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Kelly, Paul - *Triumph and Demise: The broken promise of a Labor generation*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic, 2014, pp. 580, ISBN 9780522866810 (ebook)

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On the morning of 24 June, 2010, I was embarking on a journey to the United States. The excitement of soaring over the Pacific in a new act in my own personal drama was momentarily capped by the excitement of events taking place on the Australian political stage — but only momentarily, I have to confess. Still, I have always felt slightly cheated at missing the chance to watch the piquant moments of the tragedy as they unfolded: Rudd's tears and the June days that followed. This is one of the reasons why I was eager to read Kelly's forensic analysis. The other is that it is often the discussion of the events, rather than the momentary thrill of living through them, that yields the greater intellectual satisfaction.

Paul Kelly's book, with its punchy title promising a pile-up of bodies, invites literary explanations of political behaviour. Greek tragedy is often invoked in political contexts, and much of this tale of the downfall due to hubris of a man of promise fits this genre. But to give us a political story that pits human vainglory against the force of history, only Shakespeare will do, and the book's opening chapters are full of Shakespearian allusions. These chapters deal with the triumph of Labor under Kevin Rudd, the triumph and demise of Julia Gillard, the final demise of Labor under Rudd, and finally the triumph of the Coalition under Tony Abbott, for whom, as Kelly demonstrates, the readiness is all.

Kelly's opening account proves to be better than being there. The book promises, from its first scene, a view of recent Australian politics taken from three different angles, discussed in its nine parts, comprising a total of 33 not-insubstantial chapters.

First, Kelly introduces the key personalities involved as an important – but not all-important – component: political leaders, unlike characters in a play, come to the stage with a script that is defined by the values of the party they represent. Their contribution can, however, make or break a party's fortunes. Kelly's second angle is that of how a party's culture, if locked into the past, can script its demise, and he sees this as particularly true of Labor. Mention of the past brings us to the final dimension of history itself, the collection of circumstances that are largely out of the control of any political leader or party, but to which leader and party must respond.

This is a lot to cover in one book, even one as big as *Triumph and Demise*. While Kelly does justice to his themes to some extent, the book is short on the kind of analysis for which Kelly is well known. When it does appear, it is often too skimpy. Statements of value are ill-defined because he assumes they are consensus values shared by the reader – assumptions, for instance, about economic growth, productivity, 'standard of living', and so forth. Nevertheless, Kelly has an impressive grasp of what makes party politics work, and how parties govern. For Labor to work, as seen in the elegant exposition of his best-known book, *The End of Certainty*, it must jettison the class politics that saw its formation in 1891, and capture the middle ground. This is an important message, and Kelly has made a career of delivering it well.

However, in *Triumph and Demise*, I would like to have seen him make more of a distinction between Realpolitik

and values. I found him too reliant on a strictly economic judgment of the ills he sees as besetting Australian political and social life, as well as the Labor Party. Apart from the political players, all the wonks Kelly interviews are economists, leading to a view that does not sufficiently take into account the role of ideology in the two-party system, particularly with cultural hot potatoes such as climate change and border protection. It may well be that 'It's the economy, stupid' when it comes to elections, but finding the middle ground in issues of values may not always mend a party's internal fissures. This is most obvious in his discussion of some key Labor failures: Rudd's projected emissions trading scheme and asylum-seeker policy in particular. While, as Kelly baldly states, 'the politics [of asylum-seeker policy] are vicious', and his points about failures of leadership and strategy are persuasive, solutions to the problems may not be found in the middle ground, or in pragmatic politics.

Kelly's book is not just about Labor in crisis, it is about Australian politics in crisis. This is a refrain in liberal democracies that still have a two-party system, and while Kelly acknowledges this, he does not canvass the possibility of Australia heading towards a more European-style representational system. Rather, he sees the recent developments of hung parliaments and hostile senates as inimical to good government, pure and simple.

Again, this is not to overlook the book's considerable strengths. Kelly shines at demolishing with devastating logic the internal flaws of each party's position, and demonstrating a failure of political strategy. I would like to have seen this as more of a consistent thread running through the book. In his concluding chapter, he states that his identification of a 'structural, policy and strategic crisis' in Labor has been 'a sustained theme of this book.' A theme, yes, but not sufficiently sustained, and this is because the book tries to do too much.

