

## Book Reviews

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Troy Bramston, *Bob Hawke: Demons And Destiny, The Definitive Biography*, Viking/Penguin Random House, Melbourne, 2022; xxviii + 676 pp., ISBN 978 0 14378 809 6, AUD49.99 (hbk).

**Reviewed by:** Braham Dabscheck, *University of Melbourne, Australia*.

Robert James Lee Hawke was Australia's 23rd Prime Minister, from 11 March 1983 to 20 December 1991. He won four elections as leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in March 1983, December 1984, July 1987 and March 1990. He is Australia's third longest serving Prime Minister behind Robert Gordon Menzies, April 1939 to August 1941 and December 1949 to January 1966; and John Winston Howard, March 1996 to December 2007; both leaders of the Liberal Party and in coalition with the Country and National Parties, respectively.

Hawke was born in Bordertown, South Australia. His older brother Neil died from meningitis in February 1939, a few days shy of his 18th birthday. The family moved to West Leederville, in Perth in November 1939. His uncle, Albert Hawke, represented the Labor Party in the Western Australian parliament from 1933 to 1968; was its leader from 1951 to 1966, and Premier of Western Australia from February 1953 to April 1959. Hawke attended West Leederville State School. He later won a scholarship to Perth Modern School. He attended the University of Western Australia and won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University in November 1952. He spent the next 3 years in Oxford, with occasional side trips to Europe. He wrote a thesis on Australian wage determination in obtaining a Bachelor of Letters (Hawke, 1955; Also see Hawke, 1975). On his return to Australia, Hawke did some teaching and commenced studying for a PhD at the Australian National University in Canberra, which he never completed.

In the later part of 1956 Hawke wrote to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) offering to help it in its preparation of Basic Wage cases. The offer was accepted, and he became a research officer for the ACTU. In 1959 he was appointed as the ACTU's Advocate and quickly established a reputation as an effective and forceful spokesperson on behalf of workers and unions. He was asked by various media outlets to comment on and contribute to major labour and political issues of the day. Hawke, in effect, assumed the role of a public intellectual. He was a charismatic and flamboyant person who attracted and enjoyed attention. In 1969 he was elected President of the ACTU.

Hawke had joined the ALP as a student. He was unsuccessful as a candidate for the ALP in the seat of Corio, in Geelong, in 1963. He was active in ALP circles, a regular and sought after commentator and was elected National President of the ALP in 1973; a post

he held until 1978. Hawke decided to enter politics and won the seat of Wills, in Melbourne, at the Federal election in October 1980. The ALP appointed him leader, ousting the incumbent Bill Hayden, on 3 February 1983 on the same day that Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser called an election. The ALP, under Hawke, won a substantial victory, winning 75 of 125 House of Representative seats.

Troy Bramston first met Bob Hawke on 27 May 1994 when he was 18 years old. He says

I have never forgotten it. In a crowded and noisy room, I approached Hawke, caught his attention and extended my hand. He shook it. Looked into my eyes and asked my name. He gave me his undivided attention. The room seemed to blur and the sound dulled. At that moment, for only a few seconds, he was totally focused on me. He had magnetic appeal. For one brief moment, I experienced the Hawke political magic, he was charisma personified (p. xiv).

Since Hawke's death a wide variety of documents have become available concerning his life and times. They include his diaries and those of family members, information on his school and university days, his personal papers, cabinet papers and department documents, which were made available to Bramston. Bramston also drew on previous biographies of Hawke, and published memoirs of mainly contemporary politicians, apparatchiks and journalists. His secondary source bibliography, however, is quite limited; it struggles to fill two pages (pp. 589–590). While Bramston has undertaken a significant endeavour in researching and writing *Bob Hawke* the outcome is disappointing.

