

*Incorrigible Optimist. A Political Memoir* by Gareth Evans

MUP, 2017, 402pp, \$49.99

This dense summary of a notably successful political life is as good as you'll find. Student activism at Melbourne University, a Shell scholarship to Oxford (and experience there uncannily like that of your reviewer thirteen years earlier), lecturing in law at his alma mater, lots of ALP activity, and appointment to the Australian Law Reform Commission led to a seat in the Senate. This was early in a succession of unusually competent Labor governments, allowing Evans constructive ministerial office for 1983-96 and a move to the Reps. He coined the phrase "relevance deprivation syndrome" (RDS), suffered by activists such as himself forced into opposition.

Gareth Evans had one of the brightest minds in the Parliaments of the last 70 years. He was capable of analysing what needed to be done, and not therefore wholly dependent on advisors for policy-making, as lesser Ministers are. He did not suffer fools gladly and made some mistakes, but he is not above admitting them, which makes this account as believable as it is informative. Furthermore, Evans writes from the perspective of one who has made as good a success as anyone of his post-parliamentary career, notably in leading the influential International Crisis Group from 2000 to 2009.

Ten chapters are headed Justice, Race, Enterprise, Diplomacy, Cooperation, Conflict, Atrocities, Weapons, Education and Politics, though they are all about politics. As a law lecturer Evans had a strong interest in civil liberties and early in his parliamentary career became Attorney-General, where he was more interested in reform than were his colleagues at the time. He gained great pleasure in opposing racism, both here and in

South Africa, but places more importance than I do on the value of one generation apologising for the attitudes and actions of its predecessors. It is more useful to understand history than to regret it.

Among Evans' memorable observations are noting the high standing of Australian peacekeepers wherever they have served, and the often inverse correlation between the importance of issues and the attention they get. His improving the interstate system of managing the Murray-Darling Basin water resources in 1985 is an example of this, as is the abolition of the uncompetitive two-airline system in 1987.

There is no doubt that Evans was most in his element in nearly eight years as Foreign Minister, rubbing shoulders with those whose names are internationally recognisable and no doubt holding his own. He approached the job as one should: not rushing off to photo opportunities with Americans or Europeans, but first visiting the small South Pacific states for whose welfare we have some responsibility. Defining Australia's national interest as simply security and prosperity was too restrictive, and he sensibly added being a good international citizen.

Evans has the measure of many more or less well-known people he dealt with, such as the brilliant public servant Peter Wilenski and the "irredeemable populist" David Hill of the ABC. He falls foul of fewer factual or linguistic infelicities than most (you can't have suburbs in the *inner* city) and this book well extends his *Inside the Hawke-Keating Government* (December 2014 issue). As Chancellor of the ANU, Evans is not just the pretty (bearded) face on the dustcover.

**Robert Solomon**