

**Wallace Brown.** *Ten Prime Ministers: Life among the Politicians.* Sydney: Longueville Books, 2002. 246 pp. A\$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-920681-04-3.



**Reviewed by** John Connor

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Wallace Brown has been the Canberra correspondent for the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* since 1962. His book *Ten Prime Ministers* is a history of the last forty years of Australian Federal politics in which Brown draws on his journalistic experience to give some intimate and intriguing insights into the men who have held the top job from Menzies to Howard. Brown has joined a fine Australian historiographical tradition of journalists writing political history. In fact, as Stuart MacIntyre points out in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, journalists are far more likely than historians to write accounts of Australian politics or biographies of Australian politicians.[1]

Although outside observers might think that relations between journalists and politicians are inevitably adversarial, Brown shows that the two generally have the sort of symbiotic relationship rarely seen outside wildlife documentaries. Journalists need information from politicians to write their stories, while politicians need exposure from journalists to gain electoral success. William McMahon spent so much time on the telephone talking to journalists that he became known as

"Billy the Leak." Brown gives special mention to "two notable, deliberate and most worthy leakers of information": Liberal backbencher Les Irwin who would write shorthand notes in party room meetings so he could afterwards read exact quotes to journalists, and ALP Senator Ron McAuliffe who after caucus meetings would sometimes simply stand in the corridor and tell journalists what had transpired.

The flipside of the journalist-politician relationship is that in order to retain a political source, journalists sometimes will suppress stories. Often this is a good thing. Politicians deserve the right to some privacy, and Australian journalists are much less likely than their U.K. or U.S. equivalents to report on politicians' personal lives. However, the relationship between journalists and prime ministers may become too cosy. Brown tells how in November 1968 the U.S. Ambassador asked John Gorton to visit the embassy so he could be briefed on the U.S. halt to bombing in Vietnam just announced by President Lyndon Johnson. Gorton did not arrive at the Embassy until after 1:30 a.m., having spent the evening at the

press gallery's annual dinner and arriving with a nineteen-year-old reporter, Geraldine Willesee. Many in the press gallery knew about the incident, but no one reported it until it was mentioned in Parliament four months later.

Brown prefers the claustrophobic environment of Old Parliament House to the more spacious edifice opened in 1988. This is as much a practical as a sentimental consideration as the close confines of the old building meant Brown got at least one story from overhearing a prime ministerial conversation. According to Brown, because of the distances between offices in New Parliament House, journalists now have less free access to politicians. However this is probably due less to the layout of the new building and more to the proliferation of ministerial media advisers attempting to control the political message.

*Ten Prime Ministers* deals thoroughly with the main political issues confronting governments of the last forty years, but Brown is at his best when he tells of the prime ministers themselves. As well as being Australia's longest-serving prime minister, Robert Menzies had the ability to drink copious amounts of dry martinis and remain unaffected (for those interested in some personal research on this subject, Sir John Bunting's memoir includes Menzies's favorite martini recipe<sup>[2]</sup>). Brown writes of attending Harold Holt's Christmas drinks for the Canberra press gallery at the Lodge on Friday, December 15, 1967. As Brown and other reporters left, Holt farewelled them with a promise to give some background for a story the following Monday. This was the last time Brown saw him, as Holt disappeared while swimming at Cheviot Beach that weekend. In the 1990s, Paul Keating, whom Brown describes as "a great hater," once angrily took exception to one of Brown's stories and took him off the "information drip." Yet Keating was also a regular Saturday morning sight in a Canberra music store where he would relax by listening to classical music.

Brown rounds out his prime ministerial survey with an analysis of John Howard. Brown notes Howard's tenacity and determination to remain in politics until he attained the prime ministership. It is not for nothing that two of Howard's political heroes are Churchill and Menzies, both men whose political careers were written off after early failures, but who became dominating prime ministers. Howard is also a political realist. He told Brown that he knew that he won the 1996 election, not because people liked him, but because the electorate disliked Keating more. Howard takes careful notice of public opinion, but, as shown in the current debate over Iraq, he is not a populist. Howard will pursue policies only if they coincide with his political convictions. Howard met the public grief and outrage following the 1996 Port Arthur massacre with stronger gun laws, but he had believed in the need for such legislation since at least 1993. Howard has rarely suffered from hubris, but it seems that the possibility of war with Iraq means he has postponed his retirement plans. Howard had the opportunity to follow his hero Menzies and become only the second Australian prime minister to resign at the peak of his career. By believing himself indispensable, Howard may find himself becoming merely the twenty-first Australian prime minister turned out by either his party or the electorate.

Well illustrated with cartoons by the *Canberra Times* political cartoonist, Geoff Pryor, *Ten Prime Ministers* is both an entertaining memoir and a comprehensive political history, which can be recommended to anyone interested in Australian politics or the media.

#### Notes

[1]. Graeme Davison, John Hirst, and Stuart MacIntyre, *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, rev. ed. 2001), p. 517.

[2]. Sir John Bunting, *R. G. Menzies: A Portrait* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 122-123.

Prime ministers -- Australia -- Biography. Australia -- Politics and government -- 1901-1945. Australia -- Politics and government -- 1945-

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