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***Tales from the Political Trenches***

by Maxine McKew. Melbourne University Publishing, paperback, pps 256, RRP \$29.99, ISBN 9780522862218

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In *Tales from the Political Trenches* Maxine McKew explores the political environment of the Rudd Labor government's win in 2007 and its demise in 2010. In it she details her own decision to run for the seat of Bennelong to move 'from questioning to governing' (84). She relives her excitement at defeating the sitting Prime Minister, John Howard and then her disappointment at her loss. She highlights the tension that exists for individuals in trying to balance their own values and the demands of the electorate with the requirements of being a team player in a political party. Further she gives her explanation for the events that saw Kevin Rudd replaced as Prime Minister by Julia Gillard. What tends to thread through the book is her desire to remain a non-factionally aligned member of the Australian Labor Party while operating within its aegis.

There is no doubt that by 2007 Maxine McKew was at the height of her profession. She emerges from the book as someone who is independent, clever, insightful and adventurous. Her career which began in London was developed in Australia and Washington. By 1985 she 'had a national profile, and was working with interesting people, and discussing issues of consequence' (33). In Washington she came to understand the 'core business of the daily trade in information' (33) and by 2007 recognised what was most admirable about creative political leadership: 'the physical and intellectual effort, the call to service, and the wit to know when to junk conventional wisdom' (39). McKew explains her desire to run for office as 'quite simply, 'I wanted to play a role in public life' (51) and despite approaches from NSW Labor in 2004 she felt she would rather be independent than take a safe Labor seat and be tied to party officials.

The arrival of Kevin Rudd offered Maxine an opportunity to view politics through new lens. She sees Rudd as 'smart, serious and hardworking' (53) and more importantly 'his own creation' (54) and someone who 'understands that the sun and stars don't rotate around the Australian Labor Party' (53). When he invited her to be part of his team, she didn't hesitate. It was her partner, Bob Hogg who suggested she run in Bennelong for three reasons: they lived there, it had a changing demographic and very importantly no one else would want to run for Labor so there would be no debts or obligations (56–57). On her own admission McKew ran her own campaign. She rejected any negative campaigning style and took up a more positive stance and asked people to 'reconsider' their vote. She put herself at a

‘distance from many of the party faithful’ and also rejected any advances from the *Not Happy John* crowd (60).

While she acknowledges ‘the discipline and the clarity of Rudd’s key messages were critical to the success of the national campaign’, she admits she nuanced the messages to better suit the constituents of Bennelong. While this brought opprobrium from one of Labor’s officials, she enjoyed the support of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard along with other senior Labor figures as well as Bob Hawke and Bob Carr on the campaign trail. The campaign itself is outlined in Margot Saville’s book *Battle for Bennelong* and the fact that support came from all over Australia highlights just how different this was from other marginal seat campaigns. While recognising the historical importance of the win in Bennelong, McKew recognised it as merely a stepping stone to getting things done. She says she had not asked for particular treatment and when Kevin Rudd rang after her victory she had indicated she wanted to be part of the executive.

Her elevation to Parliamentary Secretary meant she had to report to both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. She does acknowledge that Julia is extremely confident as well as being a prodigious worker who can get things done (80), but wishes she had had a better working relationship with her. There is no doubt that, despite the variety and constancy of the electorate work, McKew enjoyed the challenge. She found she could help people often in small ways and make a difference to their lives. She was also able to bring national programmes such as the Education Revolution to Bennelong and show those who had voted for her that she could deliver. However, she again ran into trouble, this time from the PM’s office, when she spoke out about her portfolio, child care, and was reported on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She acknowledges herself that the Rudd government had gone to a ‘command and control’ model (109) by not allowing MPs to contribute in a democratic way to the messages that needed to go out to the electorate. She argues that people were unwilling to speak out and Caucus became a rubber stamp for ministers — there was not even a pretence at committees seeing and discussing legislation before it came to Caucus (116). Added to this unease was her feeling of being unable to adjust to the institutionalisation of life in parliament on sitting days. She found parliamentary life restrictive and it is one of her few regrets that she did not seek more guidance from the Government Whip, Roger Price, on how to better manage her new environment. She admits this may seem extraordinary for someone who has been around the political arena for thirty years but also argues that many enter parliament as part of their strategic plan (119–120). Further she goes on to admit that she ‘always felt like an outsider in Parliament House’ (165).

It is in this context that the events of the evening of the 23 June 2010 need to be situated. For Maxine McKew there is no doubt — Rudd was the leader who had beaten Howard, made the apology to Indigenous Australians and faced down the financial crisis (165) and needed to be supported. She does concede that Rudd was also culpable and needed to be more consultative. She also argues that senior

ministers should have tackled Rudd about his behaviour before moving on him. However, there is no elaboration of any of Kevin Rudd's actions, or of why so many backbenchers moved so quickly. What is argued is that the ousting of a prime minister took away any moral authority the Labor party had and Julia Gillard has struggled ever since right through the 2010 election and beyond (169). Maxine McKew sees Julia Gillard's behaviour as PM as less than edifying and merely as a political operator (197). McKew raises issues around the mining tax, the Henry Review, and the dropping of the ETS and seeks to find answers as to why a group of people would so quickly desert an election winning leader. There is a suggestion that both Kevin Rudd and Maxine McKew owe their political success to the fact they did not come from traditional Labor backgrounds but had Labor values (227). On the other hand, their supporters and workers were firmly embedded in the ALP's structures and it is the workers like Stan (223) who have voted and worked for the ALP for 51 years who continue to carry the progressive cause for politics forward. Further she goes on to suggest that leadership is in crisis around the world (232) and it is difficult to get the media to discuss serious issues (234) in the current climate.

While it may not answer any of the questions around the leadership changes of 2010, the book does offer insights and some of the excitement around election campaigns and the day to day life of parliamentarians. It also suggests that outsiders find it very hard to be part of the political process and that to work effectively for change a leader has to be consultative and be driven by ideas. In the end Maxine McKew is hopeful of a Labor renewal. ▲