

THE HAZEL ROWLEY MEMORIAL LECTURE.
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POLITICS AND CHARACTER. David Marr.

Tony Jones asked his guests on Q&A this week to find a word, a single word, to describe the Prime Minister. He suggested, "doomed" though to be fair to Jones, he said he was only reporting what he had heard from Liberal Party backbenchers. Miriam Margolis offered "tit" and heaved with amusement. The assistant Treasurer Josh Frydenberg offered "decent" and the audience erupted in laughter.

As I was wondering what that laughter meant – which I'll get back to before we finish – I found myself unhappily recalling a night five years ago when I was on Q&A. I'd just published a Quarterly Essay on Kevin Rudd which explored some difficult aspects of his character, among them his hunger for the public's love and the anger which I called "the juice in his machine".

The executive producer of Q&A, Peter McEvoy, had set me up. Good friends do that sort of thing. On the panel with me he had a psychiatrist, Professor Jayashri Kulkarni of Monash University, who takes a dim view of biography. When her turn came, she got stuck into me with some force. "David is not qualified to diagnose anybody," she declared. "You have made a diagnosis, you have taken my patch. And I have to say, this is not right."

I wish Hazel Rowley had been with me that night because I needed a voice more eloquent than my own to stand up for ordinary human curiosity and the business of biography. "You do medical treatment," I bleated. "I'm a biographer, a reporter, I [ask], what's that person like and how does he operate? You cannot bar people from doing that." What I know I should have said to the angry professor was this: "Biographers are in the character business too."

Everything shifts in politics: policies, polls, prices and events. It is a world of chance and accident and ambush. Surprisingly little is

actually predictable. But there is something that can't change, something fixed: the character of the politicians.

While I was defending the prerogatives of biography hopelessly on Q&A in June 2010, the Prime Minister's colleagues were already moving against him. He had ten days left in office. Julia Gillard would say after the coup "a good government was losing its way". She wasn't wrong but she was being coy. Rudd was executed by his colleagues for the very peculiar failings of his character.

I copped some stick for my anger thesis. But as the nation watched Rudd destroy his successor and cripple his party in order to climb back in power, I felt gloomy vindication. You have to go back to Billy Hughes for anything as remotely vengeful, spiteful, driven and vain. Hughes never made it back. Kevin did. So much had changed by that time but not his character. He was as disorganised as ever, as unable to make decisions, as unable to bring his colleagues with him.

I was travelling with the Abbott team in the 2013 campaign when we landed late one afternoon at Richmond airport. As we disgorged from our plane on that immense, empty tarmac, the journalists travelling with Kevin Rudd disgorged from theirs. In what seemed a scene from some strange Italian movie, these two groups moved towards one another and mingled on the runway. We were at the end of a long, well-drilled day. The journalists travelling with Rudd were beside themselves about the confusion and chaos of his campaign. Days later Rudd was voted out of office.

Both Hazel Rowley and I have written literary and political biographies. Rather more is at stake, I have to admit, with FDR winning the war than Patrick White writing *The Tree of Man* or, indeed, Christina Stead writing the best of all Australian novels – though it pretends to be set in Washington - *The Man Who Loved Children*. But the biographer's approach, whether the subject is a politician or a writer, a man of power or a woman of letters, is exactly the same: paint the world; pin down the character; follow the life; rate the work.

Political biographers tend not to be much immediate use. When great political events are being played out, traditional biographers are

usually absent – deliberately - waiting with scholarly detachment until a career is all over and, more often than not, the great man or woman is in the ground. Then from a perch on a university campus, they Hoover up the letters, rake through the ruins and pick over the corpse to write a fat book about a finished life.

Rowley came from that tradition. The Roosevelts were long dead and out of power when she wrote so intimately about their marriage and their twin careers in the White House.

I come from a different tradition. I came to this business through the press. When I joined *The National Times* in the 1970s, I was assigned to write profiles, first of artists and writers - because I was then the arts editor of paper - but soon I began to write about politicians, beginning at the lower ends of the great chain of being and making my way by degrees to premiers, leaders of the Opposition and Prime Ministers.

A new and more intimate way of writing about politicians had developed in the 1970s. The pioneers of this style were Mungo MacCallum, Alan Ramsay, Craig McGregor and Bob Ellis. They never lost sight of the role of character in public life. Indeed, that was more or less the point of their work: character in political action. They treated men and women in public office as human beings. Their work was – by the standards of the time – impertinent, intrusive and exhilarating.

