

Review of Don Watson, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM*. Sydney: Knopf. 2002

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Combining a love for the classics, a gift for satire, and a strong sense of history, Don Watson is probably Australia's greatest political writer. After producing hundreds of thousands of words for John Cain, Max Gilles and Paul Keating, Watson has now turned his hand to producing one of the most readable books of modern politics.

Published six years (and two federal election cycles) after the Keating Government's demise, Watson's tome is effectively a counterpoint to John Edwards' *Keating - The Inside Story*. Whereas Edwards writes as one of Australia's leading economists, Watson is a self-confessed 'bleeding heart'.

This is a work that will be best appreciated by political insiders. Watson's crisp descriptions of Parliament House; his enjoyment of the spectacle of question time; his pithy descriptions of many a Labor figure - are all far more apposite for those of us who have spent a little time 'on the inside'. But everyone should enjoy language like 'The war washed through Keating's prime ministership like reflux' (p.182) and 'He was an enigma, a paradox, an oxymoron on legs' (p.261). And it is a rare political book which is spiced with references to Anton Chekhov, Carl Von Clausewitz, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Graham Greene, amidst many others. One only wishes that the editor had applied a slightly firmer hand. That the book is not always structured chronologically is mostly enjoyable. But at some points I found myself losing track of the timeline, and on four occasions, an observation made earlier in the book staged a reappearance.

Watson gives readers an extraordinarily candid insight into Paul Keating. Much of it is flattering. Some is not. He compares Keating at one point to Don Quixote, at another to Ned Kelly. Sometimes one feels uncomfortably like a voyeur, listening in on conversations that perhaps were never intended to be revealed. The man who calls himself a bleeding heart sometimes appears to be conducting open-heart surgery in front of our eyes. Yet the final product certainly serves history - producing a richer, more complex picture of Keating than any previous biography has provided, as well as helping us understand one of the most innovative and exciting Prime Ministerships in Australian history.

Approximately half of the book is devoted to Keating's first term (December 1991 - March 1993), and half to his second term (March 1993 - March 1996). It is in the second half that Watson tackles the toughest question of the book: Why, despite strong economic growth from 1993 to 1996, did Labor lose the 1996 election? He mentions several events that contributed to the party's downfall - the frayed relationship between Keating and the ALP National Secretary, Labor's thirteen years in power, the Western Australian Royal Commission into Carmen

Lawrence, Labor's response to the French nuclear tests, Bill Kelty's declaration of industrial war, and the forged letters released by Ralph Willis's office three days before the poll.

But it seems that the real answer is embedded in Watson's speculations about what might have been. He suggests that Labor might have done better had it continued to deluge the nation with ideas - such as expanding the HECS scheme to TAFEs, boosting the food industry, using superannuation funds to foster regional development, and introducing a voluntary environment levy. This would, in the terms Watson defines it, have been 'leadership' - which he regards as synonymous with 'vision' (p.690).

Yet here one's definition of leadership matters greatly - and Watson's is not the only accepted model of leadership. As Harvard's Ronald Heifetz argues in *Leadership without Easy Answers*, an alternative to the conventional 'leadership-as-influence' model is 'adaptive leadership'. In this definition, leadership is regarded as a process in which a community is forced to confront difficult realities, and craft solutions for itself. What Watson describes in passing as 'go[ing] through every region and work[ing] out with the residents what was wanted and what was feasible and worth doing' (p.571), Heifetz would describe as adaptive leadership. Moreover, Heifetz would argue that such a process is more valuable, and more enduring, than vision-setting.

Thus another way of understanding the debate over what the Keating Government might have done in its last term is as a dispute between two very different forms of leadership. Heifetz's model is not without its limitations - a point illustrated by Watson's observation that 'The prospect of a free-trading Asia-Pacific had not been achieved by listening' (p.687). Yet on the evidence that he presents, hindsight suggests that a little more adaptive leadership and a little less 'leadership-as-influence' may have better served the Keating Government.

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