

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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### Howard shows how far we've drifted from the Menzies era

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Set against the turmoil that has racked Australian politics since 2007, John Howard's masterly series on the Menzies era reminds us of what stability looked like.

To say those years were stable doesn't mean they were free of conflict; rather, as the series shows, the Coalition never had an easy ride of it. But with Robert Menzies' long tenure as prime minister now seeming inconceivable, it is worth asking what made it possible and why those conditions appear so remote.

No doubt, the times played a part. Scarred by the Depression and war, and haunted by the threat of a nuclear apocalypse, voters in the advanced democracies valued caution and continuity. Menzies' gradualism spoke to that need, as did the other figures who then towered on the political stage, including Germany's Konrad Adenauer, Norway's Einar Gerhardsen and Sweden's Tage Erlander, who headed their respective governments for 14, 17 and an unparalleled 23 years.

The hardships communities had suffered also meant expectations were lower and more narrowly defined: Australians wanted secure employment, a chance to own a home and safety from external threats. Moreover, as the population was relatively homogenous, those goals were broadly shared, and despite deep political differences, economic development — which involved both rising living standards and a rapidly expanding population — was widely accepted as the primary objective of public policy.

With government doing less, commonwealth spending in 1963, excluding transfers to the states, was barely 12 per cent of GDP, nearly 10 percentage points lower than today. As a result, the bureaucracy was smaller and more manageable: the commonwealth's Senior Executive Service was around one-tenth its current size. And since the boundaries between state and federal responsibilities were sharper, fewer resources were squandered in the squabbles blurred accountabilities invariably bring.

All that made governing easier. And disarray in Labor's ranks helped Menzies too, as the split, and the formation of what became the Democratic Labor Party,

tarnished the ALP's standing, fragmented its electorate and diverted its energies into factional battles. Had Labor been better led, the split might have been avoided; at least in that respect, Menzies benefited from the gift we refer to as good luck, and which earlier epochs revered as a goddess named Fortune.

But as Machiavelli emphasised, Fortune, no matter how generous her blessings, inevitably confronts human action with an irreducible element of opposition, described by him as arising from the forces of chaos, fatality, necessity and ignorance. And for all his luck, Menzies was never spared crises, including the Coalition's near death experience in the 1961 election.

If he survived and prospered, it was ultimately because of his mastery of that mysterious quality, political judgment.

The Greeks called that quality *phronesis*, or insight, while the Romans referred to it as *prudentia*, the capacity to think well in order to act well. Both considered it the principal virtue of the statesman as distinct from *sophia*, the grasp of ultimate causes, which is the virtue of the philosopher. Its precise nature has been debated ever since Aristotle; but long before management gurus blathered about leadership, readers with a sound grasp of the classics, as Menzies had, memorised its attributes on the school benches.

At the heart of those attributes was a firm and unchanging character, a clear vision of the end being sought and a consistent focus on that end's pursuit.

In practice, however, the exercise of judgment was far from easy, St Thomas Aquinas warned, as it encountered powerful obstacles, including arrogance, which undermines the willingness to "carefully, frequently, and reverently" seek advice; flattery, which exposes one to being "deceived unawares by evil counsel"; and impatience, which allows impulse to outrun reason, resulting in decisions taken in haste and repented at leisure. For those dangers to be overcome, Max Weber wrote centuries later, politicians had to combine ambition and the passionate devotion to a cause with a "sense of proportion" born of intellectual and emotional maturity, along with "a distance towards one's self" that rejects all vanity — a tall order, he noted, for how could "warm passion and a cool sense of proportion be forged together in the same soul?"

Yet good political judgment demanded even more than that: it required decisions that were not just well-made but that could be communicated and understood.

That could not happen, Kant argued in his analysis of the faculty of judgment, unless those decisions reflected the *sensus communis*, by which he meant not merely common sense but the entire way the public sees the world. No number of crafty advisers could provide that insight; it rested on an “enlarged mentality” that intuitively viewed decisions from the perspective of others. Simply put, it required the genuine ability to empathise with those one was addressing.

That Menzies had those qualities in spades is obvious from Howard's program; and it is also obvious from the decisions Menzies got wrong that even the most discerning judgment falls far short of infallibility.

Little wonder then that less sure hands, confronted with circumstances to some extent more challenging than those Menzies faced, have struggled so dismally.

And in an age in which we are ever more entangled in public life, but ever less attached to its actors, it is unsurprising that the price paid for those failures has been punishingly high.

Whether the lessons of those errors have been learned remains to be seen; but that only makes Howard's documentary all the more important.

To study statecraft used to be to study greatness, both in victory and in defeat; instead, today's young operatives are taught about organising focus groups and devising clever hashtags. Now, thanks to Howard, they can gaze on Menzies' achievements and with the rest of us, weep.