When they wrote profiles, they were big. These were times of incredibly prosperity for newspapers. Advertising kept us fat. Ten thousand word profiles were par for the course at *The National Times*. I wrote lots of them. I felt you could just begin to say something in 10,000 words. Big newspaper profiles of political leaders - intimate, flexible and penetrating – came to be a ritual at the paper at each election.

What I learned writing those profiles I applied to my first fat biography - of Garfield Barwick. I wanted to find out how that little bastard had come, in a single lifetime, from being a devoted Labor man to plotting the coup d'état of 1975. Along the way, I found a great deal to admire in him – the sheer skill of Barwick the lawyer – but the book was written as a character study to explain how that man could have lent himself to that disgraceful action.

Among the many casualties of the Internet has been the fat newspaper profile. Newspapers aren't fat anymore. Profiles are anorexic. At some point about 15 or 20 years ago, they began to be a boom in little books, quickly written and quickly published about contemporary politics. And then in 2001 came the Quarterly Essay, a lovely length to write and to read. Thirty thousand words really lets us have our say – and be read in a single afternoon.

The third Quarterly Essay was Guy Rundle on John Howard; the fifteenth was Meg Simmons on Latham; the 34th was Annabel Crabb's gorgeous essay on Malcolm Turnbull which begins with an extended riff on Malcolm holding everybody up on a plane while he stood in the aisle searched for the derivation of the word "batman" on his Blackberry. Number 38 was me on Rudd; number 47, me on Abbott and number 51, me on Pell.

I have become devoted to these slim biographies. I have written them fat and come to love them slim: to biographies written when the subject is still around, still living and breathing and dangerous. It's biography written when there is still time to warn. Timing is just about everything. Literary biography tells us what to read. Political biography – if it's out in time – can help us decide the fate of the country by telling us who these contenting politicians really *are*.

To my mind, that has never been more important because at no time in living memory has politics been so driven by character. This was unmistakably clear by 2006 when John Howard – stubborn and proud – preferred to go down with the party rather than hand over to another leader. At the same time, Peter Costello couldn't find – what do we call it? – the ordinary gumption to challenge Howard for the job or lead the Coalition in Opposition.

In Brisbane to cover the victory celebrations in the Rudd camp – and very strange celebrations they were – I found myself next morning with a group of exhausted journalists standing around a television set waiting for Costello to appear. We knew something was up when he appeared at the microphone with his *wife*. Moments later it was clear: he had come with her at his side to say goodbye to public life. Costello spat the dummy.

By unhappy chance, there followed almost in succession one – and possibly two - prime ministers who, after brilliant careers in opposition, proved not up to the job of leading the nation. Kevin Rudd turned out *not* to be who we thought he was, and Tony Abbott turns out to be *exactly* what he seemed. The old rule illustrated once again is this: winning power is mainly an exercise of political skill but governing is more than any thing a test of character.

Political biographers must never forget that a life in politics isn't quite normal. Don't get me wrong. Wanting to be prime minister is an admirable ambition. But it is odd. The life of a general is perfectly straightforward by comparison. The life of a painter is a little more difficult to explain. Why mess with paint and canvas all your life? The life of a slave trader in darkest Africa is a walk in the park. It's capitalism, after all.

But political biographers are dealing with people who possess such terrifying self-belief that they are willing to lead lives hostage at every point to public opinion and the intrigue of their colleagues, with so little hope – as they say in magazine interviews along the way – of making a difference?

Biographers don't start from scratch each time digging into the characters of politicians. There are deep patterns and strange archetypes as true in Chicago and London as Canberra. As it happens, two of the most persistent archetypes are illustrated in the lives of Rudd and Abbott.

The first of these, which has intrigued me for many years, is the archetype of the lost father. A surprising number of political leaders around the world lost their fathers in childhood. In America they include Clinton and Obama. In Britain, Churchill, Eden and Tony Blair are on the list. In Australia, the pattern is not so marked but if we count leaders whose fathers who were too hopeless to be fathers, the list goes back to the earliest years of Federation.

Andrew Fisher's father was incapacitated; Joseph Cook's was dead; Joe Lyons' was useless; Earle Page's was ruined; Ben Chifley's was estranged; poor Billy McMahon had buried both mother and father by the time he was eighteen; and little Kevin Rudd was eleven when

his father Bert, driving home after a night of drinking, ran into a tree near Caboolture.

The careers of politicians who lost their fathers young have been the subject of a number of studies. The pioneer of these was the biographer Lucille Iremonger who, years ago, drew up a list of the qualities – positive and negative - we expect to find in fatherless prime ministers: unusual sensitivity, extreme self-discipline, an overdeveloped religious sense, aggression and timidity, and overdependence on the love of others.

