

The assassination of Rudd

Equivocal readings of a mercurial Labor leader

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POWER TRIP: THE POLITICAL JOURNEY OF KEVIN RUDD
(QUARTERLY ESSAY 38)

by David Marr
Black Inc., \$19.95 pb, 138 pp, 9781863954778

RUDD'S WAY: NOVEMBER 2007–JUNE 2010
by Nicholas Stuart

Scribe, \$35 pb, 294 pp, 9781921640575

SHITSTORM: INSIDE LABOR'S DARKEST DAYS
by Lenore Taylor and David Uren

Melbourne University Press, \$34.99 pb, 278 pp, 9780522857290

The political assassination of Kevin Rudd will fascinate for a long time to come. As with Duncan's murder in Shakespeare's play it was done, as Lady Macbeth cautioned, under 'the blanket of the dark', literally the night of 23–24 June 2010. The assassins heeded Macbeth's advice: 'if it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.' And as in *Macbeth*, the assassins were in the shadow of the throne. Even the old king approved: Bob Hawke, himself deposed in 1991, recognised at last that the removal of a Labor prime minister is sometimes necessary.

The prime ministership brought to an end that night had been meteoric: the triumphant return of Labor from the wilderness; the opening months heady with symbolic actions, lofty aspirations and stratospheric approval ratings; the skilled navigation through the storms of the global economic crisis with the continuing approval of the people; the rapid crumbling of ambition, achievement and popularity; and then the execution.

The three works under review explore aspects of the Rudd phenomenon. In *Power Trip: The Political Journey of Kevin Rudd*, David Marr gives a succinct psychobiography, the most perceptive account of Rudd's personality to date. *Shitstorm: Inside Labor's Darkest Days*,

by Lenore Taylor and David Uren, is a first-rate account of the response to the global financial crisis. Nicholas Stuart, in *Rudd's Way: November 2007–June 2010*, a more ambitious but pedestrian work, seeks to assess Rudd's achievement, or rather lack thereof, as prime minister. Although Marr completed his essay within two months of the assassination, he did not see it coming: 'There was speculation that [Rudd] was in a very delicate position: essentially friendless in the party and ripe for decapitation by Julia Gillard even before the looming elections. This is rubbish.' Similarly, though Taylor and Uren conclude that 'the political shitstorm may be wilder and more damaging than Kevin Rudd ever imagined', this is in the context of electoral and second-term difficulties. Only Stuart, as a result of his prescience and the speedy efforts of his publisher, is able to include Rudd's end.

After Copenhagen, Rudd made some unwise decisions. Not the least of these may have been to have a dinner with David Marr in a Mackay pub. The meal ended in an outburst of anger from Rudd which, Marr tells us, 'informs every corner of [his] essay'. The bachelor, libertarian cosmopolitan Marr was an odd choice as confidant for Rudd, the Christian family man, authoritarian in disposition and prudish in outlook. Moreover, Marr already

had form with Rudd: in *The Henson Case* (2008) he had been highly critical of the prime minister's incendiary response to controversial images of a young girl by the photographer Bill Henson. Marr's essay on Rudd, when it appeared, was to underwrite much of the personal denigration heaped upon Rudd following his fall. Indeed, some journalists have seen it as 'a circuit breaker' or 'a shape-shifter', and thus an element in the destruction of the prime minister.

Insofar as the boy is father to the man, Marr pictures young Kevin as a 'fussy little dreamer', sickly and unathletic, living in a protected paradise, the farm at Eumundi outside Nambour, 'his Narnia'. From this he is traumatically cast forth as the result of his father's sudden death, leaving 'a wound that has never healed'. After an unhappy period as a boarder in a Catholic boys' school in Brisbane, success comes to him at Nambour High, from which he emerges with 'the steely determination' that has characterised every phase of his life to 'rise above the wrongs of these past years and make a big life for himself'. University honours, the diplomatic corps, marriage, postings to Sweden and China, and our Kevin is on his way. He remains a bit of a loner – 'camaraderie is not his style' – 'painfully correct' and a committed Christian to boot.

Yet politics was always his ambition, and the prime ministership probably his goal. The first opportunity came as chief-of-staff to the Queensland Opposition leader, Wayne Goss. Under Goss as premier, Rudd became the dominant figure in the governmental machine. Before Goss fell, Rudd moved on to be ALP candidate for the federal seat of Griffith. He failed to win the seat in the anti-ALP landslide of 1996 but won it in 1998, proving that 'the nerd' had turned himself into a formidable local campaigner.

It took him nine years and four leadership changes to reach the top of the parliamentary party. It was a hard slog. 'As he had taught himself to be a bureaucrat and a candidate, he would teach himself to be a politician.' To many of his colleagues he was 'too dogged, too cool, too academic', while his obvious ambition for the top job 'marked him

as a bit of a prat'. Two things contributed to his ultimate success: his regular appearances on the television show *Sunrise*, described by one apparatchik as 'an operation to cook caucus from the outside'; and his impressive attack on the Howard government over the Australian Wheat Board scandal, which might be said to have cooked caucus from the inside, convincing desperate right-wing powerbrokers that he was their last best hope. And so he proved: 'the party's most potent electoral machine since Bob Hawke.'

