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### Keating & his caucus

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## Keating & his caucus

### Abstract

Anthony Ashbolt is a lecturer in politics at the University of Wollongong. This is the text of his speech at the City Diggers Club, Wollongong, on the occasion of the launching of *Keating and his Party Room* by Jim Snow, published by Australian Scholarly Publishing in 2017.

### Disciplines

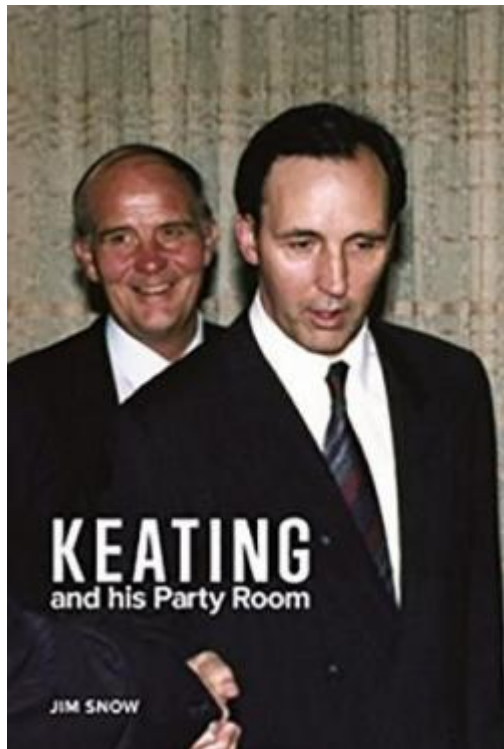
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## Keating & his caucus

Anthony Ashbolt, University of Wollongong



It gives me great pleasure to help launch Jim's book *Keating and his Party Room*. Jim Snow was the chair of the Labor Party's federal caucus in the Keating government from 1993 to 1996. These years are the key focus of the book (although it does range beyond them) and it provides an important reflection upon the making of public policy at that time. The extent of policy-making in that period (and, of course, in the Hawke-Keating years as a whole) is quite extraordinary and changed the political landscape in Australia. Many comrades here would mumble or even declaim loudly that the landscape was not always changed for the better, that Labor laid all the effective foundations of a neoliberalism that gnawed at the core of our democratic political process.

It must be stressed that Jim Snow is a very effective champion of the governments he served and particularly the one in which he was chair of caucus. Moreover, Jim is well aware of the sorts of criticisms that can be made, and at key points in the book does acknowledge those like Ken Davidson (from *The Age*) and even within Caucus, John Langmore, whose agendas were more within the tradition of radical political economy. There is, indeed, a generosity of spirit that runs right through this book—a recognition that there is debate to be had, policy contests to be dealt with seriously, differences to be confronted not just shoved aside—that helps make this book different from some standard party political autobiographies.

Look at what I accomplished, without me there would not have been a life worth living, walking on water is nothing compared with what I achieved—these are not the words, this is not the tone, of *Keating and his Party Room*. Jim Snow was clearly not a self-important chair of caucus who laid down the laws of debate in stern fashion. A welcoming of divergent views, yet a sly glance in the direction of someone about to stir up what he saw as unnecessary trouble, capture Jim's style as chair of caucus. Yet that style is not trumpeted because Jim is more interested in painting a broad picture of policy-making in the period so that we can again capture a sense of what it was like to have a government that through endeavours like *Creative Nation* recognised, amongst other things, the critical importance of infrastructure spending and, specifically, the splendid contribution of the arts community to Australian life. He includes chapters detailing the extent of innovative public policy-making in all areas of life while also acknowledging shortcomings of government in fields like mental health, where the impact on families throughout Australia, including Jim's own, is so great. Now Jim mentions the personal tragedies in his family's life but mainly to highlight a general point about policy inadequacies. You would think he might have been more concerned to place himself and his family at the centre of things but look again at the title—*Keating and his Party Room*.

The title tells you a lot about Jim's character as a politician and even the cover photo reveals a genial and slightly timid soul somehow lacking the authoritative swagger of the man in front (Keating). He recognises the strength and significance of Keating's leadership but wants to place that in context of the often ignored or under-recognised part that the caucus played in government. If you want to read a book about Jim's role in shaping Keating's thinking or Jim's role in running caucus like a tight ship, or Jim's role in making this one of the best governments Australia has seen, then this is not your book. If you want, however, a chronicle of government processes from a self-effacing insider, then this will be more to your taste. No one put better what I am trying to say than a journalist for the *Canberra Times*, Ian Warden. You have to have lived in Canberra for some time to know what an institution Ian Warden was and still is, how people would go and still go religiously to his witty and insightful columns.

At one stage in his book Jim is discussing drugs policy and employing his perspective as a pharmacist and a political representative to argue for reform: 'I introduced a House of Representatives motion that many drugs in the illegal market be placed under prescription control'. Describing the proposal as spine-chillingly progressive, journalist Ian Warden wrote:

*I have never seen [Snow] so animated before and he is usually one of those softly spoken, serene members, who imparts to the perfervid House the same level of tranquillity that a golden Labrador dog is said to impart when allowed to roam the wards of nursing homes and of asylums for the harmlessly deranged.*

What does Jim write next? 'Rick Charlseworth MP (later Australia's successful Olympics hockey coach) seconded the motion. It did not go to a vote...' In what better way could he have highlighted the wisdom of Warden's observation?

There is, then, some wry humour to be found in the book and that also sheds light upon his role as a member of parliament. Amongst all the serious stuff, you do sometimes need to slow down and have a laugh. After discussing in a critically reflective fashion the political history of his Eden-Monaro electorate, including the dispossession of the Aboriginal population, he comments: 'The proximity of Eden-Monaro to Canberra provided many stories from the past; many parliamentarians used the region as a dormitory for eating out or bonking in Bungendore, or just for driving through.' Just for driving through? I had to go back and look again and again at that other phrase: 'for bonking in Bungendore'. And, finally, too many startling images flashed through my mind and I really wondered what this pharmacist had given me.

Jim concludes this fine book with a long and glowing tribute from Kim Beazley to Paul Keating. Just before then, however, he is assessing the dilemmas of and prospects for the future. And there you find just one brief sentence with which I will conclude precisely because they are words from Jim himself that gently proclaim the madness of neoliberalism: 'Challenges for the nation include strengthening TAFE and apprenticeship and a questioning of the wisdom of financing private tertiary education providers.'