**Hawke: Getting relaxed and comfortable with the people’s philanderer**

Issue 12, August 2010 | Andrew Thackrah

It is a challenging task to convert the nuts and bolts of public policy implementation into engaging history, let alone gripping television drama. Kevin Rudd’s brief Prime Ministership, after all, reminds us that “we campaign in poetry, but we govern in prose”. In the slogan-dominated 2010 election, the main players appeared to have dropped all pretence of passion entirely. The makers of the telemovie *Hawke* – directed by Emma Freeman and screened recently on the Ten Network – are thus to be commended for attempting to bring the achievements of Australia’s 23rd Prime Minister, Robert James Lee Hawke, to popular attention.

Hawke’s blokey charm and tendencies to self-delusion are ably captured by Richard Roxburgh, while Felix Williamson perfects small Keating mannerisms such as the slight licking of lips. Rachael Blake masters an air of sad detachment that the makers seemingly thought appropriate in a portrayal of the protagonist’s first wife, Hazel Hawke. There, however, the pleasures of *Hawke* end. In an effort to link Labor’s fortunes with the at times tormented and famously emotional personality of Hawke, the filmmakers avoid any serious attempt at highlighting how politics, at its best, is animated by ideas. They take the maxim that the personal is political and deciding that Hawke is a fundamentally decent, though transparently flawed, bloke – the people’s philanderer – are content to leave it at that.

Even with these modest ambitions *Hawke* makes some odd turns along the way. With its focus on character as a driver of the political process it is unsurprising that *Hawke* becomes fixated upon the rivalry between Hawke and Keating. However, the decision to begin the film with Hawke’s downfall at the hands of the Labor caucus in December 1991 is curious. The effect is to portray Hawke’s life backwards, defining the story of Australia’s longest serving Labor Prime Minister by his defeat. Narrative confusion also ensues as the film jumps repeatedly between Hawke’s final days and earlier periods that become closer and closer to the moment of the fateful ballot. Much is sacrificed for the sake of faux dramatic tension. At one stage the film jumps a period longer than the Rudd Prime Ministership. Strangely Keating’s first unsuccessful challenge to Hawke’s leadership in June 1991, after which the Treasurer moved to the backbench, is omitted. The film seems reluctant to slow events down and acknowledge that Hawke, whose popularity reached record levels in his first term was, after all, a product as well as an eventual victim of the Labor party room.

By far the most regrettable aspect of *Hawke* is the film’s failure to deal seriously with the role the protagonist’s Government played in reforming the Australian economy. The Hawke Government, of course, led a dramatic process of marketisation that was accompanied by battles fought within the Labor Party itself. While Hawke’s commitment to the Accord process with the union movement is mentioned (including during a post-coital moment with Blanche d’Alpuget) any suggestion that economic reform radically reoriented the Labor Party away from a traditional social democratic commitment to ‘civilising capitalism’ is studiously avoided under the cover of the Prime Minister’s personality. The message is clearly that any reform introduced by such a decent character couldn’t possibly harm the interests of mainstream
Australians. This avoidance strategy is coupled with a harsh portrayal of Keating as a shady, ambition-filled back-room player whose love of antique clocks does not bode well for Australia. This is the Keating of the ‘recession we had to have’ and little more. We can comfort ourselves that Labor’s post-Hawke troubles arose from Keating’s freakish, sport-averse personality, rather than anything rotten within the Labor project itself.

Content to portray Hawke as the likable larrikin, the film swirls at great speed through the former Prime Minister’s policy achievements (such as the ‘saving’ of Antarctica) and ultimately resorts to listing them as part of the final credits. Additionally, as a by-product of the linking of the Prime Minister’s rough-diamond charm with political success, a grossly unfair portrayal of Hazel Hawke is adopted. Locked in a loveless pact with Hawke to promote his career, the film offers no insight into what initially attracted to Hazel to Bob, and no indication that their marriage of nearly 40 years was ever grounded in any true affection. Hazel appears in Hawke as the nagging female foil to harmless Australian male fun, asking the boys to keep the noise down as they celebrate one evening in the backyard.

According to Hawke the former Prime Minister’s amiability gave rise to his famous focus on ‘consensus’ politics. Hawke is shown early on accepting a copy of Mediator, Blanche’s biography of the former president of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, Sir Richard Kirby. He is later shown trying to persuade Labor Leader Bill Hayden of the merits of bringing organised labour and business together, and eventually, as Prime Minister, he is seen leading an economic summit in the House of Representatives. Yet, consistent with the film’s unwillingness to deal with any normative political concepts, it is never asked why consensus is such a positive thing, and to what end competing agendas require reconciliation. Why is consensus making in and of itself an ideal political approach? As political scientist Tod Moore notes in the recent study What Were They Thinking? The Politics of Ideas in Australia, Hawke himself did not drive the intellectual agenda: others took on the ‘ideas work’: Gareth Evans in foreign affairs; Neal Blewett, Brian Howe and Barry Jones in the delivery of social equity; Ralph Willis and Bill Kelty in the development of the Accord; and Keating as the voice of the main game – economic reform.¹

Missing from Hawke is any critique of the extent to which the former Prime Minister’s consensus politics merely enabled certain policy and political agendas, such as the push towards deregulating the economy, to dominate his government.

The parallel between Hawke’s emphasis on consensus building and the current political discourse around climate change and the taxation of resource companies is revealing. In a sense one can’t blame the filmmakers for focusing on the politics of personality. Political leaders and the parties to which they are beholden seem more aware than ever that, electorally, character matters. Yet every now and then the underlying power of ideas overturns the political order. In Hawke’s time Treasurer Keating famously declared that Australia was at risk of becoming a ‘banana republic’ while the Prime Minister was visiting China. The drama of this occurrence is overlooked in Hawke. Notably, the events surrounding the floating of the Australian dollar are still disputed by both men.² Recently, Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull was

rolled due to his principled stand on the introduction of the Carbon Emissions Reduction Scheme.

There is drama enough in the world of political ideas yet current party leaders seem convinced of the need to assure us that all major policy positions are subject to directionless consultation. The Howard era reminds us that governments can use the claim that they govern ‘for all of us’ to cover a multitude of sins. In this sense *Hawke*, with its focus on commonsense politics, ironically reflects the values of the past conservative regime. Sadly, this bland and unambitious film could also be seen as holding a mirror to the present.

*Andrew Thackrah* is a postgraduate candidate in Humanities at The University of Western Australia and a co-editor of *The New Critic*.