Editorial

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At his first ALP national conference, Kevin Rudd opened¹ the body of his address by saying:

There comes a time in the affairs of nations when they are forced to think afresh about the challenges they face for the future.²

The body of the Howard regime is now cold and the affairs of the Australian nation are the responsibility of the Rudd Government. There is no doubting that when Rudd was elected, the nation shifted. Each of the new Federal government’s iconic repudiations of the Howard gang has been greeted as a sign of freshness: the Apology, signing Kyoto and the end of mandatory detention of asylum seekers. It is impossible not to listen to the Get Up Mob’s mash up version of the apology without the sense that things have genuinely moved. In the emblematic arena of foreign policy, the hot stale air of the bulbous Alexander Downer has been replaced by the keen breeze of the assiduous Stephen Smith, talking the engaging new language of creative middle power diplomacy. Ideas and compassion appear to have regained a welcome in Canberra.

The anthology Dear Mr Rudd³, edited by the indefatigable Robert Manne, offers a range of detailed suggestions for the new government across a broad range of portfolio areas. The work is required reading for anybody who cares about the direction of the Rudd Government. Manne’s anthology provides a set of guide notes for getting out of Howard’s public policy mire, though contributions are not of uniform quality. Alongside those writers in Dear Mr Rudd who make critical and trenchant suggestions as to policy and principle are others that concentrate on kicking the body of the last government, risking an implicit endorsement of the notion that ‘Anyone But John’ is enough in itself.

We are yet to know to what extent society or political economy will be transformed under the Rudd government. George Megalogenis’ essential book The Longest Decade⁴, now expanded in a new edition to include Howard’s electoral denouement, is instructive. The cultural politics of Keating and Howard were radically dissimilar, but as Megalogenis reveals with abundant clarity, intellectually the two shared many of the same free-market assumptions. Playing at historical counter-factuals, perhaps Hawke and Keating could have taken Australia towards a Scandinavian style of social democracy in the eighties, but they didn’t, preferring instead the new orthodoxy of economic rationalism. Megalogenis argues that the difference in views of the economy between Keating and Howard was to some considerable extent only a matter of degree.

So will the differences between Howard and Rudd be confined to cultural politics, or is there going to be a shift in attitudes to greater economic and social questions? Rudd ran for leader of the ALP as an avowed⁵ social democrat who made explicit his reservations about having too much faith in market mechanisms to deliver social goods. If the Prime Minister is seeking inspiration on how to realize his convictions, he could turn to Robert Reich’s recent book Supercapitalism.⁶ Reich plainly describes the anti-democratic tendencies of globalized capitalism in order to establish a positive case for the return of government, regulating the organized power of corporations to subvert the
political system. The capture of the Howard Government by the fossil fuel lobby as depicted by Guy Pearse\(^7\) and Clive Hamilton\(^8\) is evidence enough that there is a problem in Australia too.

There are also some places where the market should simply not be allowed. Business will always argue that private enterprise offers the superior way of delivering citizen’s goods and services, but to adopt Christine Keeler; well it would wouldn’t it. A decade of the New Labour experiment in the UK has demonstrated the profound limitations of private mechanisms to deliver public goods. The market is a powerful instrument, but like any tool if it is used carelessly or inappropriately, things get broken. Privatized service delivery is often more costly and less effective. Further, public institutions are able to build social cohesion and a sense of participation in the civic sphere in a way that cannot be achieved through the market. Life is not a portfolio and human experience should not be reduced to a range of choices about investment and consumption. A number of the essays in Dear Mr Rudd, including those by Anne Manne and Clive Hamilton (reflecting the wider work of both) are particularly powerful illustrations of the limits of the market.

There was real ugliness to the Howard administration, manifested in aggressive cultural politics, the silencing of dissent and the introduction of a kind of discursive brutality to Australian civic life. It was the viciousness concealed under Howard’s banal niceness; the broken glass in the white bread peanut butter sandwich; the implicit intolerance of His Master’s Voice\(^9\). But in a sense, it is the simple meanness of the Howard Government that creates one of the great challenges for Rudd’s team. Labor’s goal must be more than simply sloughing off the spite and callousness of the previous government. Ethical superiority to Howard is an important incident, but is insufficient as the end. Restraining neo-liberalism in favor of democracy, humanity, community and fairness and the singular looming challenge of climate change, requires more than just rejecting the narrowness and nastiness of the last mob.

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1 'My name’s Kevin': Rudd opens Labor conference’, ABC News Online, 27 April, 2007


4 Megalogenis, George, 2006, The Longest Decade. Scribe Publications, Melbourne


7 Pearse, Guy, 2007, High and Dry. Penguin Australia
