

John Winston Howard: The Biography
by Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen
Melbourne University Press
Melbourne, 2007
\$49.95, 472pp
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I have a favourite story about John Howard.

In the 1960s the Liberal Youth Council used to have its meetings in the basement of party headquarters and, as Deputy Chairman of the Council, Howard generally ran them. Late one night after the usual motions had been passed, condemning trade unions and calling for an end to communist infiltration of Australia's schools, a group of Young Liberals loitered around outside—waiting for Howard to lock the door to the basement. For whatever reason he couldn't get the key to turn in the lock, and in response to this minor inconvenience, completely without warning, the future Prime Minister lost it, unleashing his fists and a barrage of abuse on the recalcitrant door. It was, a Liberal old-timer assures me, a truly extraordinary sight—and an indication of the depth of feeling that lurks beneath Howard's stoic exterior.

On the strength of this and other vignettes, I have yearned to see a decent Howard book that prises away the facade. With *John Winston Howard: the Biography* the moment has finally come, and that is terrific—although those who regard biography as an opportunity to get in close and gain a feel for the protagonist may find that this treatment of Howard only whets the appetite.

For the most part *John Winston*

Howard isn't the sort of book that tries to put you in the same room as its subject. It doesn't evoke Treasurer Howard, alone in his parliamentary office those many nights as he pored over the budget papers; and its account of how Howard was bullied as a teenager and suffered over the premature death of his father, is terse and factual. Accordingly the book is more of an informative than a visceral experience. Reading it, I couldn't help wishing for more of a sense of the man; the more so because the few passages that *are* anecdotal and evocative are simply so enjoyable. Pen portraits of a younger John Howard—as he defuses a drunken stand-off on the outskirts of Jindabyne or chats up his future wife under the nose of her then boyfriend—are where *John Winston Howard* is at its best. But they aren't really what the authors are about.

What they are about is putting new information into the public domain, and marshalling the many phases of Howard's career into a single coherent narrative.

In this respect they have succeeded admirably, and the approach pays dividends that could not have been anticipated. Facts about Howard's life that have already been repeated *ad nauseam* in the press acquire a different hue as they get put into context. The John Howard who stayed in the family home until his thirties ceases to be an introverted nerd, and becomes instead the caring son who wanted to support his widowed mother. The law student who made hardly any impression on the other members of his class no longer lacks the capacity to

impress—he was just never there because of his Young Liberal commitments. And so forth.

Other material is new. A more nuanced picture emerges of an upbringing, which Howard himself has always portrayed as extremely modest. We learn that his father actually owned *two* petrol stations, and that the family business extended to 'rorring' (the authors' word) a government entitlement program—an act of impropriety in which John Howard himself might have played a minor role.

So it's all useful stuff. And of course the quotes extracted from Peter Costello and Janette Howard are a triumph. Whether the authors benefited from blind luck, or possessed a little political black magic—it is not often that a federal treasurer rubbishes his

own government's expenditure choices; or a Prime Minister's wife suggests that anything less than a 'firm commitment' from her husband will not be honoured—the quotes also guaranteed that this book would have an attentive media. I spoke to one of its authors just a week before the release and could practically hear the clouds of cigar smoke forming at the other end of the phone line as he savoured his good fortune.

'Yeah, it should clog the news cycle for a few days,' he said airily.

He was right, and I feel very happy for him.

Media attention aside however the Howard biography is not without flaws—some of which are recurrent. In particular, it is littered with instances where conclusions bear little correspondence with the narrative. For example: the



authors rehearse the usual lines about Howard being myopic and lacking empathy with people of other races and backgrounds (they profess to being 'downright embarrassed' by his nationalism); but it is all highly incongruous with their narrative, which tells us that Howard's two closest university friends were a Hungarian immigrant and a Jew; that he idolises Nelson Mandela; has shown genuine empathy and grief on occasions like Port Arthur; and was present for the birth of all three of his children.

Aside from that a number of the book's initial contentions get abandoned outright or are woefully underdeveloped. There is an intriguing suggestion that Howard is Australia's 'first professional politician'—about which we never hear another word. Page 390 states that 'if we judge Howard by his own standards as a reformer, there isn't a great deal to show for his lengthy period in office'. This breath-takingly curt summation is not backed up by evidence, historical comparisons or discussion, even though—one ventures to suggest—probably even the most virulent Howard critic would take issue with it.

The book is a reasonably balanced one, but where the substantive disjunctions between evidence and conclusion *do* occur, they generally seem to favour a clichéd leftist view of Howard. The leftist interpretation is as valid as any other, I suppose, although three years' work might have produced something a bit more original. The seeming lack of affection for John Howard is also, in and of itself, a bit of a surprise. Dispassionate readers would be surprised to find that one of the authors is a former Liberal Party member and political staffer.

Above all else I think an important avenue of inquiry has been missed. Many different John Howards come up for discussion in this book: the shrewd politician; the ideologue; the family man; the nationalist. But at least one is missing. John Howard is worshipped by large sections of his party, and even at his lowest points has had supporters who were prepared to defer to and obey him. As far back as 1994, Tony Abbott—a man who can have few equals for egotism and self-absorption—said that Howard is not only his hero, he also occupies a plinth to which Abbott can only aspire. This is no small thing, and demands further analysis. The Prime Minister may or may not possess qualities of personal greatness, he may or may not be a major figure of Australian political history, but a large number of people are convinced of both, and no commentator has tried to explain why. Important ground needs to be covered; but it must wait for another day.

None of this should obscure the book's underlying value or that it stands out like a gemstone in the steaming pile of ordure that is Australian political biography. There's even a cute gesture on the dust-jacket, which I assume is the publisher's hint at its own private views of the Prime Minister and his party. The dust-jacket invites readers to gain 'an insightful understanding of the John Howard who lies ...'.

**Reviewed by
John Hyde Page**

John Hyde Page's *The Education of a Young Liberal* was published by Melbourne University Press in 2006.

*The Commercial Society:
Foundations and
Challenges in a
Global Age*

by Samuel Gregg

Lexington Books

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ISBN 9780739119945

This is a rich and concentrated book. So much that is important about the nature, history and conditions of a commercial society is dealt with here in economical and comprehensive fashion. Samuel Gregg, in the space of only 162 pages of text, ranges across most of the issues in politics, political economy, morals and culture that are currently occupying us. His impressive scholarship and illuminating commentary in skilfully develop his central theme of the foundational character of commercial society in promoting what is distinctive about Western civilisation and its liberties.

The commercial society is partly defined in this book by what it is not. It is not a purely agricultural society, for example, or a feudal society, or a mercantilist society, although a recognisable commercial society may have significant mercantilist elements. Australia does, and so does America. Nevertheless, a predominantly commercial society, Gregg argues, is certainly capitalist and marked by a high degree of free exchange of goods and services, both internally and externally sourced.

But behind the fever of commercial activity and production, and supporting them, is a fabric of interdependent and mutually interactive moral, economic, legal, political and mediating institutions, which are

John Howard, in full John Winston Howard, (born July 26, 1939, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia), Australian politician who was prime minister of Australia (1996–2007) and leader of the Liberal Party (1985–89, 1995–2007). Howard earned a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Sydney in 1961 and the following year became a solicitor of the New South Wales Supreme Court. His interests soon turned to politics, and in 1974 he was elected to Parliament as a member of the Liberal Party. Under Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, he served as minister for business and consumer affairs (1975–77) a