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fter being replaced as Liberal leader by John Howard in 1985, he was asked at the ensuing press conference whether he still wanted to be prime minister. "I'm not sure I ever did", quipped the deflated soufflé. Then, realising his mistake, he broke into an appallingly wan grin, which was intended to convey self-deprecation, but which actually said: "Please don't be cruel to me, I'm only a harmless buffoon".

It was far too late for Peacock by then, of course, but his dilemma about how much of his true self to reveal is one shared by his successor. John Hewson has recently been making frantic attempts to "humanise" himself, rather in the same way that aliens from outer space do in Hollywood films, when they try to take over the earth by posing as normal, small-town Americans. Despite reasonably convincing outward appearances, they always give themselves away in the end by striving too hard to be 'normal', occasionally misusing what they take to be idiomatic English, and completely misjudging social contexts. They're just too 'normal' to be normal.

This seems the most likely explanation for Hewson's recent remarks about Bob Carr not being a 'full-blooded' (presumably he meant 'red-blooded': see what I mean?) Australian. And what else can we make of his comments, supposedly in connection with the Coalition's policies, that "everybody is apprehensive about change"? "I have trouble changing my socks", he admitted, "unless I've actually focused on the fact. And people are like that". Obviously a data error in the intergalactic training program.

Whether the evil plot of the Android from Planet GST succeeds, or whether Paul Keating's deadly gamma-rays leave him in a smoking pile of transistors and wires come election time, may depend on the success or otherwise of the humanisation process. Hewson's recent appearances on Live and Sweaty and Burke's Backyard, along with a variety of photo-opportunities of him playing soccer or riding a motorbike, are all meant to convince us that, like the rest of us, his real enjoyment comes from going bowling and digging up the dahlias when he gets the chance. Honest, you could take the bloke down the pub on a Friday night and he'd have his money (plus 15 per cent) down on the pool table before you could say "Your shout, John".

Personally, I'm not entirely convinced. But the real test of Hewson's ability to convince the electorate that he is in fact human is yet to come. I refer, of course, to the apparent absence of pets in the Hewson household. Pets are a vital campaigning tool for any politician who feels the need to humanise him or herself. The fact that Richard Nixon had a spaniel, Checkers, was in itself enough to persuade a substantial part of the American electorate that he couldn't possibly be the paranoid, scheming crook that all other available evidence seemed to suggest. It may be true that you can't fool all of the people all of the time, but with the help of a four-legged friend you can have a damn good try.

George Bush, of course, wasn't averse to enlisting his dog as a member of the White House staff either. Millie, he frequently asserted during the election campaign, had a better grasp of foreign affairs than Bill Clinton. Since Millie has apparently been running the State Department for the past three years (if Barbara Bush's testimony is to be believed), perhaps this shouldn't be too surprising.

Clinton too, although hardly in need of the same level of humanisation as either Bush or Nixon, clearly learned some lessons. No sooner had Millie cleared her desk at the White House than Clinton himself made a crucial policy speech designed specifically to differentiate himself from the previous administration. The Clintons, he announced, had a cat, Socks. What better response to the changing mood of the country than to highlight the feline qualities of the Clinton team? Look at his welfare policy. Americans have become too dog-like, he argues: dependent, but always ready to respond to problems with a show of aggression. 'Tough love' on the other hand, means you have to make like a cat. You may get fed, you may not—if not, you have to fend for yourself.

American voters may have lapped up the message, but clearly John Hewson and his minders have not. One problem may be that dogs, with their strong sense of smell, can detect anything posing as a human being from 100 metres away. Or it may be simply that Hewson is worried about choosing the right dog and, above all, the right name. He's OK as long as 'normal' means white, male, wife-and-two-kids, English-speaking, home-owning, car-driving, flag-loving citizens. It's when it involves anything broader or more spontaneous, like genuine outside interests, a sense of humour or a personality that the circuits start to overload. My guess is that it won't be too long before we discover that the Hewsons own a cattle-dog called Blue.

MIKE TICHER's cat likes to sleep on the immaculate lawn of his rented house.