Bramston has not made use of academic work written about political, economic and industrial relations developments associated with Hawke's career. Nor has he examined major primary source documents of the cases he was involved with before industrial tribunals and other forums during his different roles with the ACTU. The Accord (there were in fact eight Accords) is seen as the major 'instrument' employed by the ALP, in concert with the ACTU, during Hawke's time as Prime Minister, and subsequently under Paul Keating when he was Prime Minister, from December 1991 to March 1996. These documents do not appear to have been consulted.<sup>1</sup> The same can also be said of the proceedings of the National Economic Summit Conference held in April 1983,<sup>2</sup> which Bramston sees as being so important in Hawke bringing Australians together after the conflict and discord of the Fraser years. A similar statement can be made concerning the Taxation Summit, in July 1985.<sup>3</sup>

Bramston relies heavily on interviews he conducted with Hawke and those that flitted in and out of his orbit, including leaders of other nations. He interviewed 115 persons, including Hawke (p. 653). He had previously interviewed Hawke more than 20 times as a journalist and author and conducted 'a series of interviews. . . between 2017 and 2019' (p. xv).

In explaining his rationale for writing this 'definitive biography' Bramston says, 'no prime minister has led a government that so fundamentally transformed Australia's economy, society, environment and international relations'.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that 'it is my hope that this book will help readers better understand Hawke's life, in public and in private, and the enduring legacy of his government, which brought Australians together and remade the nation for the modern era' (p. xvii). Bramston says

As a biography, the spotlight is always on or close to Hawke. The story is often told from his perspective, and that of those who observed him up close, allowing for a broader portrait to be drawn (p. xvii).

Bramston's approach to *Bob Hawke* is to focus on the foreground – 'the spotlight is always on or close to Hawke' – to the neglect of background and context. Bramston examines events associated with more than a century of Australian history, with particular reference to the second half of the Twentieth Century, when Hawke returned to Australia after completing his studies at Oxford University. Bramston's account relies on a high degree of assumed knowledge of events, issues and persons which only the 'old' and those with an historical bent may have knowledge of.

For example, Bramston provides brief references to BA Santamaria and 'The Split' (pp. 81, 84 and 115) without explaining the significance of either and the meaning of the latter. Santamaria was an important figure in Australian politics from the late 1930s to the 1970s as a leading advocate of Catholic Social Thought. He was also a leading figure in the 1954 'Split' when mainly Catholic supporters broke away from the ALP, formed the Democratic Labor Party and directed their preferences to the Liberal and County Parties coalition, helping to keep the ALP in the political wilderness until the electoral victory of Gough Whitlam in 1972 (Murray, 1970; Santamaria, 1981; Henderson, 1982).

Similar statements could be made of Bramston's presentation of material on the role of industrial tribunals and national wage cases during the 1960s, when Hawke was the ACTU's advocate; the operation and workings of the ACTU; the relationship between unions and the ALP; and meanings attached to 'right', 'left' and 'center' factions within both the ACTU and ALP. Bramston needed to provide information of a few sentences, or paragraphs, on these and other issues/events as background or contextual information which would have enhanced his presentation of material and Hawke's 'role' in such events. It would have been a kindness to readers.

Bramston mainly employs a heavily fact based approach in *Bob Hawke* which makes extensive use of interviews with his 115 *dramatis personae*. Following on from the above paragraph, there are only three chapters which employ a thematic, conceptual or contextual approach. They are a prologue which provides a brief summary of Hawke's life and times (pp. xviii-xxvii); an overview of how Hawke managed his office and conducted administrative arrangements associated with the machinery of government (pp. 279–298) – the best chapter in the book; and how he managed his serial womanising as Prime Minister (pp. 410–417). There is also a chapter devoted to correspondence between Bill Hayden, during his period as Governor General, from 1989 to 1966, with the Queen in her Constitutional role as Australia's Head of State (pp. 475–485). As interesting as this might be (and it isn't), Bramston should have applied Ockham's razor; it would have helped reduce the size of what is an overly long book.

Bramston sees himself as providing 'a balanced account of Hawke's many lives' and 'his substantial achievements. It is impossible to draw any other conclusion'. He, then draws attention to Hawke's 'considerable personal failings'. These were his serial womanising and being a male chauvinistic pig, his alcoholism (though he went teetotal prior to and during his Prime Ministership) and being ugly, aggressive and rude when drunk. Now we come to what Bramston sees as his major contribution to Bob Hawke scholarship. He says:

his considerable personal failings, which have been somewhat sanitised in previous biographies, are not sanitised here. This aspect of the book may shock some readers. But it is necessary to provide an accurate portrait of a complex life (p. xvii).

