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**‘Frank Bongiorno, Carolyn Hollbrook, & Joshua Black (Editors),
Gold Standard: Remembering the Hawke government’**

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Frank Bongiorno, Carolyn Holbrook, Joshua Black (eds.), *Gold Standard?: Remembering the Hawke government* (NewSouth Press, 2026), 352pp. Paperback. A\$39.99. ISBN: 978-1-7611-7052-2.

2023 was the fortieth anniversary of the election of the Hawke government. To mark the occasion, a symposium was held in the historic chamber where so much of the political action of the 1980s took place, Old Parliament House, now the Museum of Australian Democracy. From that event, this edited collection has emerged. Although the book's title includes a strategic question mark and asks if the Hawke government was the gold standard, for most of the contributors, it indeed was.

The Gold Standard? has an outstanding editorial team. Frank Bongiorno has established himself as the most influential political historian in Australia. Carolyn Holbrook's innovative work links history with public policy, while Joshua Black is one of the most exciting emerging scholars and an expert in political biography. The other contributors include a range of academics, former politicians, and public servants who have lived experience working with the Hawke government.

This work is a timely contribution to our understanding of Australian politics in the 1980s. The Hawke government with its four successive election victories (plus a fifth under Keating) represents Labor's most successful period in government. Several of the chapters unpack the key factors in this success. Journalist and biographer, Troy Bramston explains how Hawke had a smaller and better disciplined cabinet than his Labor predecessor Gough Whitlam. Former public servant, Andrew Podger, while not uncritical, outlines the pragmatic changes to improve responsiveness and efficiency in public service. Meanwhile Bongiorno draws on Chirs Wallace's work to explain how Hawke-led Labor kept winning elections. This chapter is nicely paired with Meghan Hopper's contribution on how Hawke's display of Australian masculinity shaped his campaigns.

Economic reform dominates how the Hawke government is viewed in public memory. Economist Bruce Chapman and historian Liam Byrne offer helpful and complementary insights into how the Accord worked. In one of the standout chapters, Marija Taflaga explains how the success of the Hawke government owed much to the disunity of the opposition. She also gives an important corrective to the 'myth of policy cooperation' (p. 90). While the Liberals supported some of Hawke's economic reforms in principle, they strongly opposed key initiatives, such as compulsory superannuation.

Although the eponymous question for the book refers to government, some of the chapters feel like they are really answering if Hawke is the gold standard of prime minister. Hawke's leadership style is a consistent theme. We learn about his collaborative nature, which refrained from micromanaging his ministers, and his competitive streak that extended to recruiting cricket legend Rod Marsh to the prime minister's cricket team. Perhaps it is significant that Hawke alone appears on the front cover with his famous silver quiff upgraded to gold.

The heavy focus on Hawke as a leader has merits but does come at the expense of some of his talented front bench. His Treasurer-turned-rival Paul Keating features regularly, especially in press gallery veteran Michelle Grattan's account of their contrasting relationship with the media. Marian Sawyer's insightful chapter unpacks the significant achievements of Susan Ryan as the minister for women. Ralph Willis and John Dawkins get some attention in industrial relations and education respectively.

Other significant players are invisible. Minister for the Environment, Barry Cohen, is absent despite the significance of stopping the Franklin Dam to the Hawke government, both at the time and in public memory. Hawke himself was more generous in his 1994 memoir, giving Cohen the credit for many of his government's environmental achievements.

Deputy prime minister and attorney general Lionel Bowen is also missing (except for passing references). The Hawke government proposed six changes to the constitution at two referendums. All failed. Championed primarily by Bowen, the 1988 referendum has the unfortunate distinction of being the least successful in Australian history. This episode might have been usefully included to introduce more of the significant players in detail and to show that the government had its fair share of failures along with policy wins.

This doubtless reveals my own bias and research interests, but it struck me as an omission that there was nearly no commentary on the wave of new nationalism in the 1980s and the close interest Hawke took in Australian national symbols. For all the commentary on the Accord, only Bramston (very briefly) notes the way the Hawke government promoted a new national identity by cementing Advance Australia Fair as the anthem in 1984, passing the Australia Acts in 1986, and hosting the first Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in 1989. The 1988 bicentennial and the intense debates over its form and symbols receives a single sentence in Holbrook's excellent chapter on Medicare.

That said, the editors understand that an edited collection like this cannot be expected to comprehensively cover four terms in office. The introduction notes, for instance, that the government's foreign affairs policy is a significant part of the story even if the authors of this book 'draw our attention elsewhere' (p.10). In fact, the introduction is itself an important chapter and offers readers a useful review of existing literature. Especially for readers who might find this volume too flattering, the introduction lists several works that criticise the Hawke government for embracing neo-liberal economics, the most significant recent addition to these is Elizabeth Humphrys' *How Labour Built Neoliberalism*.

Just as the Hawke government tried to avoid some of the mistakes of the Whitlam years, the current Albanese government is attempting to avoid the mistakes of the Rudd-Gillard years. They would do well to also consider the successes of the Hawke years. While much has changed between the 1980s and now, many of the insights in this book remain as relevant as ever. This book will be fascinating reading to those interested in Australian political history and compulsory reading for Labor politicians hoping to emulate Hawke's success.

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