
There he is: Prime Minister of Australia (at last), written about, interviewed and watched every day—and still an enigma. He is even an enigma to Edna Carew, despite a professionally researched and written biography by someone who has established herself as a leading finance writer and has the background to tackle Keating in precisely the arena where he excels: economic policy.

I had read Carew’s earlier version of this book, then titled Keating: A Biography, and enjoyed it—though I was a bit put off by the heavy concentration on Keating’s financial views; it was as though it were a book about Keating the Treasurer, rather than Keating the Man. This new edition is essentially an updating of the earlier one to take advantage of Keating’s accession to the prime ministership, and it has all the virtues and flaws of the original. In other words, it brings the Keating saga through to 1992 without really offering any new insights into the man or revising the style and tone of what was already a successful biography.

First, the virtues. This is an accessible and easily read book which follows Keating’s career in classic chronological order (first sentence: “Paul John Keating was born on 18 January 1944 in the suburb of Bankstown...”) and is mercifully free of economic jargon. It has the succinct clarity of mainstream feature journalism of the sort one has come to expect in the quality financial press in Australia, with lots of direct quotes, comments from other journalists, clips from contemporary newspaper reports and some useful scene-setting about what was happening in the politics of the nation at large as well as Keating’s role in it.

Carew gives a good deal of emphasis, rightly, to Keating’s working class/Irish/Catholic background, though without investigating very far just how much of this Keating has kept and how much he has discarded—a fascinating question, and one which, if she had been able to answer it, might have given her a more conclusive or at least central theme to wrestle with in the course of her narrative. She deals, briefly, with Keating’s wealth, his pursuit of style and good taste, his friendships with people like property developer Warren Anderson (“I like stars”). But it is all very circumspect, as though she felt she had to cover the ground without expecting to reveal anything insightful about Keating’s character.

It’s left to Keating’s own statements about his allegiances, especially in the later part of the book, to get across the commitment to his background which he still seems to feel so strongly—so much so that John Hewson accused him in parliament recently of “sounding like Jack Lang” (not realising that it might have been the greatest compliment he could pay his opponent). Carew’s quick description of Jack Lang reads uncannily like a description of Keating himself:

Born the son of a watchmaker, and forced to supplement the family income as a child by selling newspapers, Lang was determined to shake free of working class poverty. He became a successful accountant and a wealthy real-estate agent, and later a newspaper publisher. His entrepreneurial streak and profitable business interests...

Since becoming PM Keating has let some of that personal ideology come through; his old-fashioned Bankstown nationalism, his republicanism, his Irish suspicion of the Brits. The book brings out, too, the personal elan and vivacity which charms even hardbitten Canberra press gallery commentators like Alan Ramsey.

Carew is good at charting Keating’s ambition, his rise from Young Labor star to a three-week minister in the dying days of the Whitlam government, to Hawke’s Treasurer to, eventually, Prime Minister (“He’s a fixer, he’s always been a fixer”—CRA chief economist John McLeod). The chapters on his years as Treasurer are detailed and illuminating, with the successive policy crises and changes documented with extracts from speeches, press conferences and newspaper columnists. There is also a chapter on “Old clocks and four-letter words” which lumps together a lot of human interest material about Keating, from his interest in French Empire antiques to his explosive verbal abuse to his one-eyed belief that you must be utterly for him or utterly against him. For Keating, the world is a jungle peopled by friends and enemies—nothing in between.

And yet, at the end, Keating the man seems as much a mystery as ever. It’s as though Edna Carew has recounted the outline of Keating’s character without ever trying to understand what the man is really like, what makes him run, what is bravura and what is real passion, what the hell he is doing it all for. This is no psychological portrait. There is virtually no attempt at interpretation. Even Keating’s economic policies are simply reported, without any attempt to link them with Keating’s persona or the political/personal/ideological changes which may have prompted them. I was disappointed that Carew didn’t even draw on her own expertise to ‘place’ her subject in the context of the economic debates which have dominated the political agenda in Australia for the last decade. Keating is clearly not just a pragmatist, but this biography reads as though that’s all he is.

