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Quarterly Essay 47 Political Animal: The Making Of Tony Abbott



POLITICAL ANIMAL THE MAKING OF TONY ABBOTT David Marr

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Synopsis

Winner, 2013 John Button Prize Tony Abbott is the most successful Opposition leader of the last forty years, but he has never been popular. Now Australians want to know: what kind of man is he, and how would he perform as prime minister? In this dramatic portrait, David Marr shows that as a young Catholic warrior at university, Abbott was already a brutally effective politician. He later led the way in defeating the republic and, as the self-proclaimed "political love child" of John Howard, rose rapidly in the Liberal Party. His reputation as a head-kicker and hard-liner made him an unlikely leader, but when the time came, his opposition to the emissions trading scheme proved decisive. Marr shows that Abbott thrives on chaos and conflict. Part fighter and part charmer, he is deeply religious and deeply political. What happens, then, when his values clash with his need to win? This is the great puzzle of his career, but the closer he is to taking power, the more guarded he has become. "Since witnessing the Hewson catastrophe at first hand, Abbott has worn a mask. He has grown and changed. Life and politics have taught him a great deal. But how this has shaped the fundamental Abbott is carefully obscured. What has been abandoned? What is merely hidden on the road to power? What makes people so uneasy about Abbott is the sense that he is biding his time, that there is a very hard operator somewhere behind that mask, waiting for power." • David Marr, *Political Animal* This is no character assassination. Marr is not afraid to praise Abbott in places and respects his political skills and intelligence. "Michael McGuire, the *Advertiser* • Michael McGuire, the *Advertiser* David Marr is as brilliant a biographer and journalist as this country has produced. "Peter Craven, *Australian Spectator* "If you want to hit a man where it hurts, hit him in the groin. David Marr doesn't miss in his *Quarterly Essay* profile." • Chris Wallace, *Canberra Times* David Marr is the multi-award-winning author of *Patrick White: A Life*, *Panic and The High Price of Heaven*, and co-author with Marian Wilkinson of *Dark Victory*. He has written for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age* and the *Monthly*, been editor of the *National Times*, a reporter for *Four Corners* and presenter of ABC TV's *Media Watch*. He is also the author of five bestselling biographical *Quarterly Essays*.

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Customer Reviews

Last Sunday I had the pleasure of lunching with the former British treasurer, Norman Lamont. During the meal, he revealed that the current British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was his former speechwriter. Naturally, we asked what Lamont thought of Cameron. His reply was interesting. He said: "A British reporter recently asked me the same question on TV. I told him that David was very bright, very articulate and very keen to become prime minister. On the other hand, even though we worked together for some time, I still do not know what David's convictions are, and I don't think he knows either." Lamont then went to say that shortly after speaking to the reporter, he met Cameron himself, who told Lamont his answer was spot-on and admitted he was not sure what his convictions were. This got me thinking about Tony Abbott. He is intelligent and articulate and that necessary EQ component of all leaders, the desire to win (which in this case is becoming the prime minister) and spends much time putting down his opponent. And in case anyone thinks this only occurs in Australia, may I suggest they watch the US presidential debates. However, Lamont raised an interesting idea: whether a prime minister (or any leader) can be deemed to be successful unless she or he has convictions. I have just finished reading journalist David Marr's recent essay *The Making of Tony Abbott*. Marr is bemused by Abbott - he tries to understand what makes him tick but fails. His essay focuses on Abbott's nurture but spends little time on his nature. He spends an

inordinate amount of time on Abbott's time at university. However what you do get from reading the essay is that Abbott is a conviction politician. You may not agree with some of his values: Catholicism, monarchy, anti-abortion, etc, but what you have to admire is his willingness to both debate and stand up for his values. Many people doubt that Abbott has what it takes to be prime minister but even Marr concedes that Abbott was an excellent health minister - one of the major portfolios in the federal government. Even more interesting is that Marr defines one half of Abbott as "Values Abbott" in contrast to the other half, which he deems "Politics Abbott". While everyone has focused on the wall banging incident and whether it occurred or not, it may be that Marr has unlocked (unintentionally because he is Labor to the core) why Abbott could be as successful a Prime Minister as say John Howard.

Marr is a great writer and this essay is compelling reading. In it, Marr reveals to us the ambitions and motivations of the man whose desperate desire is to be the next Prime Minister of Australia. Marr seems to be arguing that Tony Abbott operates in two modes: the devout unquestioning catholic, and the ruthless politician. While his political motivations are deeply informed by his religious convictions, Marr argues that Abbott can conveniently put these aside for his political ends. For example Abbott is outspokenly against abortion, and while he opposed access to the abortion drug RU486, he is politically savvy enough to know he can't pursue this agenda further in parliament. The great controversy that has surrounded this essay concern Marr's revelations about Tony Abbott's propensity for threatening behaviour whilst a student politician. Some argue nothing has changed. Marr is a little more generous than that, nevertheless this controversy is still rages, particularly concerning Abbott's attitudes towards women. Abbott's minders are now in overdrive attempting to counter the continuing criticism that he has a problem with women. While the party he leads is doing very well, Tony Abbott is not popular with the Australian public. Australia is a secular country and unlike in the USA, those with outspoken religious convictions are not really trusted. This may in the end be Abbott's real problem, and one he is yet to properly address.

This is a very well written and researched book, presenting a balanced and thoughtful assessment of Tony Abbott. Although some reviewers and most members of the media who have read it have focussed largely on the revelations about Abbott's aggressive behavior during his days as a student, the most important insights seemed to me to be those about what drives him and who have most influenced his views on moral and political issues. These are the factors which will determine what he would do if he were to find himself to be Prime Minister next year.

Very readable analysis. At last a journalist bravely highlights the truth of what Tony Abbot was like as a university student in the 1970s and points to his continuing disrespect of women and treatment of people. No Prime Minister before has had such venomous press drummed up by a nasty lead of the opposition, as Julia Gillard has had to contend with. The contempt by Tony Abbott's journalist friends on Sydney radio has been in the same league as how Tony Abbott treated his female opponents in the SRC back in 1977-8. Quarterly Essay 47 Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott

I was most impressed with the review of Tony Abbott provided by Marr in this essay. Beyond the student politics and the now well-publicised incident with Barbara Ramjan, Marr has given a review of the evolution of Abbott from moderately talented high school student through to his recent time in the Ministry and his recent campaigning style. Though it did not change my view of Abbott, I feel it is worthwhile for all political afficianados as we examine the alternative Prime Minister

It worries me that such a political animal could become the prime minister of Australia. I'm not sure that he has much compassion for the ordinary person. He seems fixed on replaying the record of the Howard Years which were not in the time of our present world. Genuine compassion is not there - only winning and wanting to be king of the castle

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