David Marr sees Rudd's response to the global financial 'calamity [as] the making of him as prime minister'. It is worth turning aside from biography to *Shitstorm* for the account of that response. Lucid, balanced and authoritative – with detailed accounts from every key player – it is an exemplary piece of contemporary history which accords Rudd the dynamic role in the government's strategy. While Taylor and Uren acknowledge the value of Rudd's fiscal inheritance from John Howard and Peter Costello, and the importance of the buoyant nature of the Chinese economy, they praise the Rudd government's response.

First was the speed of the government's reaction. The October 2008 meetings, in which planning for the first stimulus was initiated, were 'extraordinarily early planning compared with other governments around the world'. The second impressive feature was the courage to spend big and to spend fast. The authors estimate the government committed some \$75 billion, spending more as a proportion of GDP than any other advanced economy apart from South Korea. It achieved its objective: 'alone among the thirty-three advanced nations counted by the IMF [Australia] avoided a recession in 2009.'

Taylor and Uren also tally the downside: the botched delivery of some stimulus schemes, the budget deficit and the possibly excessive nature of the stimulus spending. There were other consequences too: the disruption of the government's program, including the undermining of the emissions trading scheme and the crowding out of major

projects – health and taxation reforms, the national broadband network – into the 2010 election year.

The government was too successful for its own good. It believed that the best way of managing a recession was to prevent it from ever happening. But neither the treasury nor the key ministers thought it likely that that would occur. When recession was avoided, the population had little sense of the danger averted. Inevitably, the populace focused on the failures in the stimulus program – the mess of the pink batts and the alleged rorts in the school building program – rather than on the catastrophe that never occurred. It was easy for the Opposition to question whether Rudd and Co. had 'over-hyped the downturn' and for many to suspect that the spending commitments had been excessive. But given the quick recovery, the government 'had neither the policy room nor the political will to pare back its spending'.

Nicholas Stuart has problems assessing Rudd's role in handling the economic crisis, for it does not fit easily with his thesis. This is stated in his opening account of the 2020 summit, a gabfest which, for Stuart, provides 'a paradigm for much of the activity in Rudd's term of office ... The prime minister would state his ideals fluently and eloquently, but he proved consistently unable to translate these statements into concrete policies for action.' A chapter is devoted to each of the major areas of governmental activity, including one on the economic crisis, and the book closes with the decline and fall during 2010.

Rudd's Way is pervaded by animus towards the prime minister, heightened by the fact that, whereas Marr's essay is buttressed by a judicious blend of attributed and unidentified quotes, and whereas Taylor and Uren draw almost entirely on attributed sources, Stuart relies almost entirely on tittle-tattle from unnamed politicians and bureaucrats around the capital. The ease with which these writers can secure such scathing comments suggests a visceral dislike by many in close contact with Rudd. They confirm Marr's point that

'if Australia saw [Rudd] through Canberra's eyes, he would be done for'.

Stuart's approach works best when discussing Rudd's blunders. Stuart derides Rudd's over-inflated and gadfly approach to policies. Education, in early 2008, was 'agenda item number one'; three months later the war against inflation was 'number one priority'; by the end of the year, saving jobs was 'our first national priority'. In 2009, managing the aftershocks of the financial crisis, national security and health were all in turn given top billing. Climate change and the poor handling of 'the great moral challenge' get a thorough going over, though the impact is weakened by the meandering nature of the narrative. This section should be compared with Taylor and Uren's authoritative chapter 'Emission Impossible', with its hint of a tragic dimension to the failure. But where the issue is more debatable, Stuart often seems grudging and occasionally exaggerates grossly.

This brings us again to the handling of the financial crisis, where Stuart has to admit that it is 'difficult for any fair-minded observer not to award the government top marks for the escape'. However, he subtly attempts to play down Rudd's role and to accentuate the role of the other members of the so-called 'gang of four', particularly that of Wayne Swan, in avoiding recession. After praising Rudd, Stuart offers this cute put-down: '[T]here is every reason to believe that [Rudd] felt he played the vital role in ensuring Australia's escape from economic catastrophe.' On the evidence amassed by Taylor and Uren, he *did* play the vital role.

But it is on foreign policy that Stuart's animus leads to claims that cannot stand. Under Rudd, he declares, 'disaster ... engulfed Australia's relationship with the world'. The first challenge this claim faces is that probably no other first-term peacetime Australian prime minister has made such an impact on the world. And if the impact was 'disastrous', why is he held in such respect by many world figures? Of course there have been flaws in his diplomacy. As Stuart notes, funds to the Foreign Affairs department have been slashed; as he does not note, the Australian aid budget has been signifi-

cantly increased. Stuart is right to note that the initiative for an Asia-Pacific community was poorly handled, but there are now positive signs that it is leading to creative thinking about reforming the region's architecture. Again, Stuart is highly critical of Rudd's challenging speech on human rights to the students of Peking University in April 2008 as damaging to Sino-Australian relationships. Whether that was true or not, it was a speech much admired around the world. As one observer notes, we need to get the balance right between an unhappy China and a kowtowing Australia.

