

Speechless: A Year in My Father's Business

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I felt like a Wild West barman polishing glasses. The posse would charge into town, riding horses in circles and whooping. They'd shoot up the saloon, smash the mirrors. I'd duck, then go back to my polishing. They were gone (p73).

This hilarious (if it wasn't so serious) picture of the way it was on those days when Prime Minister Rudd was giving a speech sums it all up. There was no rational approach to the Rudd speechmaking process. And even someone so cut from Labor cloth as James Button was not allowed into his confidence. Powerful though the message is about the chaotic style of government that Rudd ran, this book, perhaps surprisingly, is less about Rudd and just as much about the Public Service, the Labor Party — and his father, the much loved Minister in the Hawke and Keating governments, John Button. James Button found, or distils from his life so far, new and, to him, surprising insights into all of these worlds. It is all here: why Rudd failed, why there is a disconnect between policy, the Public Service, the press and the public, and why the Labor Party is floundering. It is all told sparingly, succinctly, eloquently, perceptively — and discretely — in James Button's engaging and poignant story of his '...Year in my Father's Business...'

A powerful part of the story is the price politicians, and their families, pay for their calling. 'Watching politicians I wonder whether it is possible, when you are so possessed and under such pressure, to stay an ordinary human being' (p242). Few outside it see or appreciate the sheer drudgery of politics, the thankless hard work, but from his father he knows it is a passion. Sadly, the public see more of the self-seeking side because this is what makes news, and 'honest politicians don't hide the fluid mix of altruism and self-interest that drives them...' (p15). Understanding this, families endure, or not, with a mostly silent scream. The price is often very high because they, too, believe passionately in 'the cause', so they carry on, mutely determined, for they wouldn't or couldn't wilfully do anything that might cost it. I recall a conversation with Hazel Hawke when she was in The Lodge who wouldn't have anything of the case for hardship. There are people in all walks of life she said who suffer long separations or other disruptions to what might be regarded as the domestic norm. No special pleading there from someone eminently qualified to claim it. Of course there are many pluses to balance the minuses. And James Button's ability to see Canberra, all of it, for what it is must be one of the pluses.

Australia is now seeing 'Borgen' on SBS television. This is a Danish series about a female Prime Minister and the price she has to, or ultimately chooses, to pay for her power in terms of family and friends. It is a riveting look inside the political and personal scene of high power. A conclusion many will not like is that this status is simply incompatible with successful family life, especially where young children are involved. Has anyone done a study of the relative incidence of damage to young families in a world where now younger and younger women and men go into politics when once they were older with their children mostly grown?

Such is the symbiotic relationship that must develop for there to be a great speech-writing partnership, that perhaps the fatal flaw in the Button-as-speech writer design was his placement in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and not in the hotbed of the Prime Minister's Office, even one as chaotic as this one. But in any case, Button concludes that the personal connection of the kind between a Whitlam and a Freudenberg, or a Keating and a Watson was not possible for Rudd: 'How he spoke, wrote and presented himself was somehow existential for him. He had to control it' (p81). Or was it more Rudd's cut and paste approach to his speeches, in some cases requiring a number of people to draft the speech, and then picking the eyes, the good ideas, the good lines out of each of them so that there could be no intellectual coherence to the whole? How could this approach result in telling big stories in bold language as Button recalls Whitlam, Hawke and Keating so successfully to do? Or resemble anything approaching the Keating view of the speech as 'the most noble form of public life...which allows and requires politicians to expand their thoughts, to argue, to persuade...' (p238). 'Just pick three big things and do them right' Button notes both Hawke and Keating to advise (p64). But the Rudd scattergun approach was to take on them all, when he couldn't delegate or trust. Instead he took apparently delight in picking up typos in texts presented to him and, unsurprisingly, failed to follow through and deliver.

Effective communication, or its absence, is what much of this book is about. Importantly James Button points to the loss of confidence on the part of the public service to background journalists as once was the case in the easier flow of business in a town when people conveyed information that could be conveyed to ease the wheels of information about government business. In its place has developed an adversarial zero-sum game; there was no media unit in PM&C in Button's day. The consequences for a government's capacity to tell its story have been enormous. A Howard government that forbade much of this contact was one cause of the loss of a public dialogue from the Public Service. The 24/7 news cycle was another. James Button records quality journalists Michelle Grattan, and Laura Tingle regret the professional loss, the loss of quality and of in depth journalism, the stories not reported, the economies leaving no time for the best to do the research and analysis.

This is a book about sons and fathers, what they do and don't do, say and don't say. We learn that there was a dark side to his father, this wonderful, warm, hugely intelligent and funny man, with his piercing blue eyes and impish approach to life, which perhaps explains

the driven and absolutely determined side of his political commitment – and perhaps why his son experienced a little more loss than just an absentee political father.

It is also an instructive book: if you want to know about the ethos and values of the Public Service and what came to be Button's great respect and admiration for the style of quiet, competent operation and responsiveness that characterises the support senior officers in that Department, as of course in other Departments of State, give to their political masters of any political persuasion, it is all here.

If you want to understand the pressures of politics or even what the problems are in the contemporary Labor Party, reference back to his father's own sheer bloody minded determination to join the party as an outsider (a student and middle class when these were not at all typical of aspirant members) and the grounding this gave them in politics, philosophy and party explains much that may be missing in its heirs and successors who did not have to fight for their place. Put away the agonising volumes, chapters and reports on what has gone wrong with Labor; it's all here, but may take a new generation, shaken by dramatic failure, to come to know what it is like to struggle.

This book is also a monument to the common sense and real return that comes from the interchange between professional worlds.