

Like the US, we should revere our former leaders

Adam Connolly on the unlikely friendship
between ex-PMs Bob Hawke and John Howard

When a young Democrat US President, John F Kennedy, was confronted by the defining test of his generation — the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1961 — he turned to his Republican predecessor Dwight Eisenhower for advice. A photograph of the second world war naval hero shuffling along in a stooped walk through the White House Rose Garden beside the former D-Day commander won a Pulitzer prize. Based upon Ike's advice, JFK was able to stare down the Russians, forcing them to turn their ships back from the brink, in what became one of the highlights of his brief Presidency.

In Australia, former prime ministers rarely, if ever, have the same trusted relationship, and never across party lines. Why is this so? It may be because most end their political careers in disappointment, rejected either by voters or their own party room.

Robert Menzies is the only prime minister since the second world war to have left the Lodge on his own terms, with Harold Holt, John Gorton, Billy McMahon, Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke, Paul Keating and John Howard all suffering political oblivion to end their careers effectively. Under such circumstances, can you imagine Paul Keating and Bob Hawke breaking bread, or Malcolm Fraser and John Howard sharing a public stage?

No such relationship exists in Australia, although the closest is that of former prime ministers John Howard and Bob Hawke, from opposite sides of the political divide.

A little-known fact of Australian politics is that Hawke sought out Howard privately at least twice during the latter's prime ministership to discuss issues close to his heart: Burma and the Middle East.

They met privately in Parliament House Canberra and the prime minister's Sydney office between 1996 and 2007. Hawke also graciously rang Howard directly in 2004 to congratulate him on overtaking his record as Australia's second-longest serving PM.

The two ex-prime ministers have long harboured a discreet personal friendship that transcends party politics and the gaze of the political classes. The dynamic between the two is different from that of Kennedy and Eisenhower though. Howard was an experienced federal Treasurer when Hawke entered

parliament as a freshman backbencher in 1980, only three years before he snatched the keys to the Lodge from a tearful Fraser in 1983. Theirs is a relationship of equals.

Last week that relationship became public. Appearing on stage for their first public debate, at the fifth Oxford Business Alumni Forum in Sydney, the warmth between the two was genuine. It was a debate 23 years in the making, following Hawke's refusal to debate Howard during the 1987 election. Back then, they were confined to throwing bombs at each other across the Chamber or on the campaign trail — but had never debated each other in the same room.

Ironically, Keating used the same venue at the fourth Oxford Business Alumni Forum 15 months ago to verbally skewer Malcolm Turnbull in a more traditional version of the winner-takes-all sport of political barbarism. Last week, before an audience of 200 of Australia's business elite, the outcome was different, as Hawke and Howard opened up about their unlikely alliance.

'It is genuinely a great pleasure to be here with John. I have always respected his integrity and I think we can say, John, that we have always been good friends,' Hawke said.

'We did disagree on a lot, and we probably still do disagree on a bit, but he is the best prime minister the Labor party has ever produced. I feel that very strongly,' Howard said, in a clear challenge to the records of Labor leaders Ben Chifley and John Curtin.

Typically the debate ranged over a colossal array of issues from health, education, the role of China and the make-up of the Australian Federation to government debt and the Iraq war. Ironically for someone like John Howard, who suffered for his contentious remarks about the level of Asian

migration in the late 1980s, both men agreed on the need for high immigration today.

Freed from the constraints of party political discipline, they surprisingly took aim at the states, saying they never should have been established. 'If we were starting this country again you wouldn't have states, you would have regions,' Howard said. 'But you are not starting the country again. That is probably the only governance thing that I ever agreed with Gough Whitlam on. Whenever you have a system that is divided between the commonwealth and the states, you never completely end the blame game.'

Hawke responded by saying: 'What I argue therefore is, get rid of the States. Keep the boundaries for the purposes of Sheffield Shield cricket and State of Origin.'

Of course, for leaders from different sides of the political spectrum, differences of opinion remain. Hawke is an avowed Sinophile and recently returned from his 85th trip to China, while Howard believes in the ability of Uncle Sam to reinvent himself to retain his economic primacy in world affairs.

'It is inevitable that China, certainly before the middle of this century and many people think well before the middle of the century, will become in absolute terms the biggest economy in the world,' Hawke said. 'And as it does that we will, in part, be the beneficiary of it.'

'I don't agree with Bob about China being the dominant power. I believe that in the middle of the century the US will still be the dominant economy,' was Howard's response.

On the formerly emotional issue of a possible Australian republic, Hawke conceded he had approached Kevin Rudd with a plan to get it back on the national agenda. The referendum question? 'Are you in favour of Australia becoming a republic to come into effect at the end of the reign of the present monarch? I believe if you did it that way you'd get a 95 per cent vote and that would be a bloody good thing.' Not surprisingly, Howard maintained his support for a constitutional monarchy, confirming he had voted against the republic option as prime minister a decade ago.

Given the bonhomie in the room last week, why didn't Hawke debate Howard 23 years ago? 'I think that John was so taken up with having to sort out a bloke called Joh Bjelke-Petersen. That was the fella that he really needed to debate with.'

Perhaps it is a sad fact of Australian politics that we don't revere our former leaders like they do in the US or Europe. After last week's performance by Howard and Hawke, and the revelation that they have a trusting personal friendship in private, we may at last be more respectful of their place in our national history.



Good mates: Hawke and Howard at the Oxford Business Alumni dinner

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