More damaging to Stuart's case, however, is that, apart from a single paragraph, there is no discussion of Rudd's role in the establishment of the G20 as 'the premier forum for ... international economic cooperation'. Taylor and Uren provide a definitive account of Rudd's relentless efforts to make the G20 'the pivotal body in world financial affairs'. Stuart waxes sarcastic about Rudd's September 2008 address to 'a near empty' United Nations General Assembly – 'most of the world wasn't listening'. He neglects to mention that this was the speech in which Rudd made his pitch for the G20, the beginning of an international campaign which ultimately succeeded. He was no doubt used by the United States, since such major changes do not occur without at least the acquiescence of the superpower, but, as Taylor and Uren observe, 'Australia got 100% of what it wanted'. The result was one of the most important changes in global governance since the formation of the United Nations. For Australia, it was almost certainly the most significant diplomatic achievement in the first decade of the century.

The core elements in the critique of Kevin Rudd as prime minister are the over-centralisation of power in the head of government, the passion for micro-management, the chaos that ensued and an authority sustained almost entirely by the polls.

The electoral victory of 2007 had been very much Rudd's personal triumph, and since it was his victory, it

would be his government. Rudd, rather than the factions, would choose his ministers. This was not, as Stuart claims, a first for a Labor prime minister; Paul Keating had done it in 1993. Nor is there much in Marr's claim that 'all but a few heavyweights sitting at the Cabinet table owed their place to him'. Rudd could and would have got much the same ministry through a caucus vote – as did Hawke in 1983.

This act of hubris reflected Rudd's desire to concentrate authority in the prime minister's office. As Stuart argues, 'No public announcement – let alone shift in policy – occurred without his imprimatur'. He would make the headline, 'top shelf' news statements. One result was continual television shots of the prime minister with the relevant minister nodding wisely in the background. Moreover, his fondness for inflated language tended to a confusion of priorities and the creation of expectations impossible to meet. There was also his insistence that ministry and caucus be disciplined and always on message, leading Taylor and Uren to comment on the 'ludicrous blanket uniformity' of the language of otherwise intelligent ministers.

The global financial crisis both justified and accelerated this tendency to centralisation: 'The extreme sensitivity of the decisions meant that Rudd's predilection for keepings things close was taken to extremes.' The gang of four – Rudd, Swan, Julia Gillard and Lindsay Tanner – made all the decisions; the cabinet simply ticked them off after the press releases were done. Of course, some of the big beasts in the cabinet were, as Stuart notes, given greater freedom than other ministers. Ministers with their own power bases in caucus – Simon Crean, Kim Carr, Martin Ferguson, Stephen Conroy – were left relatively untrammelled.

Yet the prime minister's office proved incapable of handling this concentration of power, coupled as it was with Rudd's desire to plunge into the detail of innumerable projects. One fascinating aspect of Marr's account of Rudd as Goss's chief aide is how his experience of power there foreshadowed what was to come when Rudd ruled

in Canberra. In Brisbane, the chaos of his office sprang from the fact that his desire to micro-manage exceeded the capacity of his office to be effective. For Marr, 'Canberra was Brisbane all over again. The same demands, the same chaos, the same kids' brigade, the same high hopes, the same obsession with the news cycle ... the same ceaseless work', with a prime minister seeking refuge from pressure by burying himself in detail. Stuart talks of 'a black hole' in Canberra with gridlock and deferral as decisions banked up awaiting the prime minister's approval. Taylor and Uren tellingly report that ministers and public servants hoarded paper work until Gillard was in the chair (as acting prime minister) because she was more efficient than Rudd at ploughing through it.

Nevertheless, with few friends in caucus and no faction, Rudd's authority was scarcely questioned, sustained for two years by his extraordinary popularity: 'the more Australians saw him, the more they liked him'. As with most of us, Stuart is puzzled by this phenomenon. So is Marr: 'Can Australia have a leader who's an ash-blond, unfit, smiling nerd?' The answer seems to be that the populace took him as he presented himself, 'a conviction politician of rare courage', a most fragile image in the imperfect world of politics.

The fragility became apparent after Copenhagen, but all agree that the catastrophic fall came in April 2010 when he abandoned his emissions trading scheme. Where was the conviction, where the courage? Stuart puts it bluntly: 'Rudd had trashed the one thing he could never regain – his own credibility.' We know from these books and other sources that Tanner, Penny Wong and Greg Combet all appealed to the better angels of his nature; but they were overwhelmed by the arguments of Gillard, Swan and the New South Wales right. It is an ironic coincidence that those who advised him so disastrously were the very instruments of his downfall. ■

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