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Power readers

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Our federal MPs reveal the books in their lives, from Tolstoy to Harry Potter

IN the midst of the 2008 US presidential election campaign, we found ourselves catching up over beers on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The two flat-screen TVs tuned to CNN and Fox presented a gladiatorial picture of the campaign, with the talking heads shouting their scripted points for the thousandth time. And yet on the table in front of us lay a discarded weekend copy of The New York Times, and in it we came across an article that offered a different picture of the candidates. The piece detailed the reading habits of Barack Obama and John McCain, and the books and authors that had influenced them.

Obama was portrayed as a lover of fiction and poetry: Shakespeare's plays, Ralph Waldo Emerson's poems, the novels of Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Graham Greene and Doris Lessing. McCain, too, cited literary greats, including Ernest Hemingway, Somerset Maugham, William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Both candidates mentioned their love for Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1946 novel *All the King's Men*, a philosophically drenched tale of political corruption and moral redemption.

And so, later that night, after reading the article, the two of us sat in the bar and discussed the role of reading in politics, especially Australian politics, and just why reading is so essential for political and moral leadership. And if reading is important, as we believed it to be, then what, we asked, ought our leaders read? The Bible, perhaps? Aeschylus and Shakespeare? Or maybe more modern works of the imagination? Might history, biography and nonfiction suffice? And what of the present crop of Australian politicians, how do they stack up? Our discussion prompted us to conduct a survey of the reading habits of Australian MPs, the results of which we are revealing for the first time in this article.

THE greatest leaders have always been readers. And not just any readers, but deep, thoughtful ones. In ancient times the likes of Pericles, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian were steeped in books. American history offers a host of enlightened readers: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson and both Roosevelts. And British history yields much the same impression: Pitt the Younger, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Winston Churchill. Indeed, it's difficult to name great statesmen who shunned the written word and the cultural and civilisational heritage it represents. It seems there is something about great leadership that requires a kinship with what Edmund Burke called the "moral imagination", a need to stock the inner life with an awareness of the best of what has been thought and said, an appreciation of the human condition and, perhaps most important, an understanding of one's deepest self.

To be sure, great leaders are rare. Chateaubriand wrote in the 19th century that "nowadays statesmen understand only the stock market, and that badly". More recently Gore Vidal fretted that "today's public figures can no longer write their own speeches or books, and there is some evidence that they can't read them either". Yet there remain isolated examples of contemporary political leaders who have built their careers around deep reading: Bill Clinton,

Vaclav Havel and Barack Obama come immediately to mind, as do Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Roy Jenkins, Dennis Healey and Chris Patten. And Canadians look set to elect Michael Ignatieff, a former Harvard professor, novelist and biographer of Isaiah Berlin, as their next prime minister.

And so we come to Australia. We don't normally think of Australia as a crucible of great leadership. It's a truism of Australian politics that we've never produced a Jefferson or an Obama, much less a Lincoln or a Churchill. Paul Keating famously claimed at the National Press Club in 1990 that Australia had never had a first-rate leader. He questioned why the US could produce a Jefferson in an 18th-century Virginia backwater with little more than three million people. Australia, it seems, has only produced serviceable leaders: Alfred Deakin, John Curtin, Ben Chifley, Robert Menzies and Bob Hawke.

But how about readers? Edmund Barton, Deakin, Menzies and Gough Whitlam certainly qualify. All were deeply versed in classical literature, which played an important part in their inner lives. Hawke downloaded a lot of data from reading but it's questionable whether he entered into the moral imagination that literature offers.

Curtin, Chifley and Keating were autodidacts who took reading seriously, embodying a common theme from the early labour movement, which through its links to the chartists and Fabians focused on self-improvement alongside an interest in improved working conditions. More recently, Clinton lauded Kevin Rudd as one of the best-informed and well-read world leaders, while Annabel Crabb's *Quarterly Essay* on Malcolm Turnbull revealed his love of literature. Beyond the Lodge, Australia has produced a handful of wise politicians tutored through books: Paul Hasluck, Percy Spender, both Beazleys, Neal Blewett and John Button.

