

George Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*,

Scribe, Melbourne, 2006.

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The photograph selected by Scribe for *Australian* journalist and economist George Megalogenis's latest offering is an inspired choice: Outgoing Prime Minister Paul Keating is showing his successor John Howard around the grounds of the Lodge. Keating, arm outstretched, points to his right, his gaze fixed on some distant objective; but Howard – looking uncomfortable with hands thrust deep in his pockets – does not follow his predecessor's gesture. He does not need Paul Keating to point him in the right direction, for he has his own visions of Australia's future, and his eyes betray the fact that he is thinking of objectives of his own and only paying a modicum of attention to the man he has ousted from power.

The Longest Decade is very much the story of these two men and their respective ideas about what kind of society Australia should be, and the policies each pursued in their time at the top of the political 'greasy pole'. As such, the book will appeal to 'Howard Huggers' and members of the Keating fan club alike, and yet it will most likely unsettle those who prefer to view the nation's most recent prime ministers as antithetical and offering divergent political, social and economic policies. As Megalogenis points out, 'Keating's Australia' and 'Howard's Australia' are more alike than many have been willing to admit, and it is only by studying their careers in tandem that such similarities become apparent. Nevertheless, this is not a simple single-hypothesis work, but gives ample time to exploring the very real differences between the two prime ministers who dominated the 1990s and (through their tenures as federal treasurers under Fraser and Hawke respectively) the past 30 years of Australian economic life.

It is to be admired that in pursuing his exploration of the Keating-Howard Era, Megalogenis does not allow the economist in him to take over. When statistics

are presented, this is done so in a lively fashion; jargon is kept to a minimum; and every chapter is enlivened with a humanity often lacking in works whose primary focus is on the stuff of market forces, interest rates and recessions. Though the 'Longest Decade' of the title is at root an economic commentary on the way Keating and Howard together broke the boom-bust cycle of previous decades, the book is also rich in cultural and social detail. The chapter-by-chapter account of the Keating-Howard relationship is broken by 'snapshots' which deal with almost every aspect of the Australian story in the 1990s. The issues of racism in sport (particularly Australian Rules Football), and the feminsation of the workforce find their places alongside interesting discussions of 'Australians as Warmongers', and the 'Rise of McMansions', making for refreshing reading away from the main narrative. However these sections also serve as vital building blocks in the overall picture of the '90s, never straying into irrelevance

The solid matter upon which Megalogenis has based his book is a series of extended interviews with Keating and Howard themselves, conducted in mid-to-late 2005. To the author's credit, he has not limited his discussion to these, but also draws on a vast store of other journalistic material from his eleven years in the Canberra press gallery (1988-1999) and his work as a senior feature writer for *The Australian* since returning to Melbourne. Readers will find the book's appendix particularly insightful (and amusing), as Megalogenis presents a series of extended quotations of 'Keating on Howard/Howard on Keating', and dealing with the key areas which have defined both men's premierships. On refugees, leadership and the future, the words of the old adversaries take one back to the days when they faced one another across the despatch boxes: Keating's words ever mercurial and impulsive; those of Howard more staid, but calculated and carefully-chosen.

While Keating and Howard are the obvious foci for *The Longest Decade*, Megalogenis also presents compelling portraits of the other political titans of the 1990s, including most notably former Liberal leaders John Hewson and Alexander Downer, and the man who he dubs 'King Jeff': former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett. Megalogenis's Hewson is not a sympathetic figure by

any stretch of the imagination – a nasty Thatcherite economic rationalist with the personality of a schoolyard bully – but is nevertheless perhaps the closest anyone has yet come to capturing in miniature that most enigmatic of Opposition leaders and loser of the ‘unlosable election’ of 1993. Kennett is less well-handled as a personality (despite extended quotations from his notorious phone conversation with Andrew Peacock in 1987), and instead better handled as the ‘political phenomenon’ he was; though I feel uncomfortable with the appellation of ‘the closest thing to the decade’s political adjudicator’ – this sits awkwardly with the truer portrait of ‘Jeff’ as the ultimate expression of the business-school version of government, to which both Keating and Howard aspired, but never attained (largely because they recognised early the unfortunate electoral consequences of such behaviour, to which Kennett fell victim in the ‘protest vote gone wrong’ in 1999).

Where the book is perhaps less effective is in what it leaves out. Megalogenis is seeking an explanation for Australia as it stands today, still in the midst of an era in which ‘avarice is the new black’, but with less of an idea about how we will ever escape from our passive acceptance of the ‘monologue of materialism’ (without that is, the aid of a catastrophic recession to shatter our dreams and dream-homes). Nor is there much of a recognition that the Keating-Howard revolution in deregulation was not an inevitable process, and that there were (and are still) alternatives to the materialistic society they helped to create. In all other respects, Megalogenis’s book is a thoroughly enjoyable portrait of the 1990s as a decade and as the first real attempt to view the Keating-Howard years in tandem: an important work of Australian political history, accessible to the casual reader and academic historian alike. It will in any case be interesting to see whether Megalogenis’s analysis of the likely causes for a backlash against Howard hold water come November, 2007.

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