

## Howard Back

*John Hyde*

John Howard's reappointment is a sign that common sense is overtaking the Liberals. With Howard back in the team they have an excellent chance of forming the next government.

The Hawke Government has lost direction. It is avoiding central issues such as foreign debt and declining living standards, but squandering political authority on the Greens, Kodak and the semantics of the pilots' dispute. It has set out to buy another term in office at the expense of long-term economic goals. Cabinet management was once one of Labor's strengths. It is now being confounded by Senator Richardson and the Prime Minister, who seem to be licensed to preempt decisions. Politics is now dominating government and government is increasingly by the Fuehrer principle. How very like the Fraser Government's self destruction in 1982.

There is more at stake in Howard's reappointment than perceptions of Liberal unity. Australia needs his sense of direction. Despite his shortcomings as a leader, his attempts to turn the Coalition away from populism toward the sort of public leadership that faces up to tough choices are a matter of record. From Industry, Technology and Commerce, Howard can oversee the micro-economic reform, which the Liberals claim is central to getting Australia out of the current mess, but which few of his colleagues have the stomach for.

Labor's disarray has, at last, allowed the Liberals' popularity to climb back to where it was when Howard was sacked. But, another reason for Coalition recovery is surely that the Liberals have almost stopped stabbing each other. Why now?

In politics, a stab in the back is delivered most often by leaking to the press. The leaks, that so destabilized Howard's leadership, have now stopped.

One possible explanation is that Howard could not control his team while Peacock can. Another, just as true, is that Howard's friends are more scrupulous than his enemies.

Consider two events among the many that led to Howard's downfall, Peacock's support for the Joh-for-Canberra push and one particularly damaging leak.

Without Peacock's support, Joh's campaign could not have gone as far, nor done as much damage to the Coalition's election prospects as it did. Howard's critics nevertheless claim that, by allowing a leadership vacuum to develop, Howard made destabilizing activities inevitable.

Although this is no doubt true, it hardly excuses those who by stabbing him from behind contributed to the 'leadership vacuum'. We can also ask why they didn't find a better champion than Joh. Federal politicians did not need Fitzgerald to tell them that something was rotten in the State of Queensland.

In the run up to the 1987 election the Joh camp said the Liberals lacked policy---therefore, Howard could not lead. It is true that the Liberal Party had fewer vague and contradictory pieces of paper promising hand-outs to people who did not deserve them, than was normal. Howard regarded Hawke's repudiation of his election undertakings as immoral, and believed that no policy was better than a bad one.

On the other hand, the Coalition had more clearly defined policy positions on difficult issues---i.e. those which upset vested interests---than it ever had had. These caused people outside the parliament to snipe at Howard. Another irony: when it later came to a crunch, the Queensland Nats who had backed Joh were so weak on policy that they could not stomach even such obvious micro-economic reform as removal of the Wheat Board's monopoly.

The most damaging of the many malicious leaks that undermined Howard's authority occurred in 1986. Shadow Cabinet had met the Business Council to explain the Industrial Relations policy. At the time it was radical, although it was almost identical with the Business Council's position today. In what was meant to be a private meeting, Howard was challenged fairly vigorously. Next day, the Financial Review reported that Howard had been bucketed and his policy rejected.

Then and later, criticism was heaped upon Howard by people who have no idea how the Liberal Party functions. The Libs' internal politics have become too like a street fight---that is, there is no rule but self interest. If a Liberal leader does not have the authority to dominate his colleagues, and if they have not the honour to face him with their criticism rather than leaking to the press while counting numbers, there is very little he can do about a situation which is politically disastrous.

Leaks calculated to undermine Howard's authority helped drive him to the bunker mentality which was the reason the conspirators got the numbers to sack him. Bad faith, not lack

of talent, is the real heart of the Liberals' troubles. It is why Howard's dismissal evoked such bitter resentment.

Peacock may well win office. He may even keep the show on the road for a time. Like Hawke, he is neither wet nor dry nor anything in between. He has the advantage that those who supported Howard have, so far, shown more respect for the rules that sustain his leadership than his own supporters did for Howard.

Big questions remain however: Can Peacock take the tough economic management decisions? Can he, like Hawke in his more successful days, leave the business of governing to more purposeful lieutenants? Can he afford to be without such lieutenants as Durack, Spender and Messner? Will the street fighting break out again?

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