All of this would seem grist for the leaders as readers mill. And yet the picture is more complex. While Harry Truman said that "all leaders must be readers", it seems equally true that not all leaders who read will be great or even good. Think of John Quincy Adams or Anthony Eden, Whitlam or Ted Heath, Jimmy Carter or Gordon Brown. There are many essential qualities that speak to leadership: character, will, determination, perseverance, judgment, understanding and vision. Reading can give succour to all of these qualities, but it will not suffice if those other qualities are lacking.

CONVENTIONAL wisdom holds that we live in an era that doesn't value reading. That wisdom seems sound if we are to believe the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which reported in 2009 that the average Australian watches almost three hours of television a day but spends only half an hour reading. (*Arts and Culture in Australia: A Statistical Overview*.) Even among readers, the ABS found that newspapers and magazines dominate, with books a listless third. And among the books, it's safe to assume that not many are reading the classics. It seems we're too busy, too stressed and too tired. Work, family and friends all take precedence, and perhaps reading books, especially complex fiction, no longer speaks to our most immediate and pressing concerns.

Disappointing, yes, but hardly surprising. Most of us can only shake our heads and plead guilty. But what we want to ask in this article is whether we can reasonably expect our politicians to be different from the rest of us? Can we hold them to different, more elevated, standards? Can we ask that our leaders have a superior understanding of literature, history and culture? Can we ask that those selected to govern bring more to the national table than a predilection for number-crunching and Tweeting? To these questions, we think the answer is yes.

Politics is a profession, not an amateur vocation. From Machiavelli to Max Weber, political theorists have acknowledged that leaders need certain real-world skills to manage the course of events, and that these cannot be learned from a library. Voters rightly demand a wide-ranging command of political and policy detail, and an ability to get things done. Compromise, flexibility, pragmatism, maybe even a streak of ruthlessness and arrogance, are the bread-and-butter skills of the politician. Indeed, Shakespeare teaches us -- whether in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus* -- that politics is treacherous business, and leaders who cannot stomach the dark arts do not last long. All true enough.

And yet one of the deepest mistakes about political leadership is that it is exclusively about power, polls and public policy. Shakespeare also says that political leadership is, at its best, infused with something spiritual and mystical, with a commitment to deeper truths and understandings. What we all yearn for, Shakespeare implies, is leaders we trust, leaders with character, leaders with a sense of self-understanding, leaders who have something meaningful to tell us about ourselves and the deeper, unheard rhythms of our place and times.

So the question arises as to where such deeper insights might be found? It was once believed that great leaders were born, not made, and that a high sense of dignity and duty were best secured through aristocratic blood. Our more democratic temper hopes that great leaders can be taught and self-taught, and that reading offers a primary means to elevate character and understanding in our leaders. Keating once said that it was essential for political leaders to have a fulsome inner life. He claimed to have reformed the Australian economy on the back of Bruckner and Mahler and through the examples he discovered in books. He spoke, like Lincoln or Churchill before him, about the need to get one's "longitudes and latitudes" right in order for the big observations to flow, and to avoid getting snowed under by the ordinariness of things. The Australian media mocked him, of course, and once again displayed an inverted superciliousness.

For when it comes to our leaders, the need for an inner life, so often fostered and nourished through reading, is not some elitist private matter of little concern to the wider public. Deep and considered reading furnishes the mind with standards, gives wing to the moral imagination, maps the expanses of the individual and national character and dusts off the detritus of political life. It can teach our leaders how we might do things better, not just in terms of policy, but in terms of the responsibility, measure and humility we need within our own lives and within the country at large.

A good politician knows that to lead people, you must understand them. The highest task of leadership is communicating a

sense of where you want to take the country. It is not to tell people what to do but to remind them of what is at stake. A leader must know what is to be done and how to explain it, as Thucydides said of Pericles. We can take it for granted that most of our politicians will seek to discharge this duty faithfully. They will attend community dinners, open school fetes, meet with hundreds of constituents each year and try to understand the needs of their electorates.

Yet even if politicians were to spend every minute prowling shopping centres, they could never hope to properly understand the human condition from within such a limited domain. None of us could. Our lives are too narrow in scope and too short in duration for any real wisdom to be discovered unaided, at least until late in our lives. "Experience is the teacher of fools," said Ben Franklin, that most practical of men. And so the greatest leaders, recognising this, have always looked to enter the realm of reading in order to understand what lies deepest and to sense the spirit of a people and their history.