Let us return to the first three of the nine parts of the book in which Kelly sets out the problems as he sees them, for the political system generally, the Labor Party in particular, and the leaders, Rudd and Gillard, in whom were invested perhaps the greatest expectations since the Whitlam era. All of the key players discussed in this drama face, at one time or other, a collision between party values and the historical moment, and they are judged on the choices they make. In making his judgments, Kelly documents not just Labor folly, but the missteps on the Coalition side that led, first, to the felling of the monumentally successful John Howard through WorkChoices, then to the torching of Liberal Party support for an emissions trading scheme (initially a Howard commitment), along with the leadership of Malcolm Turnbull. These early chapters are among the best in the book, but already one could say that it is exceeding the brief suggested in the title, which singles out Labor. Nevertheless, Kelly offers us a gripping account of the slaying of Howard as Prime Minister, leaving the field open to the golden pair, Rudd and Gillard.

The fate of Rudd and Gillard was inextricably bound up with the tactical choices of their party. Some of these choices, argues Kelly, were so poor that the Labor government never recovered. High up on the list is Gillard's manner of gaining leadership, for all the necessity as she saw it. In discussing the events of 23–24 June 2010, Kelly presents a convincing case that Gillard did not accept the job as deputy in order to snatch the top job – for all his later criticisms of her leadership, he pays tribute to her integrity and professionalism. But her actions 'signed the death warrant of the Labor Government.'

As the curtain comes down on the crisis of 23–24 June 2010, Kelly then moves into the analysis of the events that led to it, with a tightly written account of how Abbott seized the political agenda through a stirring of Liberal and National Party populism that would have been unthinkable under Turnbull. But this is not just a grand tale of political folly, of missed opportunities, of inauspicious decisions, and of failing to respond to political harbingers and auguries. Kelly sees Australian history as an important component of political analysis. He has a journalist's capacity to coin a phrase. His term, 'Australian Settlement,' aired at the beginning of his 1992 analysis of the Hawke-Keating Accord, *The End of Certainty*, has largely displaced the more academic discussions of what is often known as the Deakinite Settlement, first set out in W. K. Hancock's seminal 1930 book, *Australia*.

Kelly's reputation, then, has been built on his ability to straddle political journalism and academic history, and from this position to offer new, interesting insights into the workings of the Australian political system. A hefty book, *Triumph and Demise* promises to cast a cold eye over our recent political turbulence, delivering a verdict on how this reflected 'the broken promise of a Labor generation', as the subtitle of the book promises. It offers the possibility of Shakespearean drama combined with vintage 'Kellyian' analysis. From Part IV of the book, however, it becomes baggy and unfocussed. While he does not abandon analysis, Kelly nevertheless seems to be in two minds about whether to stand back and let his characters play out their roles according to the parameters of his three-angled script, or to give the reader the benefit of every bit of information he has so painstakingly gathered through the series of comprehensive interviews that form the basis of his research. This means that the book develops into a more conventional blow-by-blow account of not just what went wrong, first with the Rudd government, then with that of Gillard, but the key features of those governments. Not all of them are central to the story of triumph and demise.

Because Kelly commits the cardinal authorial sins of not picking his battles or killing his darlings, analysis is buried in a morass of detail. Kelly is rewarding to read when he plays himself: the veteran with an encyclopaedic

knowledge of the Australian political scene, a good head for history and a gift for dismantling the logic or illogic of a given political position. But as well as being too detailed, the book is at times strident and hectoring, especially when dealing with the follies and hubris of K. Rudd. A note of sarcasm often creeps in, for instance, in his description of Rudd after the global financial crisis: 'The public wanted the next story but Rudd's bookshelf only listed [sic] Keynes.'

Too often, Kelly's style in describing Rudd's failures is too personal to qualify as a surgical dissection of the situation. Thus the promise of the book's subtitle is only partially realised: it is not entirely clear where the responsibility of the party ends and that of the leader begins. As a result, the ideas aired in the conclusion float 'rudderlessly'; Kelly has not set us up well for the conclusions he draws. I felt that he wanted to write the definitive book on the failure of Australia's political system generally, *as well as* a book about Labor's failures. The combination of the two spreads his ideas too thinly.

It is understandable that both the author and publisher of *Triumph and Demise* were keen to get it out while the corpses of Rudd and Gillard were still warm. Nevertheless, time spent with a skillful editor bringing the book to heel would have yielded more satisfying results. Apart from the failure to wield the scalpel where necessary, copy-editing was also not always the best. It is not Paul Kelly's job to write like Shakespeare, but it is his editor's job to keep an eye on his prose. Overuse of words and phrases, such as 'Labor brand', and carelessness with spelling and grammar crop up too often. Misspellings ('straight-jacket' for 'strait-jacket', 'discreet' for 'discrete', 'blind-sighted' for 'blind-sided') do a disservice to the quality of the ideas behind the book. Nielsen polls are standard fare for a book about Australian politics, and should be spelled correctly; even the US President suffers the ignominy of his first name being spelt 'Barrack'. Paul Kelly has written about Australian politics for many years with clarity and élan; for all this book's strengths, I would like to have enjoyed it more than I did.

About the reviewer

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