

Gareth Evans

As Bob was always himself the first to acknowledge, he wasn't *perfect*. He was famously sheepish (not that Hazel and the kids gave him much choice in the matter) about being designated in his ACTU days as 'Father of the Year'. To drink with him, as I often did, along with the trade union crowd at the John Curtin Hotel in his pre-political boyo days, was to appreciate that he was an unusual anatomical and sartorial combination of short arms and deep pockets.

To play tennis with him, as I often did at his home at Sandringham in the early days, was to learn that his eyes, when it came to line-calls, saw things differently from other mortals. And to play golf with him, as I often did on cold early mornings in Canberra when he was Prime Minister, was to learn quickly that he had a different understanding than the rest of us of the basic laws of arithmetic.

But if Bob wasn't perfect, *gee he was good*. Bob Hawke at his best was as good as it gets for an Australian Prime Minister, and I suspect for a Prime Minister just about anywhere else in the world. For nearly a decade, through four successive election victories, he had a remarkable hold over both his colleagues and his country, leading a government that is almost universally still judged – including on the other side of politics – as the Australian gold standard. And he had and maintained that hold for at least four good reasons.

First, there was his great capacity to craft a grand political narrative. From the outset we had what any successful government needs: a clear philosophy and sense of policy direction, in our case built around the themes of very dry, pro-competitive economic policy; very warm and moist social policy, with the dry economic discipline accompanied by delivery – through health, education and superannuation policies – of a very compensatory 'social wage'; and liberal internationalist foreign policy – essentially the Third Way model subsequently embraced by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Bob Hawke was a leader who led.

Second, there was Bob's legendary ability to connect with people at all social levels, and to make others warm to him, both privately and publicly. Partly, this was a function of his manifestly exuberant pride in and affection for all things Australian. Partly, in the Australia of the 1980s, it was his uncontrived blokiess: his obvious ability to empathise with anyone preoccupied with sport, sex, having a beer, having a punt, or making a buck.

And less blokey types, including among his colleagues, could relate to his obvious intelligence. On absolutely no subject was Bob anyone's dummy, notwithstanding his almost complete lack of interest in less carnal pursuits such as art, music, literature, philosophy or history (despite punishing his Cabinet colleagues for some months with anecdotes from a biography someone had thrust upon him of the first British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole!)

Not the least of Bob's attractiveness to people, even those (like Margaret Thatcher) who didn't share all his beliefs, was the obvious genuineness of the beliefs he held. The tears he shed in the Australian Parliament for the victims of the Tiananmen massacre forty years ago were as genuine as those ever shed anywhere by anyone in public life. He had a total and absolute abhorrence of racism in any shape or form, which made him a formidable advocate, in the Commonwealth and around the world, for the downfall of South Africa's Apartheid. And he was, ahead of his time, an equally passionate environmentalist, leading the global charge to make Antarctica a mining-free wilderness park in perpetuity.

One of the more intriguing features of Hawke's personality, which again made people warm to him, was his grace in victory. His battles were usually fought with no holds barred – with snarling invective almost always preferred to the verbal rapier – but once won, were usually followed by great generosity to the losers (the only exception I can remember being the hard Left of the Victorian State Labour Party, for whom he retained a visceral lifelong distaste). Malcolm Fraser was an early beneficiary of that instinct, as were a number of cabinet and ministry colleagues (including me in my Attorney-General days) who fell out of favour from time to time. And all this was equally matched with grace in defeat, as we saw with the caucus ballot that finally ended his long political reign.

Bob's grace toward his opponents, which seemed invariably to be reciprocated, is exemplified in his *Memoirs* in what he says about the British Prime Minister with whom his battles, particularly over South Africa, were legendary: 'I have a certain admiration for Margaret Thatcher. There is so much of her philosophical approach to domestic and international politics that I cannot share, but she is a formidable and remarkable person – applied, committed, dogged, dogmatic, determined and certainly courageous.'