This seems to be little more than vicarious pleasure dressed up as scholarship. An alternative approach could have been to focus on his broader contribution to Australian society in a more thematic and considered way, especially given the availability of the new source material which Bramston gained access to.

Bramston has an extensive section on sources that runs to 59 pages (pp. 592–651). There are 1,948 notes in total. Of these, 697 (36%) are based on interviews; of which 136 (7% of total sources) were with Hawke. There are two major ways in which Bramston uses this material. The first, is a large number of his contemporaries providing titbits on his relentless womanising, drinking and turning nasty and aggressive when he had had too much to drink. The second, is on the tittle-tattle associated with various struggles for ascendancy between Hawke and his contemporaries over power and policies. A large proportion of this material is on the long term rivalry between Hawke and Keating over who was responsible for this and that; who made a more important contribution to Australian society. Bramston delights in unpacking the minutiae of who said what to whom, and the opinions of various persons about what happened and who played or didn't play an important role in these never ending political games. Much of *Bob Hawke* reads like a lengthy newspaper article on political skullduggery.

Bramston has organised his material into four major sections. They are Hawke's childhood and education, his work with the ACTU and his period in Parliament prior to the 1983 election, his period as Prime Minister and his post parliamentary life. There are some major problems and omissions with Bramston's account of events associated with Hawke's public career.

At one stage he says that 'The Whitlam government never had a workable prices and incomes policy' (p. 161). Well it did. It and the ACTU convinced the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to introduce wage indexation, where wages were linked to movements in prices, on 30 April 1975 (National Wage Case, 1975; Dabscheck, 1975). It lasted 6 years and was a major part of the landscape of Australian industrial relations and the Australian economy during the second half of the 1970s, continuing into the 1980s. Other than for a brief off-the-cuff comment (p. 186), Bramston doesn't engage with or consider the role of wage indexation during this period, or as a precursor to the subsequent introduction of the Accord which, initially at least, was based on wage rises linked to movements in prices – wage indexation.

After his victory in the March 1983 election, Hawke convened a National Economic Summit Conference, held on 11 to 14 April 1983. Bramston devotes a few pages (pp. 301–303) to the Summit, hailing it as 'the highlight of Hawke's consensus policy making' (p. 301). The Summit endorsed an Accord which had been agreed between the ALP and ACTU prior to the election, hailing the return to a centralised wage determination system linked to wage indexation. This was a policy which had been abandoned 2 years earlier! As already mentioned, there were eight versions of the Accord during the Hawke-Keating years. Bramston pays scant attention to both the Summit and the Accord in his account of Hawke's period as Prime Minister. With respect to the Accord, he has a brief summary of six iterations which doesn't even fill one page (p. 304).

Bramston has simply accepted the rhetoric spun by the ALP concerning the benefits of the Summit without examining what transpired at the Summit and the subsequent hostility it created amongst the business community and 'conservative' or New Right elements in Australia. The Summit did not have any representatives of women or feminist groups. They resented their exclusion. The only female participant was Senator Susan Ryan, who attended in her capacity as a government Minister. The essential 'political' function of the Summit was to have the business community, at best, endorse, at worst, not express opposition to the Accord. Given that a new government had just been elected, business representatives were prepared to keep 'their powder dry'. Bramston has missed an observation made by Sir Peter Abeles, whom Bramston describes as one of Hawke's 'few genuine friends' (p. 562), who said business representatives 'felt during the early days of this Conference, as though we had been invited to play singles tennis against a championship doubles combination' (National Economic Summit Conference, 1983: 194).

The Accord and wage indexation were hailed for their apparent ability to resolve the problems of the Australian economy – high levels of unemployment and prices. Both proved to be intractable. In addition, in the mid-1980s Australia encountered balance of payments problems, and, in 1987, a stock market crash. Following the Summit, business organisations decided to become more active in forming umbrella organisations, such as the Business Council of Australia, and aggressive in resisting and taking on the economic agenda of the ALP. In addition, other groups formed, such as the HR Nicholls Society, to provide a forum for 'right wing' attacks on the ALP and the Accord.

