

1. The Howard enigma

John Howard is one of our longest-serving prime ministers, and still seems popular. Why do Australians keep voting for Howard time after time?

Thirty per cent of Australians shake their heads and wonder: how could our democratic process get it so wrong? Thirty per cent smile and say: Howard is doing a great job; just look at the economy. The other 40 per cent are the swinging voters, the main target of election campaigns, the ones who ultimately decide who rules.¹

If the first 30 per cent is right and Howard is doing a bad job then a majority of Australians don't seem to have noticed. What do they think he has he got so wrong? Where is the evidence? What values shape his everyday decisions? Where do these values lead? What sort of a future do these values create for our children's generation?

For some, Howard is a villain who has taken our country into an unjust war in Iraq and has been negligent when it comes to responding to climate change. For others, he is the man they can trust and have confidence in to create a safer and more prosperous nation. For some he is boring, but they vote for him because they trust him on security and interest rates. For yet others, Howard remains an enigma, a puzzle.

A veritable library of books has been written about the Howard phenomenon. The commentators are deeply divided. His detractors suggest he is racist, that he is in bed with big business, while his promoters see him as a visionary, defining new values and leading us into a more prosperous future.

Many versions of the Howard story seem to be revisionist; attempts to rewrite history. Could the 1980s version of the man be more

accurate: that he is neither hero nor villain but just an ordinary Australian who is totally pragmatic; that he is intelligent and shrewd in the way he constantly adapts to the pressures that surround him?

By studying Howard and his values we can learn much about the conservatives' vision for Australia. The first half of this book examines how John Howard has dealt with some of the biggest challenges of his prime ministership. How did he perform? Where has our pragmatic leader taken Australia? Unlike the daily news journalists who live in the midst of flux and conflict, working with the uncertainty of a much smaller time-scale, we have the luxury of hindsight and, hopefully, a more complete picture and broader perspective.

By examining his decisions we can ask some forensic questions. Who benefits from Howard's policies? Do they serve the common good? Do they serve the interests of other groups? Are they self-serving? If Howard has been able to adapt to the world as he finds it, what are the results of eleven years of such pragmatism?

While this book focuses on Howard, it also looks at other forces that are now shaping Australia. It goes on to examine successful lobbyists, powerful pressure groups that try to control government decisions. We explore a number of key questions: Do very powerful pressure groups care about ordinary people? How do we feel if power brokers are manipulating our government for their own benefit? Is the Howard government so keen to win elections and please powerful interests that it is distracted from its real purpose of creating a future for Australians? Or is it managing to do both?

There is no doubting Howard's capacity to adapt to the world as he sees it, but where is his pragmatism leading us? To answer this we examine the Bush administration, which reveals itself as a corruption of democratic capitalism. It looks after the needs of its financial backers, who bankroll election campaigns, while ignoring the needs of many Americans.

This close-up look at corrupt American-style capitalism provides a strong reality check for Australians who have prospered under a much

more democratic form of capitalism. We are forced to ask, to what extent do we want to follow the American model?

The final chapters examine threats to our democracy and what we can do about them. Here we confront the real dilemma that Howard has thrown at us. With private interests trying to shape government decisions, we examine the fallibility of our democracy and ask, do we accept the control of big money and overseas influences over government decisions? Do we want to pragmatically adapt to this new order? Or do we want to fight for a return to a more democratic style of government? Is a change in direction possible? Are such matters beyond the range of ordinary citizens?

From our forbears, we inherited a society striving for prosperity, freedom and justice. Each one of us wants to leave it in better shape for our children and their children. These stories conclude with practical proposals of what each of us can do.