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Quarterly Essay 47 Political Animal: The Making Of Tony Abbott



Correspondence

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Synopsis

Winner, 2013 John Button Prize Tony Abbott is the most successful Opposition leader of the last forty years, but he has never been popular. Now Australians want to know: what kind of man is he, and how would he perform as prime minister? In this dramatic portrait, David Marr shows that as a young Catholic warrior at university, Abbott was already a brutally effective politician. He later led the way in defeating the republic and, as the self-proclaimed "political love child" of John Howard, rose rapidly in the Liberal Party. His reputation as a head-kicker and hard-liner made him an unlikely leader, but when the time came, his opposition to the emissions trading scheme proved decisive. Marr shows that Abbott thrives on chaos and conflict. Part fighter and part charmer, he is deeply religious and deeply political. What happens, then, when his values clash with his need to win? This is the great puzzle of his career, but the closer he is to taking power, the more guarded he has become. "Since witnessing the Hewson catastrophe at first hand, Abbott has worn a mask. He has grown and changed. Life and politics have taught him a great deal. But how this has shaped the fundamental Abbott is carefully obscured. What has been abandoned? What is merely hidden on the road to power? What makes people so uneasy about Abbott is the sense that he is biding his time, that there is a very hard operator somewhere behind that mask, waiting for power." "David Marr, *Political Animal*" "This is no character assassination. Marr is not afraid to praise Abbott in places and respects his political skills and intelligence." "Michael McGuire, the Advertiser" "David Marr is as brilliant a biographer and journalist as this country has produced." "Peter Craven, *Australian Spectator*" "If you want to hit a man where it hurts, hit him in the groin. David Marr doesn't miss in his Quarterly Essay profile." "Chris Wallace, *Canberra Times*" David Marr is the multi-award-winning author of *Patrick White: A Life*, *Panic* and *The High Price of Heaven*, and co-author with Marian Wilkinson of *Dark Victory*. He has written for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age* and the *Monthly*, been editor of the *National Times*, a reporter for *Four Corners* and presenter of ABC TV's *Media Watch*. He is also the author of five bestselling biographical Quarterly Essays.

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Customer Reviews

Last Sunday I had the pleasure of lunching with the former British treasurer, Norman Lamont.

During the meal, he revealed that the current British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was his former speechwriter. Naturally, we asked what Lamont thought of Cameron. His reply was interesting. He said: "A British reporter recently asked me the same question on TV. I told him that David was very bright, very articulate and very keen to become prime minister. On the other hand, even though we worked together for some time, I still do not know what David's convictions are, and I don't think he knows either." Lamont then went to say that shortly after speaking to the reporter, he met Cameron himself, who told Lamont his answer was spot-on and admitted he was not sure what his convictions were. This got me thinking about Tony Abbott. He is intelligent and articulate and that necessary EQ component of all leaders, the desire to win (which in this case is becoming the prime minister) and spends much time putting down his opponent. And in case anyone thinks this only occurs in Australia, may I suggest they watch the US presidential debates. However, Lamont raised an interesting idea: whether a prime minister (or any leader) can be deemed to be successful unless she or he has convictions. I have just finished reading journalist David Marr's recent essay The Making of Tony Abbott. Marr is bemused by Abbott - he tries to understand what makes him tick but fails. His essay focuses on Abbott's nurture but spends little time on his nature. He spends an inordinate amount of time on Abbott's time at university. However what you do get from reading the essay is that Abbott is a conviction politician.

His observation of the relationship which commenced between Abbott and the (to become) shock jock Alan Jones after Abbott's winning of the seat of Warringah in 1993 (p41, I'm not spoiling it) is an example of both the humour and, more importantly, the correctness without being politically correct that Marr can risk as a very open commentator. The transformation that he subtly charts in Abbott's choices, in particular the extent to which they are influenced by day-to-day politics or by his values, is reminiscent of many politicians, notably Kevin Rudd in Marr's earlier Quarterly Essay and the John Howard in the biography by Errington and Van Onselen. That Marr nominates Politics Abbott or Values Abbott as the author of various decisions is none too subtle, but the evolution of this dichotomy is the story Marr tracks skilfully. This is a strength of Marr as a biographer - that he achieves this in the brevity of a Quarterly Essay rather than in, say, the luxury of his tomely Patrick White bio, makes this essay all the more a rewarding read. The Quarterly Essay series is the ideal medium for authors to tap the detail of the rough and tumble of the last few decades of Australian politics, as well as the many other diverse topics they chronicle. Previously, Laura Tingle and David Marr, as political correspondents for much of this period, exemplify this. Marr utilises his credentials to build this essay up to a political crescendo as the Politics and Values Abbotts alternatively seize the moment against a minority government. Alas, history has not revealed the denouement, so neither could Marr, even if Abbott's interview had allowed quotations.

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