That is not to say that we need a parliament of intellectuals and academics. William Buckley was on to something when he said he would sooner be governed by the first 2000 names in the Boston phone directory than by the entire faculty of Harvard University. But what we do need is leaders who through the wisdom and understanding found in reading can ennoble and dignify the country, draw people towards what is important and sincere and bring a sense of elegance and integrity to our national life. Great leaders deliver a sense of transcendence to their countries: they address their leadership to past, present and future generations, all combined in one unitary sense of the nation.

It was Edmund Burke who first stressed that political leadership must address "the dead, the living and the yet unborn", a kind of spiritual bond that linked generations in one political project. It reflected a fluid and cosmopolitan sense of time, even if the world of Burke's age remained provincial in geography. Today we face the opposite problem. Australia, once the definition of geographically provincial, hemmed in by the tyranny of distance, is now intimately connected with the rest of the world by the internet, A380s, and a globalised media. But we have replaced our new found geographical cosmopolitanism with a provinciality of time. In this we are no different from any other western country. We are locked in an eternal present with a dim awareness of the civilisational heritage and collected wisdom that preceded us. Our technological dominance fosters an implicit superiority, a sense that previous generations have little to teach us. While we all want to live in our own times, it should also go without saying that the "permanent things" -- those things intimately associated with the human condition -- have not changed.

Yet it seems that our leaders, along with the rest of us, have mostly forgotten about those permanent things and embraced a flat and provincial sense of time. Perhaps they have done so, at least in part, because they have stopped reading deeply, turning away from those authors who tutor a more complete understanding of our politics, culture and civilisation. In its place they read newspapers and magazines, which tend to constrict and push the imagination inwards.

This is not meant as an arid call for leaders who can quote facts about Agincourt or Antietam, or who can recite Donne's sonnets at dinner parties. Deep reading is not about facts or grandstanding. It is, as we have attempted to describe, about quietly expanding the moral imagination, gaining access to the distilled judgments and deepest wisdom of our predecessors and bringing to bear the wide-ranging experience of the past to the unique circumstances of our lives and times. Does this mean that we're asking too much from our leaders? Don't they already have too much on their plates, without saddling them with unrealistic expectations about the spiritual and mystical nature of great leadership? Shouldn't they be addressing climate change, financial instability and global terrorism, without worrying about the wisdom of Dostoyevsky and Proust, the histories of Gibbon and Macaulay?

Well, yes, when put like that. But the two are not mutually exclusive. Obama recently descended from Air Force One carrying a book of poetry and some presidential biographies, before immediately heading for a game of pick-up basketball with his closest friends. During the presidential campaign, he told David Cameron, the British Conservative Party leader, that a leader needed to carve out large chunks of time during the day just for thinking and reading. That mindset, which recalls Marcus Aurelius and Lincoln, is, we suspect, a large part of what sets Obama apart.

FOLLOWING our evening in New York debating the links between leadership and reading, we resolved to find out what Australian leaders liked to read. We decided to send a letter to all federal MPs, asking them to name the most recent fiction and nonfiction books they had read, and their all-time favourite fiction and nonfiction titles. We sent out the letters in mid-2008, and followed up with an email and a second letter in 2008-09.

While we awaited the responses, we took bets with one another. A few findings seemed likely. A handful of conservatives would list the Bible, while a handful of progressives would name George Orwell. We doubted anyone would include works by Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare or Montaigne, all of whom formed the basis of a liberal education in earlier times. Perhaps a few would name classic Australian novels such as George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* or Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, but we agreed that most of the literature and nonfiction would be Anglo-American.

After an initial letter and two follow-ups, we received responses from 89 of the 226 federal parliamentarians, or 39 per cent, which is well within the normal range for surveys of elite groups. And while other surveys can be answered by staffers, ours required the attention -- if only briefly -- of the politicians themselves. We recorded a response rate of 41 per cent from Labor MPs, 39 per cent from Coalition MPs and 25 per cent from independents and minor parties.

You can learn a lot about a leader by the books they read, or say they read. At the very least you can learn whether they take reading seriously. Given our belief about reading and leading, it was encouraging that senior Australian politicians from both sides listed serious books. While Kevin Rudd and then opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull did not reply to our letters, others in the leadership groups of both parties did.

Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner mentioned his love for the Russian greats, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. New Opposition Leader Tony Abbott identified Catholic authors J. R. R. Tolkien and Evelyn Waugh as his favourites. Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Human Services Minister Chris Bowen and parliamentary secretary for defence Mike Kelly all disclosed an interest in complex and insightful books, as did the Opposition's Senate leader, Nick Minchin, and education team, Chris Pyne and Brett Mason.

Two of those who responded -- Liberal senators Bill Heffernan and Judith Adams -- were sufficiently honest to confess that they did not read. Another interesting, albeit unsurprising, trend was our politicians' strong interest in reading biographies about other leaders. It seems natural enough that those who aspire to leadership will turn to the stories of their predecessors, or of other leaders from around the world. For instance, we all know now of Rudd's admiration for Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose theology and acts of moral courage give the Prime Minister personal ballast.

WHEN it came to fiction, one in seven of the politicians who responded said they were not at that time reading a novel (and no one who did list a novel failed to list a nonfiction book as well). Those novels listed were eclectic, ranging from childhood fiction (independent MP Robert Oakeshott was reading Dr Seuss, Labor politicians Trish Crossin and Richard Marles were reading Harry Potter) to potboilers (National Party MP Mark Coulton was reading John Grisham, shadow parliamentary secretary for defence Stuart Robert was reading *The Da Vinci Code*). Some had escaped into crime fiction (Gillard and Joe Hockey were reading John le Carre, Tanya Plibersek was reading G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories), while others were deep in classic novels (Abbott was reading Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy, while Bowen was reading *The Great Gatsby*). Australian authors such as Kate Grenville, Winton and Geraldine Brooks appeared on the lists, but seemed no more common than if one were browsing the fiction section at the local bookshop. Not a single federal politician responded that they were reading a book of poems or a play.

When we asked about favourite novels, clearer patterns emerged. *War and Peace* came in at number one, with politicians as ideologically diverse as Tanner and Minchin plumping for Leo Tolstoy's tour de force of Napoleonic Europe, notwithstanding its rejection of the "great man of history" thesis. Perhaps in Pierre Bezukhov's moral and spiritual questing, they find a reflection of their own efforts to make some sense of the world. Perhaps in Prince Andrei's ultimate disenchantment with the desiccated nature of 19th-century public affairs, they see a deeper truth about our own times. Or perhaps in the utilitarian Nikolay Rostov or his saintly sister, Natasha, they find insightfully drawn characters they've known all their lives. Of course, perhaps they just think it's a rollicking good read.

But we like to think that in the Tanner and Minchin households, you'll find a dog-eared copy of *War and Peace*, heavily underlined where young Prince Andrei, approaching death, lauds the lofty, righteous, kindly blue sky, and bemoans the petty and vain Napoleon: "Gazing into Napoleon's eyes, Prince Andrei mused on the unimportance of greatness, the unimportance of life which no one could understand, and the still greater unimportance of death, the meaning of which no one alive could understand or explain."

Orwell's most famous novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, also ranked highly. While Orwell is often considered a literary standard-bearer for progressives, his appeal is significantly wider. A recent survey conducted by Andrew Norton of the Centre for Independent Studies found that among a politically engaged subgroup of Australians, Orwell was the favourite writer across the political spectrum. His honesty, emotional sincerity and lack of pretension remain appealing, while his timeless concern with authoritarianism and social justice continue to resonate.

But what did surprise us was that the only politicians who listed Orwell's novels were Liberals: Mitch Fifield, Cori Bernardi and Gary Humphries. The Labor MPs who listed Orwell preferred his nonfiction. On reflection, this makes some sense. *Animal Farm* and *1984* were resolutely dystopian and anti-communist, and reflected an overwhelming concern with the evil inherent in totalising government. Orwell's nonfiction, on the other hand, was less overtly political, more humane and sympathetic; perhaps more akin to the philosophy of progressives.

A final observation about federal politicians' reading of fiction. Many respondents identified as their favourite novels ones

with an overt political or moral theme, such as the Orwell titles. Bowen listed Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Brett Mason, too, cited *Mockingbird*, as did Bruce Billson (Labor) and Shayne Neumann (Liberal). Liberal Andrew Laming mentioned Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, while colleague Alex Hawke bravely nominated Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Surprisingly, only Chris Pyne listed a Dickens novel, choosing *Great Expectations*, the wonderful bildungsroman about the orphan Pip and his Australian benefactor.

