

It's always easy to romanticise the past – in celebrating the prime ministership of Bob Hawke it is important to remember it had its peaks and troughs.

Trouble marked many years – the fall of ministers, nasty spats between the PM and his treasurer – and it ended badly. After winning four elections, Hawke was dumped by caucus.

And Hawke's successes look easier in retrospect than they were, or appeared, at the time.

Having imposed that reality check, another reality is that without doubt, Hawke did more, and did it better, than any of the prime ministers we've had in the last decade, and probably any PM since he left.

Many Liberals put John Howard up there with Hawke, but the totality of his achievements doesn't warrant that conclusion, despite his legacies of gun control and the GST.

And Paul Keating's major contribution was as treasurer. In the top job, his most singular success was clinching the unwinnable election; he had policy victories, such as the Mabo legislation, but it was a prime ministership of unfulfilled promise. Arguably, one factor was he got the post too late.

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So if Hawke was the best of our modern prime ministers, what was special about his governing?

View from The Hill: Bob Hawke was master of managing government

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Partly – but only partly – the times make the leader.

When Hawke won power in 1983, the Australian economy was under pressure to open itself to the world. Any government would have had to deal with that. It was a question of how to make the adjustments, which inevitably would involve some pain.

While the challenges imposed by the time put exceptional demands on Hawke and his government, they also provided opportunities to shine.

Although it's less than four decades ago, this was a very different political environment in which to operate, one with a vigorous mainstream media but without social media or the 24-hour news cycle. Paradoxically, it was an easier time in which to have a serious policy debate.

At the heart of Hawke's political strength was his character, and his personal story. The Australian people had a great love affair with their future PM well before he entered parliament.

They admired, albeit wondered at, his freewheeling style – the I'll-do-it-my-way nature of the man. For many people, Hawke typified what they thought of as the true Australian, even if that was a caricature.

This was vital politically because it enabled Hawke to connect with the public. People were inclined to trust him, even when his government's policies demanded sacrifices or involved U-turns.

Days before the 1983 election, Hawke paved the way for breaking promises if the circumstances he inherited demanded it. When things panned out that way, there was more public understanding than you'd see today.

Read more: [*What I learned from Bob Hawke: economics isn't an end itself. There has to be a social benefit*](#)

Hawke had the temperament for governing. Before he became leader, some critics wondered about his suitability for the job. Would he be too volatile to run a team? Would he lack personal restraint?

In fact, he was adept at disciplining himself and, in general, managing his ministers. Secure in his skin – he had a large ego but not a fragile one – he usually knew how much rein to give ministers, and when to rein them in. Gareth Evans wrote: “So long as ministers weren’t screwing up, or deviating too far from the government’s collective storyline, he let us get on with the job”.

The relationship with Keating was highly productive, though progressively harder to handle. On policy, Keating was angry when Hawke overrode him to abandon the push for a broad-based consumption tax, settling for more modest reform. For Hawke, it was a matter of what the traffic would bear.

Hawke’s biggest management failure was his own exit. Having agreed on a succession plan with Keating, he went back on it and stayed too long, fracturing the government and leading to his forced departure.

He was very fortunate in those around him – his cabinets contained some quality players.

Apart from Keating, ministers such as John Button, John Dawkins, Evans, Neal Blewett, Susan Ryan, Ralph Willis, Bill Hayden, Kim Beazley, Brian Howe, and Peter Walsh were among those who were notable not just in their areas but as contributors to the collective discussions. Hawke and those around him had also learned what not to do from the Whitlam experience.

In Hawke’s day, Labor’s caucus and the ALP’s extra-parliamentary wing were noisier beasts than now. Wrangling the caucus could be testing work, for Hawke, Keating, individual ministers

and factional chiefs. Party conferences still had real teeth, and they too, had to be cajoled to endorse what many in the rank and file thought “unLabor” policies.

A linchpin of the Hawke government, facilitating trade-offs between economic reform and social wage benefits for workers, was the accord with the union movement. Keating did much of the negotiating under its framework, but Hawke’s deep roots and connections in the union movement were invaluable.

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So what can be taken from then and applied to now?

We can’t conjure up a Hawke-style personality. No current leader touches him for charisma, popularity or communications skills, even leaving aside the larrikin history (which some say could never pass muster in our more politically-correct era).

These are harder times in which to govern – because of the low level of public trust in politicians, the nature of the news cycle, and much else. Nor are there those compelling circumstances to help shape a government’s agenda and drive change.

But Hawke’s emphasis on bringing people together, in the community, in his party, in his cabinet, carries lessons for a contemporary prime minister. The ability he showed to look to the longer term while still balancing out the immediate politics is much needed today, as are ministers able and willing to bring intellect to arguing their cases, not just talking points.

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