So what is he? A technocrat? A moderniser? What’s his agenda—apart from the most difficult one of all, winning the next election and keeping John Hewson out of office? He’s certainly an activist, having pushed through the deregulation of the financial system and a series of tax reforms which typically combine progressive (capital
gains and fringe benefits) and regressive (lower taxes for high income earners) features. He's won the admiration of good, solid Left ministers such as Brian Howe.

Biography is a difficult art, and Edna Carew's is the best one of Keating we have. Her task has been made doubly difficult by having someone as complex and elusive as Paul John to deal with. She doesn't seem to have had much direct access to the man himself. What we are left with is a cautious, impersonal report—at a distance, as it were—of one of the most dazzling figures in contemporary Australian politics. Whether he is as capable of dazzling the Australian electorate as he has the media we will know next year.

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Are we witnessing a “worldwide liberal revolution”? Are we living in the “old age of mankind”? Indeed, has History with a capital ‘H’ really ended? Francis Fukuyama thinks so—but, in the words of Mandy Rice-Davies, “He would say that, wouldn’t he”.

Educated at the University of Chicago where one of his professors was Allan Bloom, author of The Closing of the American Mind, Fukuyama is a former deputy director of the US State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, the intellectual powerhouse of American foreign policy since its establishment in 1948. He even wrote The End of History under the auspices of the RAND Corporation, a private enterprise equivalent of the Policy Planning Staff. In 1990 Fukuyama published ‘The End of History?’ the essay which led to this book, in The National Interest, an influential US neo-conservative journal. ‘The End of History?’ of course, spawned an extensive intellectual debate throughout the Anglophone world.

Yet besides its tasty ‘sound bite’ of a title, how do we explain the success of Fukuyama’s work? The End of History is a confused book, but it is a telling confusion. It captures the ambivalent mental state of America’s conservative intelligentsia as it assesses the post-Cold War era. The End of History manages to be simultaneously triumphalist and pessimistic. No mean feat, but everyone admires a skilled acrobat.

If the revolutions in Eastern Europe and the recent break-up of the Soviet Empire have only been greeted with two cheers in the United States, it is because the Reagan-Bush years look more like the fin-de-siecle of the American century, and less like its zenith every day. In this sense Fukuyama’s book is the first major neo-conservative response to Paul Kennedy’s The Rise and Fall of Great Powers and the debate it spawned.

In the post-Cold War world geoeconomics is replacing geopolitics as the dominant feature of international relations. Like a champion past its prime, the United States seems ill-equipped to win this new game. The United States, as we are constantly reminded, has ‘won’ the Cold War, only to find itself losing the economic peace’.

This is the dilemma of American neo-conservatism that Fukuyama tries to confront. As the taste of victory turns to ashes in their mouths, American conservatives want to be reassured that the two great tenets of their faith—liberal democracy and economic liberalism—have fulfilled their Manifest Destiny. They don’t want to hear about the problems of actually existing liberal democracy—budget deficits, the need to raise taxes, the costs of imperial over-reach and the riots in LA. They want to hear about the inevitability of their creed’s success.

This triumphalist reading of Fukuyama is simply stated:

As mankind approaches the end of the millenium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty. Two hundred years after they first animated the French and American revolutions, the principles of liberty and equality have proven not just durable but resurgent.

Fukuyama chooses to support this claim with an eccentric thesis based upon the works of Hegel or, more exactly, upon the interpretation of Hegel of early 20th century French philosopher Alexandre Kojeve. According to Hegel-Kojeve-Fukuyama, History is one-directional, eschatological and susceptible to Universal laws. In a throwback to the ‘modernisation’ theories popular within American political science in the 1960s, The End of History argues that “the logic of modern natural science” ensures that all societies will eventually have access to the same level of technology, and hence the same level of economic development. In the wake of communism’s collapse, all nations will therefore follow the most efficient path to economic success—economic liberalism.

In the book’s major Hegelian twist, Fukuyama argues that human beings are driven by a “desire for recognition”, what the Greeks called thymos. According to this view, “human beings seek recognition of their worth, or of their people, things or principles that they invest with worth”. Thymos explains the urge of slaves to be free and consumers to spend. At the international level, thymos—or megalothymia, as Fukuyama