

The Return of the Drover's Dog

John Hyde

John Howard's use of the Federal Conference of the Liberal Party to remind all and sundry that he is around, raised a more important issue than whether he embarrassed the pretties on the top table. It is: how are Australians to regain access to his talent?

Economic factors are likely to ensure that the Coalition wins the next election. When it does, it will have to cope with a serious economic mess. Whatever some elements of the Liberal Party may think, Howard is the toughest and most clear-headed statesman they have. If his talents were not available to the incoming Government we, and perhaps even our children, would come to rue it.

One cannot help being amused by Mr John Elliott's extension of the olive branch to Mr Howard, over Mr Peacock's head as it were. Mr Elliott was, nevertheless, right to do so. He should do so again at the next opportunity.

Mr Howard was entitled to his quip about the Mafia sending flowers to the funeral---it was damaging precisely because people knew it was fair. Even so, although he has legitimate cause for complaint, Howard must not indulge his anger---his own political achievement will in the end be a sweeter revenge. So, without cutting off all of his options, he should give some indication that he is likely to accept the olive branch. By doing so he will enhance his opportunity to serve Australia in its hour of need. He may even draw satisfaction from the thought that conspicuous magnanimity will twist the knife in the political wounds of people who are already seen to have behaved badly. More importantly, however, magnanimity will enable him to retain the authority to influence policy both now and after the election.

The policies the Opposition adopts now matter a great deal. The policies it takes into the election will not be precisely those employed to tackle a mounting economic crisis, but what it says now may well determine which policies are simply not available. The Opposition has virtually ruled out of contention two economic policies which it may need in hard times. These are a broad-based consumption tax and the lifting

of environmental restrictions from export industries such as uranium and wood chips.

Mr Peacock has not been given *carte blanche* in policy formation. From day one, he has assured us that the change in leadership would mean no change in policy--- "*Future Directions*" was sacrosanct. In short, Mr Peacock has been given the leadership in order to implement Mr Howard's policies. It's a queer world.

Of course, the Liberals made the change, despite the worries they must have had on the policy front, because they thought Peacock was more likely to be elected. But as Mr Hayden once remarked, a drover's dog could win against the incumbents. Indeed, the picture of industrious, loyal, courageous, accident-prone and untidy Mr Howard as the drover's dog appeals to anyone who has owned such a dog. The question the Liberals should have asked themselves is which leader was more likely to implement the Howard policies.

Mr Howard should now use the freedom afforded him by his lack of formal status to see that most of his policies do, in fact, survive. Unless Mr Peacock is a new man, he will not be calling for blood, sweat and tears from the Australian electorate. He is not the sort of politician who, by argument, builds constituencies for initially unpopular policies. Howard may use Peacock's perceived policy weakness to defend his own policies. He has only to point to backsliding---a proper activity for a back bencher---to impose a political price on retreat which will often ensure that the policy in question survives.

Further, Howard can now build support for policies on which he was thwarted by National Party threats to divide the coalition and by wet intransigence within the Liberal Party. In particular, he should now be able to again defend a broad-based consumption tax and his "One Australia" policy. It is true that he could also argue for reduced Asian immigration--- I hope that he does not.

Finally, via his opportunities to speak and his column in *The Australian*, he can advance other policies which may be needed in the gathering economic storm.

He has only to appear more substantial than Mr Peacock to embarrass those who sacked him. And on policy matters, if he gives his mind to it, I believe he will appear so. He has more ability than Mr Peacock and it is no longer his responsibility to maintain 'coalition consensus'. This will, no doubt, cause him some satisfaction. He will be wise to keep his satisfaction to himself---not to stoop to the cheap gloating of those who undid his leadership.

After the election he must be prepared to work within a cabinet in which, initially, the Peacock supporters will be in the majority. It is crucial that he is. There is more at stake than his pride, and if he were not prepared to serve, then he would lose the support of those who now believe in him. In

time, the complexion of the cabinet will change because of the election to Parliament of the like of Ian McLachlan, Peter Costello and the two Kemps. Howard must be at the cabinet table to lead the dries---without whom Peacock could not form a credible Ministry---in the fight for policies which will save Australia from falling living standards, unemployment and inflation.

Just how much support John Howard will be able to count on then, will depend very much upon his performance between now and the poll. If he plays his cards right, then although he has twice been denied the Prime Ministership, he may yet live to see Australia governed more or less as he would have chosen.

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