As problems of the economy continued these groups placed pressure on the ALP, and its Accord partner the ACTU, to move away from assumptions contained in the Accord and adopt a neoliberal agenda.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on the wages side of the Accord, this initially resulted in discounting National Wage Cases rises for movements in prices, then to move to a more decentralized system of wage determination with the development of a two tiered system, and eventually the adoption of enterprise bargaining where wage increases were linked to changes in enterprise productivity. In addition, various iterations of the Accord involved wage-tax trade offs where the ACTU agreed to not pursue wage rises in exchange for reductions in income tax.

These trade-offs involved unions and workers agreeing to restrictions on their earning capacity. Such trade-offs had the side effect of providing reductions in the taxes of others, whose incomes were not subject to determinations by industrial tribunals and did not make a similar sacrifice as workers to their income earning potential. Moreover, early versions of these trade-offs provided higher tax relief for high income earners. Reductions in tax, ipso facto resulted in reductions in revenue the Federal government could devote to welfare and other benefits, especially for those at the bottom of the socio economic pyramid. It also involved unions in 'running dead' on wage campaigns and extolling workers to work harder and more productively, in language that would be expected from employers, not union leaders whose apparent role was to defend their rights and interests. These policies involved a substantial decline in union density. Between 1982 and 1996 an Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] survey of union members found union density fell from 49% to 31.1%. A survey of information provided by unions found, between 1983 and 1996, density fell from 55% to 40%; and for financial members, between 1985 and 1996, it fell from 51% to 35% (ABS, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b).

Bramston reports that at a time when Hawke was both President of the ACTU and National President of the ALP, he provided American and British diplomats with reports on political and industrial relations developments in Australia. Bramston says:

The Americans, like the British, were cultivating Hawke, and he was happy to be cultivated. This is what diplomats do. Hawke was not the only Labor or union figure who shared information with foreign diplomats; so did Liberal and Country Party figures. His assessments were no more candid than what he said in private, and often in public. Hawke knew these relationships could pay dividends later, as he continued to build contacts abroad. . . Hawke was not a spy or a mole, or a leaker. While he shared information with diplomats, like many others, it is misleading to describe him as an ‘informant’. His commitment to labor, and to Australia, was total (p. 176).<sup>6</sup>

Bramston provides information on Hawke’s activities on the diplomatic front during his time as Prime Minister and his ability to develop ‘friendly’ relations with international leaders (pp. 418–447). Bramston maintains that Hawke played an important role in ending apartheid in South Africa and the release of Nelson Mandela from prison (pp. xxvi+432–440). This is not a view shared by Bell who has examined Australia’s involvement in apartheid struggles. While ‘official’ tours of sporting teams ended after the Springboks visit of 1971, and Australia contributed to international forums concerning apartheid, more broadly based international forces, especially the choking off of finance by American and British financial institutions, brought about the end of apartheid. Tellingly, Bell points to how Nelson Mandela in his 768 page memoir, *Long Walk to Freedom* ‘made no mention of the contributions. . . [of] Australian activists, or of Hawke as prime minister, during more than four decades of anti-racism struggle’ (Mandela, 1995; Bell, 2022).

The major problem of Troy Bramston’s *Bob Hawke* is that in focusing on the personal, with particular emphasis on ‘his considerable personal failings’ (p. xvii) and the minutiae of interactions with contemporaries, the author has not so much downplayed, but rather ignored broader political, economic and industrial relations developments associated with his career. He barely mentions the wage indexation experiment of 1975 to 1981, or the Accord and machinations associated with its operation.

