



PROFILE

John Hewson

They say it's the toughest job in politics, "they" being the ones who have taken it on and failed. Leaders of the opposition exist, after all, for only one reason: to work themselves out of a job by becoming Prime Minister.

For the first half of our federal history, their record was pretty good; most succeeded in the task. But in the post-war years a worrying trend has developed. Four—Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke—made it. Six—Bert Evatt, Arthur Calwell, Billy Snedden, Bill Hayden, Andrew Peacock and John Howard—did not.

After their final losses, both Evatt and Calwell got out of sight rather than serve under other leaders. But the more recent losers have taken a very different approach. For each, the inevitable period of outrage when their parties replaced them was comparatively shortlived, and each was prepared to continue in parliament, albeit with somewhat reduced ambition.

Snedden went on to become Speaker, a position in which he positively revelled; Hayden leapt into foreign affairs. Now, of course, he is at Government House which he rather sadly regards as the apotheosis of his career. It is also hard not to believe that Hayden always basically saw himself as a pick and shovel man rather than foreman material. Like

Snedden, he spent most of his time as leader repairing the worst of the damage he inherited from his predecessor. Like Snedden, he was denied a second chance at the glittering prize by a much more arrogant and ruthless colleague. And, like Snedden, while he might have won an election, he certainly would not have won four. On that score, the ALP can justify its decision, if only in hindsight.

The two surviving Liberal leaders are, on the surface at least, equally happy with their fate. Peacock and Howard both claim to be looking forward to being part of the John Hewson renaissance, which they see, with some justification, as a pretty sure thing. Howard describes the relationship between himself and Peacock as "cordial" which, if true, is a remarkable tribute to the Christian principle of forgiveness; for at least eight years the relationship was one of mutual loathing and often well justified suspicion.



Which brings us to Hewson's place in the hierarchy of opposition leaders. On the surface, he seems destined directly for the winner's circle. The opinion polls have him as a shoo-in. And certainly his background puts him well ahead of most: merchant banker, academic, restaurant owner, Ferrari driver. None of the cultural deprivation which may have affected Snedden, Hayden and Howard, and enough solid achievement to overcome the dilettante image which eventually hamstrung Peacock.

But despite all the optimism on the conservative side of politics, Hewson

remains, for the present at least, unclassifiable. He has simply not been around for long enough to be tested. Even Hawke had a couple of years in parliament before he felt ready to thrust greatness upon himself, and was only opposition leader for the period of the 1983 campaign proper, which may have been just as well for him. A leader is a great deal more exposed than a shadow minister, even one as prominent as Hawke.

Hewson was seconded to the leadership with not only less parliamentary experience, but far less training in the knock-'em-down-drag-'em-out school of politics in which Hawke and Paul Keating excel. So far, this has been an advantage: Hewson is seen as fresh and honest, if a bit naive. He has had an easy run, partly because the government has been in more or less constant confusion since the last election, and partly because parliament has not been sitting much. There is an irony in this, as parliament is traditionally the opposition's best chance to score off the government; in recent years it has become more a place where governments destroy opposition leaders by portraying them as the disciples of the negative; as whingers. In opposition, it is an easy tag to get and a hard one to shake.

Oppositions simply cannot put together a comprehensive plan for the nation overnight and, even if they try, the government is sure to label it an irresponsible wish list. So far, Hewson's whinges have been muted, and his wish lists tentative, but with up to two years before the next election, the honeymoon cannot last the full distance. Sooner or later, Hewson will find out whether he really has the toughest job in politics. If he survives it he will need nerve, luck, and the continued reassurance of the polls which have given him his big early kick along. If he does not, he will, like the other losers, blame the media. If only we were so important.

MUNGO McCALLUM observed several opposition leaders come and go from the vantage point of the parliamentary press gallery.