The third reason why Bob's reign lasted as long as it did was that he operated in a genuinely collegiate manner. His cabinets operated overwhelmingly on the basis of argument rather than authority. The Prime Minister may have been first among equals, but only just. Everything was contestable, and contested. We argued everything out, often very fiercely, and didn't just succumb passively to the exercise of leadership authority. The language used around the cabinet table was sometimes more redolent of the schoolyard than 10 Downing Street. But it reflected the intensity of the views held, and everyone's willingness to fight for their corner.

When it came to cheerfully obscene language, around the Cabinet table or anywhere else out of public earshot, Bob had rivals in Paul Keating and some of the rest of us, but no real equal. I remember an occasion back in the mid-1980s at the ALP National Executive when, having been quoted in the media as telling the last executive meeting that we would 'shit it in' at the next election, and having suffered a deluge of wowsers public complaints thereafter, his oral language at this meeting was actually a model of decorum. But the urge to compensate in writing was overwhelming, and at one stage – after a particularly dull and plodding half-hour – he passed me a note which read as follows:

Have you read McGooligan, the 19th Century poet, I offer the following  
with no undue deference to him:

Do you enjoy the mental stimulation,  
Or is it intellectual masturbation,  
From your attendance at this meeting  
Which, thank Christ, is very fleeting?  
If the size of their minds reflects their organs of sex

And you applied De Minimis Non Curat Lex,  
Then if you rated their chance of getting a fuck  
They'd get what they deserve – no bloody luck.

Bob's collegial and consultative instincts extended to the way in which he worked with ministers on their individual portfolios: so long as we weren't screwing up, or deviating too far from the government's collective storyline, he let us get on with the job and make our own running in the media and parliament as we saw fit.

Bob's collegiality was certainly genuine and instinctive, but it was reinforced by the character of the government he led. He operated on the clear understanding that unilateral captain's calls' would never fly, not least because he had a Cabinet around him that was neither timorous nor deferential. We demonstrated that early on in the life of the government, with a spectacular assault on three centuries of established Anglo-Saxon cabinet tradition.

Although Bob was famously punctilious about starting meetings on time (and famously regular in lambasting Paul Keating for his indifference to that constraint), one way he kept his record intact was by regularly rescheduling cabinet meetings at the last minute when he found himself with something more urgent to do. On the day in question Cabinet had been called then postponed in the morning, then called and postponed again in the afternoon, and finally called again for 6.15 p.m. We were all milling around the ante-room when the message came through that the Prime Minister was busy again and had now cancelled it, although as before there was no obvious crisis running of a kind that would make this understandable.

About six of us then said, more or less in unison, let's go ahead and have the bloody thing anyway, which we duly proceeded to do, with the result that Bob rather sheepishly joined us about twenty minutes later. The rebellion did not extend to dealing with any particularly contentious item in the boss's absence, but the point was made – and accepted. Neither Bob nor Paul – who followed his example in this respect – always loved the reality of cabinet peer group pressure. But both of them accepted they were running a cabinet, not a presidential, system.

The fourth and remaining major key to Bob's success as Prime Minister was the personal and institutional discipline he brought to the role. If never quite a candidate for Mount Athos, his lifestyle became almost ascetic, certainly by comparison with the exuberance of his larrikin days at university and with the trade union movement. And he led his ministerial colleagues by example, working long hours, thoroughly reading his briefs, and maintaining a disciplined diary.

Bob was determined to avoid the manifest dysfunction of Gough Whitlam's wonderfully exuberant but very short-lived government eight years earlier and, from the outset, important ground rules were laid down and observed about cabinet-outer ministry, ministry-caucus, executive-public service and ministerial office relations. Good cabinet process, including prior consultation with all relevant portfolios and interests, was rigorously followed; as I have already mentioned, free debate was not only allowed but encouraged (not that it could really ever have been suppressed, given the ministers round the table); and outcomes were practically never stitched up in advance (albeit not, in many cases, for want of trying).

The Hawke cabinet was, throughout, very much a team of rivals, a highly strung collective of very capable, forceful personalities. That we managed to work together as we did, for as long as we did, and achieve as much as we did, owes almost everything to the quality of the leadership we had. The government was brilliantly led, and the country was brilliantly led. I suspect that it will be a long time before we see Bob's like again.