a private occupational superannuation funds industry’. Sharp traces the development of superannuation within Labor’s economic policy framework. She concludes that, while mandated occupation-based superannuation could be claimed as a policy revolution, ‘its privatised, occupational nature makes it a mechanism … for extending gender, class and race disparities to the aged population’.

Suzanne Franzway considers Hawke’s role on the international stage as a union leader, claiming that his strong union leadership also paralleled a period when women gained a stronger place in unions. Hawke was a member of the ILO Governing Body (1972–80) during his time as ACTU president and worked to build Australia’s links with the international trade union movement. Franzway argues that the increasingly important place of women in the trade union movement in Australia is aligned with the political legacy of Bob Hawke and his leadership at national and international levels of the labour movement.

In a final tribute Elizabeth Ho reviews the most recent activities of Bob Hawke both in the university centre that bears his name
and in the wider community both national and international. She deliberates on his many activities and passions, bearing out the notion of ‘the politics of intimacy’ alluded to earlier and attesting to Bob Hawke’s continuing desire for responsible economic and social reform.

References