Given the understandable preference for social and political realism, it was pleasing to see a few MPs listing novels beyond the political ken. Maxine McKew said George Elliot's *Middlemarch* was her favourite, while Plibersek and Hockey named Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* respectively. Plibersek would make a fine Elizabeth Bennet: intelligent, lively, open, passionate. Hockey as Fitzwilliam Darcy is more problematic. Perhaps Charles Bingley instead: avuncular, charming, well-meaning, ambitious.

WHEN it came to nonfiction, biographies dominated the MPs' bedside tables. While a few MPs were reading about the lives of non-politicians (Twain, Isaac Isaacs), most were drawn to the biographies of other politicians. Some listed titles about those who had gone before them (Bob Hawke, Keating, Rudd, Mark Latham, Peter Costello), others were focused on British political figures (William Pitt the Younger, Churchill, Cherie Blair), but most were reading about American politicians and the "greatest show on earth".

Deputy opposition leader Julie Bishop was reading a biography of Condoleezza Rice. Junior Defence Minister Greg Combet was looking at Conrad Black's biography of Franklin Roosevelt. Alex Hawke was seeking inspiration in the life of Karl Rove. Bowen was reading a semi-biographical account of the 2004 US Senate race between Tom Daschle and John Thune.

Others were reading biographies of Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. Meanwhile, two respondents couldn't resist a political dig when asked about their most recent fiction book: Labor MP Brett Raguse named *Liberal Thinking* by C. J Puplick and Robert Southey, while Liberal Dennis Jensen listed Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

As far as favourite nonfiction was concerned, classic biographies of Lincoln, Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt all made the top five list, as we expected. But the overall favourite of Australian politicians was Nelson Mandela's inspirational 1994 autobiography *Long Walk to*

Freedom, followed by Robert Caro's multi-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson, which with deep psychological and political insight presents LBJ as a conflicted and ambiguous character and has become a modern touchstone for political biography.

Les Carlyon, author of the top-selling war histories *Gallipoli* and *The Great War*, The New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman and God rounded out the list. Of the remainder, two listings caught our eye. Pyne nominated Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, a favourite of ours, too. And Agriculture Minister Tony Burke was the sole parliamentarian to list a science book, Amir Aczel's *God's Equation: Einstein, Relativity and the Expanding Universe*.

It is 50 years since British scientist C. P. Snow published his famous two cultures essay, lamenting the lack of communication and understanding between the humanities and the sciences. No doubt the scientific community wishes our politicians spent more time endeavouring to understand new developments in physics, genomics, medicine and astronomy.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a handful of our politicians have penned their own books. Starting with data provided to us by the Australian Parliamentary Library, we estimated that 12 of the 226 federal parliamentarians have written a book, although others have contributed to edited collections or written parliamentary reports. It would seem that few of our elected members have the inclination, temperament or time required to write a book.

The "parliamentary book club" (as it is sometimes disparagingly called) comprises Craig Emerson, Duncan Kerr, Graham Perrett, Wayne Swan and Tanner from Labor; Abbott, Kevin Andrews, Peter Costello, Mason, Russell Trood and Malcolm Turnbull from the Coalition; and Bob Brown from the Greens. Our sitting politicians have tended to write fairly dry policy books (novelist Perrett is the one exception).

Memoirs, it seems, are left to the halcyon days of retirement. Unfortunately, most Australian political memoirs have been hastily produced accounts of events (Bob Hawke, Graham Richardson and Costello), or clumsy attempts at score-settling (Mark Latham and Bill Hayden). Since the 1970s, perhaps only Hasluck, Blewett and Button have used their memoirs to successfully shed fresh light on the business of politics.

WELL, we were right to think that none of our Australian politicians had Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare or Montaigne on their reading lists. Yet we gave them only one option each, and not the 10 or 20 slots most readers would need to cover their most-loved books.

We suspect that many of our respondents felt like Petro Georgiou, who responded that it was too difficult to select just one favourite fiction and nonfiction title.

Having said that, it is clearly important that our leaders continue to read deeply, and not just the literature of the day, but the time-honoured literature of the past, with its ability to teach us more about ourselves and properly direct the aspirations of our national life.

While it would be silly to imagine that we might make Deakins out of Heffernans, it's not so crazy to hope Australia's leaders might read more. For the politicians themselves, perhaps this means finding more space to think and read, free from the constant demands to talk and react.

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