
📌 CURRENT ISSUE — Volume 8 Issue 2 – 2014

Delahunty, Mary - *Gravity: Inside the PM's Office During Her Last Year and Final Days*, Hardie Grant Books, 2014, pp. 300 ISBN: 9 781742707631

Reviewed by Dianne Dickenson - University of Western Sydney (Australia)

The tumultuous circumstances in which the ALP government of 2007-10, and subsequently the ALP-led minority government of 2010-13 governed, have certainly proven to be fertile ground for review by Australian authors. The rise and fall of two distinctive and victorious leaders from the same party both within the timeframe of a single parliament each is unique in Australian political history. By definition, the arrival almost without warning of the first female prime minister was also unique. Finally, that the politics of the period from June of 2010 was set within a personal narrative of the rivalry and ostensible animus between the two leaders virtually guaranteed the political equivalent of a soap opera would shape nearly everything within the 43rd parliament led by Julia Gillard within the terms of this contest.

With this in mind, the eventual fall of the ALP government at the election of September 2013 opened the way to a number of books dealing one way or another with this contest. *The Stalking of Julia Gillard* (reviewed here) by Kerry-Anne Walsh, Paul Kelly's *Triumph and Demise* (reviewed in this edition) and most recently, *My Story* by Julia Gillard herself, each contribute something to the desire amongst the politically engaged to grasp the politics of this period and its drivers.

It was also inevitable, given the novelty and hope attached to Australia achieving its first female prime minister, that those most appreciative of the significance of the moment, would be especially engaged with what was clearly a sustained attempt by her ousted rival and immediately prior Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, to return the favour, apparently it seemed to many of Gillard's admirers, in concert with both the conservative opposition and the Murdoch-led media. When Julia Gillard stood in parliament and gave what came to be called 'the misogyny speech' calling out then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott for what she asserted was his sexist conduct, there can scarcely have been a dry eye amongst her admirers, and very probably any politically engaged woman in Australia fancying that she had been the victim of marginalisation or worse by men.

It's this context that especially predisposed both Walsh's book and Mary Delahunty's *Gravity*. This book is clearly the work of an enthusiastic supporter and falls on a line somewhere between hagiography and apologia. *Gravity* offers a chronicle of the last year of Gillard's leadership, told from the point of view of an insider, who had been a media figure and one time Victorian ALP minister. Delahunty makes no attempt to place any distance between herself and her subject, and significant sections of the book are transcripts of Gillard's own words or those of her admirers.

Although the book is divided into chapters, dealing with distinct periods of time or relating to areas of policy with which Gillard was associated, such as the 'Gonski' and the Disability Care packages, the writing is discursive and rambling, returning frequently to Delahunty's main themes – Gillard's sincerity, her compassion, her steely determination in the face of insistent abuse and so forth, punctuated by rhetorical questions to which Delahunty suggests no answers. There can be little doubt that this book will find a market amongst those wanting to show solidarity with Gillard post politics, but it's hard to imagine that anyone in that group will learn anything of substance about Gillard from Delahunty. Many will have attended or have listened to the podcasts of

Anne Summers' interviews with Julia Gillard, and in any event have been familiar with these matters through social media at the time.

Delahunty asks in her preface:

“ ... does public service in this country have to be so hard? How did she do it, how did she weather the storm day after day? (sic) Why was her personality shrouded in political fixes and often grotesque images? Why did she fascinate an international audience? And why didn't we really get to know her? [...] I also wanted to understand how a woman could take it and how men thought they could get away with it (xxii-xxiv passim). ”

However important answers to these questions were for Delahunty, she makes no serious attempt to suggest answers, or furnish the information from which one might deduce them. That a book written by a journalist asking such questions, intended for an audience convinced that she was on the receiving end of a media-driven hatchet job barely discusses the mass broadcast media beyond a collection of anecdotes is a major failing. Despite spending time discussing the furniture and fittings of Parliament House, Julia Gillard's choice in glasses, her apparent interest in the retirement of the race horse *Black Caviar*. Delahunty mentions the *Finkelstein Report* just once in passing, and completely omits Julia Gillard's fairly high profile address to the National Press Club in July of 2011, with Murdoch embroiled in scandal where she challenged Mark Riley of Channel 7 (and by implication the rest of the media scrum) to 'stop writing crap ... it can't be that hard'. For someone presenting Gillard as 'warrior woman', it's hard to see how Delahunty missed this moment, even allowing that it was outside her book's timeline. Yet in that speech, speaking of the challenges of power Gillard uttered lines that would appear in Delahunty's book in one form or another several times:

“ It doesn't come easy to me to expose my feelings as I make these decisions. I was the shy girl who studied and worked hard, and it took time and effort but I got from Unley High to the law and as far as here, where I am today. I've brought a sense of personal reserve to this, the most public of professions. And the rigors of politics have reinforced my innate style of holding a fair bit back in order to hang pretty tough. ”

Perversely, despite her evident objection to what she regarded as the insistently misogynist framing of Gillard, Delahunty's account offers a description that would not look out of place in the *Women's Weekly* – at one point describing Gillard going out 'in lipstick and battle armour', at another, fussing over which outfit to wear, when to have the cardigan on, which glasses would play best with the media scrum, that Tim's efforts with the blow drier lasted the entire day and much more. One may object that an admirer of Kevin Rudd would not have done likewise. That in seeking to problematise the use of gender against Gillard, Delahunty traded in it is as damning a criticism as any one might make of this book.

In some cases, political books that offer relatively little in substantive analysis at least offer useful references to events and persons of the period that can easily be accessed. Regrettably, *Gravity* is not that kind of book. Most grievously, despite the potentially enormous cast of political characters, events and issues and the rather disjointed and rambling discussion in chapters that give little indication of their likely contents, the book lacks an index. There are two chronologies: one for Julia Gillard's life and a second for the year during which Delahunty follows Ms. Gillard around. Hagiography aside, there is no particular value in these chronologies. The events in question will certainly be easier to search on the web, and yield more detail. Rather, they offer up a picture of what someone who was 'embedded' with Ms Gillard saw as salient. They tell us (indirectly) rather more about Delahunty than her subject.

While *Gravity* was never conceived as a biography, it is a failure both as political analysis of the Gillard prime ministership or even as the kind of light reading one might find in the easy reading sections of weekend papers, of which genre the book is strongly reminiscent. It gives every impression of being written in undue haste – and to be a prisoner of the paradigm of the political insider, borrowing their jargon, dropping the names of key players and even managing when discussing Gonski to divide the school sector 'government', 'non-government' and 'Catholic' schools. Clearly, Delahunty, is either paying homage to her own years in the Catholic system or her ALP tribe in her description of school sector topology.

Gravity is thus not a book that makes a significant contribution to an understanding even of the ill-defined questions to which Delahunty apparently wanted answers. It's essentially a *cri de coeur* from someone much impressed with Julia Gillard and much distressed at her political destruction by the political players inside and outside her party. One might buy this book in order to express solidarity with Ms. Gillard and her admirers, but even such folk need scarcely read it.

About the reviewers

Dr. Dianne Dickenson is a Lecturer in English, Text and Writing and Cultural and Social Analysis in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney. She coordinates units in Children's Culture and Children's Literature and is completing research on children, media and identity.

Paul Esposito is a NSW high school teacher, political tragic and *sub rosa* blogger.

© Global Media Journal - Australian Edition