This picture fits Rudd like a glove. I am afraid to say, it was fossicking in this territory that so upset professor Kulkarni all those years ago. Not that she disagreed with my conclusions – she made that clear over drinks in the green room after the broadcast – just that I should have left the work to her.

As a one of the fatherless, Rudd turned an attractive face to the public as he manoeuvred Labor so brilliantly into office in 2007. He seemed a new kind of leader on the Federal stage: a man of intellect and values. He sounded right. He looked fresh. He was not mired in old Labor conflicts. He seemed a conviction politician of rare courage, a thinker who could take the country into the future.

Australia fell in love with Kevin Rudd, voted him into office and gave him unprecedented approval for a couple of years. But it became clear – certainly behind the scenes – that he did not have the character required of a prime minister. Office revealed him to be a workaholic who couldn't make up his mind, couldn't delegate, couldn't bear to be unpopular and lacked courage.

Now more than ever it is clear the course of politics in this country was decided in early 2010 when Rudd did not hold the double dissolution that might have broken Tony Abbott, locked an emissions trading scheme into place and secured power for the Labor Party for a long time. Rudd agreed with the strategy but never called the election. As the summer ebbed away, Labor leaders would remind him of the election they were supposed to be having, but Rudd shirked the challenge and spent his time working with an actor to write a children's book.

Nothing worked after that. He backed away from the ETS; lost the adulation of the crowd; felt jilted, went into a funk; came out fighting; lost the fights; could not govern; and was removed.

The Abbott archetype is the golden boy who serves his mentors. All his career, Abbott has sought mentors to give himself over to. All are men. Most have been old men hanging on to embattled beliefs: true believers; relics of lost causes; men with a high view of their mission; men who believed in the magic of old institutions like the crown and the church. And they loved Tony: he was so unlikely, so promising, a brawling and sharp-tongued golden boy.

The old Catholic termagant B.A. Santamaria was the first and greatest of his mentors. His influence with Abbott continues to this day. From Santamaria he absorbed the idea that standing up to the times, defying the zeitgeist, is the moral purpose of politics. In his service, Abbott was happy to be unpopular. The same was true when Howard became his mentor in the party and the government. Abbott did not crave the approval of the crowd. What he needed was the direct, personal approval of the men he served.

But what happens to these golden boys when they reach the top? Where do they turn for reassurance? We don't know what goes on between Howard and Abbott these days. The old Prime Minister has ventured one or two light criticisms of the new. But what we see in Abbott is a political leader peculiarly tethered to his base. It's as if he is their mentor now. That helps explain an attack on the Human Rights Commissioner Gillian Triggs in the last fortnight that would have earned Abbott no votes. He was playing to his people: to the constituency that fears, indeed despises the whole enterprise of protecting human rights.

Abbott came to office promising to grow. This hasn't happened – in great part, I believe, because this man of many mentors so needs the direct reassurance of the people that now most matters to him: the narrow core. What we saw once in him is what we have now, and there is little prospect that this will ever change.

But say this for Abbott: he is and has always been lucky. Napoleon knew about the power of luck. He insisted on having lucky generals around him in battle. Tony Abbott, doomed according to his own backbenchers on Sunday, was reprieved on Monday by an Ipsos poll.

The heat was off by the time Q&A went to air. Which brings us back to the roar of laughter when Josh Frydenberg called his leader decent. It was a strong roar from a politically divided audience. And it was instantaneous.

Good word “decent.” It’s not pitched too high. It somehow acknowledges there will be failings; that our leaders can’t always live up to the high hopes we have for them. And I don’t just mean the high hopes of biographers. We may be professionals in the character business – but the character of our leaders is deeply the business of us all, all the time.

We want them to be honest and brave and intelligent. We want them not to be arrogant. We want to be able to trust them. We want even to be able to like them. We know we are always going to be disappointed in them because as grown ups we know they have to betray; to break their word; to be at a certain level – as members of a party and members of a government - untrue to themselves. But they will still have us on their side if, even after the inevitable disappointments of office, we can still call them decent.

The story of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt’s marriage could be written and read as one of adultery, betrayal and failure. But Hazel Rowley’s treatment of it is so grown up: for all its terrible faults, this was the marriage that was needed to be for them both to be the leaders they were. No one in their right mind would want to live it, but Hazel gives us reason to admire it – for all its faults – deeply. It was a decent arrangement.

But on Monday night that crowd – laughed at the notion of Abbott being a decent man, a decent leader. I do not for a moment write him off. Not for a minute. I will show myself gloomy enough about his prospects to say this: it looks to me as if it won’t be long before he’s the subject of a fat, scholarly biography.

David Marr.