His focus on interviews involved him in a substantial intellectual opportunity cost. Bramston interviewed 115 people; presumably many ‘key’ persons on multiple occasions. It takes time to set up interviews, record and store information. Interviewing is, of course, a stock in trade of journalists. Having once conducted interviews Bramston wanted to make use of them/incorporate them in his narrative, if for no other reason to justify the time and energy he expended in conducting them. When it came to Hawke’s ‘considerable personal failings’ they all essentially said the same thing. We have comments ad nauseum on his womanising, alcoholism and being a nasty drunk. Rather than trotting out these similar sentiments, Bramston would have been better advised to provide a paragraph or two concerning Hawke’s failings. If nothing else, it would have helped to reduce the length of *Bob Hawke* – Ockham’s razor again – and provided more scope to examine and think through the broader economic, political and other dimensions of his career. Also, it is not clear that information provided concerning Hawke’s picadilloes (names of several of his lovers are provided) provides any useful function in understanding his role and impact on Australia.

The cost of Bramston's interview strategy and 'hunting' for and reproducing quotes is that he has ignored primary sources and commentaries which have chronicled these times. His basic approach is to gloss over major events, he is not concerned with nuance and resolving conceptually difficult issues. His work lacks critical insight. The production of mountains of facts clogs up rather than clarifies his account of events. In the final analysis Bramston has produced a work that is little more than an exercise in hagiography, of that person with such 'magnetic appeal. . . political magic. . . [and] charisma personified' who he first met as an 18 year old, way back in 1994 (p. xiv). *Bob Hawke* is a wasted opportunity; it falls a long way short of being a *Definitive Biography*. Robert James Lee Hawke deserved a better, more thoroughly researched and carefully thought out biography in examining his role and place in Australian history. This is a view I have for anyone who becomes Prime Minister of Australia.

## Notes

1. The eight versions of the Accord are reproduced in Wilson et al., 2000.
2. National Economic Summit Conference, 1983.
3. National Taxation Summit, 1985.
4. This is nothing quite like hyperbole. The decision by the Liberal government under the Prime Ministership of Joseph Cook (June 1913 to September 1914), subsequently endorsed by the ALP under the Prime Ministership of Andrew Fisher (September 1914 to October 1915) and then William Morris Hughes, initially as an ALP, then National Labor and Nationalist Prime Minister (October 1915 to February 1923) for Australia to participate in World War I, had a more dramatic and devastating effect on Australia. Another candidate would be ALP Prime Minister Joseph Benedict Chifley (July 1945 to December 1949), whose reforms after World War II heralded three decades of economic growth characterised by full employment. This ignores the role of ALP Prime Minister John Joseph Curtin (October 1941 to July 1945) guiding Australia through World War II.
5. For a detailed examination of the twists and turns of the Accord years see Dabscheck, 1989; Dabscheck, 1995.
6. Also see Coventry (2021). This is one of the few academic sources referenced by Bramston.

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Zachary D. Carter, *The Price of Peace. Money, Democracy, and the Life of John Maynard Keynes*, 2020; 656pp. ISBN 9780525509035, \$45.50

**Reviewed by:** Norbert Ebert , Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

When a friend saw me reading *The Price of Peace, Money, Democracy and the Life of John Maynard Keynes* by Zacharia D. Carter (2020), she asked me: ‘Who is John Maynard Keynes?’ I described him as arguably the most influential economist of the 20th Century till today. My brief explanation must have sounded bromidic. My friend responded curtly: ‘I somehow doubt that. Sounds like just another white, dead European male to me.’ This brief conversation alone cleared up my initial doubt about the need for yet another book on John Maynard Keynes. However, suppose we today are unaware of the unbroken transformative power, promises and abuses of Keynesian ideas, in which case there is a need for a detailed yet non-academic book on Keynes and Keynesianism.

*The Price of Peace* is a book of many stories, histories, to be precise. There are stories about Keynes' private life which are the apparent focus of a biography. Without further ado, the book becomes about the intersection of biography and history and lessons to be learned from both. As a reader, you get at least two books in one, two lives that surface from a sea of material about Keynes that Carter reviews. There is the life of a man with a razor-sharp intellect, his ideas and policies as he develops them in response to and in the context of historical events during his lifetime. Then there are his ideas, nowadays widely recognised as Keynesianism, as they took on a life of their own beyond his lifetime. Carter's book is a near-perfect example of how history and biography mutually shape each other or what C. Wright Mills described as the relationship between personal troubles and public issues (1959: 8).