
***Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, by Troy Bramston.
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David Clune

Honorary Associate, Department of Government and International Relations,
University of Sydney.

Troy Bramston has emerged as one of Australia's leading political historians and biographers. He has edited important collections of essays on the Whitlam, Hawke and Wran Governments, co-authored with Paul Kelly definitive books on the dismissal of the Whitlam Government and the so-called 'Palace letters', and written well-regarded biographies of Paul Keating and Bob Menzies. Now comes a major challenge: a biography of Robert James Lee Hawke.

It is a challenge not only because of the scope – recording Hawke's stellar career in the arcane world of industrial relations and chronicling his action-packed nine Prime Ministerial years – but also because of the need to deal with his outrageous and destructive personal life.

Bramston has handled the last well. He frankly records Hawke's serial philandering, his alcoholism during his ACTU days, his obnoxious behaviour when drunk, and the damage all this and his obsessive pursuit of power caused to his family. It is an integral part of the story and Bramston does not indulge in unnecessary prurience or sensationalism. He perceptively sums Hawke up as 'exceptionally gifted but profoundly flawed'.¹

In some ways more damaging to Hawke's reputation are Bramston's revelations about his relationship with powerful businessman Peter Abeles. During the 1970s, Abeles paid Hawke's childrens' school fees, mortgage, bill for a hotel suite in Sydney, gambling debts, and hired several of Hawke's ex-girlfriends. It was a major error of judgement on Hawke's part to make himself vulnerable to Abeles' influence. It is surprising Bramston does not make more of this.

¹ Troy Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, Viking Publishing, 2022, p. 562.

A great strength of the book is Bramston's meticulous research and access to previously unavailable sources. From 2002 until just before Hawke's death, he had extensive interviews and conversations with Hawke. Bramston describes the book as an 'unauthorised biography' written with the subject's full co-operation. Hawke's personal papers were made available to him. Bramston also interviewed hundreds of others: family, lovers, friends, unionists, staffers, bureaucrats, ministerial and parliamentary colleagues.

Hawke's life emerges as a series of puzzling paradoxes. His father was a dedicated and conscientious Congregational clergyman and his mother a loyal partner and tireless community contributor. It was a close and functional family. Hawke, although intensely grateful to his parents, was a deeply flawed husband and parent. 'Bobby' had a secure and nurturing upbringing – perhaps too much so as his parents uncritically doted on him. Yet from his youth he exhibited a wilful, at times unpleasant, larrikin streak. During his university days, Hawke was an activist in Christian organisations but also a heavy drinker and womaniser. He could be abrasively rude and insensitive, yet often became emotionally over-wrought and cried in public. Although possessed of a giant ego and a strong sense of personal destiny, Hawke consistently advocated consultation, conciliation and consensus. A ruthless careerist and relentless self-promoter, he had a life-long commitment to 'principles of compassion and community, of helping those less fortunate, and of peace over conflict'.²

Hawke was Western Australia's Rhodes Scholar for 1953 which enabled him to take a Bachelor of Letters at Oxford. His thesis was on the role of the Australian Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. Returning to Australia, his interest in industrial relations led him into contact with the union movement. It was a milieu he found attractive and in 1958 Hawke was appointed the ACTU's Advocate. He excelled at the role, 'arguing the ACTU's case cogently and logically, and with passion and verve. He spoke loud and fast, displaying a nervous energy, while pacing the carpet in front of the bench. One thing was clear: Hawke knew what he was talking about'.³

Hawke's high profile as Advocate became a springboard to Presidency of the ACTU in September 1969. He was just short of 40. Unlike his bland predecessors, Hawke was dynamic, charismatic and newsworthy. By the late 1970s, his celebrity status was at its

² Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, p. 38.

³ Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, p. 84-85.

zenith: 'Hawke engaged the public consciousness like no other national political or union figure. He had a connection with everyday Australians. He was at the epicentre of a great celebrity drama in which he was the dominant figure ... He was original, authentic and compelling'.⁴

Speculation about Hawke entering politics was constant and in 1979 he decided to make his move. He was preselected as ALP candidate for the Melbourne seat of Wills and elected in 1980. Speculation now switched to when Hawke would challenge Opposition Leader Bill Hayden. By early 1983, a significant number of Labor MPs had serious doubts about Hayden's leadership and his ability to win the 1983 election. Pressure was applied to Hayden to step down in favour of Hawke in the Party's interest. A fundamentally decent person, Hayden took the gut-wrenching decision to acquiesce. Hawke became Opposition Leader on 3 February. As these events were taking place, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser unsuccessfully tried to head off Hawke's ascension by calling an early election for 5 March. Labor won easily with 75 seats to the Coalition's 50. Under Hayden, a victory was a possibility, under Hawke it became more like a certainty.

Reading Bramston's account of Hawke's Prime Ministership, one cannot but be impressed. Hawke managed the machinery of government with great skill:

He assembled a talented staff and welcomed frank and fearless advice from public servants. Ministers regarded him as a 'chairman of the board' who was a good manager of cabinet business and provided strategic direction for the government. He was an effective communicator and often a powerful persuader. He had a strong work ethic, energy and drive. While luck often ran his way - such as the facing a divided opposition - he also showed courage and took policy and political risks.⁵

Hawke fundamentally reshaped many areas of Australian life. The economic record is particularly impressive: 'floating the dollar, deregulating the financial system, slashing tariffs, overhauling the tax system (with big reductions in company and personal tax rates), and privatising government assets. These reforms were the foundation stones

⁴ Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, p. 196-97.

⁵ Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, p. 536.

of three decades of economic growth'.⁶ The Prices and Incomes Accord with the unions brought remarkable harmony to industrial relations. Medicare was established and the welfare system reformed to make it more equitable. Hawke was a pioneer in environmental protection: the Gordon and Franklin Rivers, Kakadu National Park, Tasmania's old-growth forests, the Daintree rainforest. In foreign policy, Hawke played a prominent role in ending apartheid in South Africa, protecting Antarctica from mining and establishing APEC.

To achieve all this, Hawke had to bring along with him his Caucus colleagues, Ministers, the ALP, and, of course, the Australian people who bore the brunt of the short term pain necessary to achieve long term gain. It was no small achievement. Machiavelli warned: 'It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than a new system'. NSW Premier from 1988-92, Nick Greiner, transformed the State with his major reform agenda but failed to persuade the voters and paid the political price. Yet Hawke succeeded, winning four successive elections. It was a tribute to his powers of communication, persuasion, advocacy, and political acumen. Hawke's long-time commitment to and aptitude for negotiation and compromise underpinned his achievement. His astonishing popularity with the Australian people was also a key factor. When Hawke appeared in public, he had a mesmeric attraction that could induce a form of mass hysteria, with people surging forward, desperate to greet, even touch, the great man.

The achievements of the Hawke era owe a substantial debt to the efforts of Treasurer Paul Keating. Almost inevitably, the partnership of two such giant egos was destined to end badly. Keating saw himself as the heir apparent and became increasingly impatient when Hawke failed to step aside for him, in spite of promises to do so. Hawke obstinately rejected advice from his closest colleagues that Keating was closing in and that he should depart with dignity while he could. On 19 December 1991, Keating defeated Hawke for the Prime Ministership by 56 votes to 51. Bramston records that in later life the two were reconciled and became close friends again.

Bramston has produced a well-written, highly readable book that is also an authoritative account and analysis of Hawke's record. He perceptively captures the essence of Hawke's personality. The many quotes from Hawke's friends and enemies

⁶ Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny*, p. 302.

enliven the text and provide revealing insights. Bramston's book is described on the cover as 'the definitive biography'. Does this claim stand up to examination? The answer is a definite yes.