



# John Howard

*September 1998*

**J**OHN HOWARD SAYS HE LOVES Bob Dylan. For the music, not the lyrics. The words of arguably the most significant poet of his generation have left no impression on the man. It's the sound that moves him. Which is curious given that John Howard is practically deaf. Were it not for the operations he has had and the small hearing devices he wears in both ears, his world would almost be a deathly hush.

Mind you, Beethoven was deaf, too, and that didn't stop the music from surging through him. He might not have heard the shepherds singing but he learnt to develop his full range of expressions.

The trouble with John Howard appears to be that his personal handicap of deafness—over which he has bravely sought to triumph—has become a metaphor for his relationship to the country. He finds it hard to hear the tragic notes, the imperceptible sounds, the finer subtleties, the cries and melodies and songlines of his country.

And he finds it even harder to absorb the lyrics, the stories, that accompany those sounds, let alone feed them back to us in an imaginative way. That's largely because his own story prevents him from doing so.

*Because something is happening here  
But you don't know what it is  
Do you Mr Jones?*

Bob Dylan, *Ballad of a Thin Man*

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**J**OHN HOWARD IS A MAN who, it is often said, cherishes constancy, a man firmly rooted in the past. When Opposition leader in the 1980s he still had a trophy room at home proudly displaying his second XI school cricket bat and his cub scout uniform.

He has lived in the same suburb for almost all his married life, pursued the same recreational interests since he was young and taken holidays at the same drowsy seaside resort for the past 19 years. There, at Hawks Nest, an hour's drive north of Newcastle, the Howard family stays at a place called the Lodge, in a unit that backs away from the sea. It has been described by the journalist Michael Gordon as 'a paradise without the ocean view. The big window in the motel unit looks away from the beach out onto an unremarkable street and another block of flats. It's clean and basic, with clichéd dolphin and waterfall prints on the white walls and enough room to sleep the three Howard offspring, provided one is content on the fold-up divan. There is no video recorder, no CD player and no microwave.'

This, of course, does not disqualify him from the top job. Great men can break away from the most circumscribed of worlds. And Howard, a basically good if not great man, has risen, despite all sorts of impediments and obstacles, to the highest office in the land. Indeed, of all the conservative political leaders in the past quarter century, Howard has proved himself the most significant, and resilient.

No-one else in Australian politics can match him for his championing of economic reform; for the way in which he has single-mindedly pursued issues such as smaller government, lower taxation, industry deregulation, more competition, more freedom for workers, cheaper imports, more exports and a tougher stance on unions.

And for these things and more, many people might argue he deserves another chance on October 3. This is not an argument against that proposition. Rather, this is an assessment of the man's character, and the manner in which that character has helped shape the policies of his government. It's an assessment of a man who many believe, despite his notable attributes, has never escaped from the narrow environment into which he was born 59 years ago.

We are all familiar with the contours of this territory. The Anglo-Saxon neighbourhood of Earlwood. The moral purpose of Methodism. The shadow of Sir Robert Menzies. The fitter-and-turner father who, uniquely perhaps, served on the Western Front with his own father and then ended up running a garage. The devout but fiercely anti-Catholic mother who gave up her job at Nock and Kirby's to raise their four sons. Theirs were the values of honesty, hard work, unpretentiousness and courtesy; these were the safe, indivisible lines that Howard was born into.

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In an interview in 1995 with his former senior adviser, Gerard Henderson, Howard noted that the Earlwood of his childhood was 'really middle Australia in its quintessential fashion. You had that feeling that everybody was about the same.' Except they never were. Single mothers (and, in many cases, housebound wives), Greek migrants, Irish Catholics, Aborigines—indeed all who didn't fit into the majority culture—were aware of divisions and discrimination. Howard didn't acknowledge—or simply wasn't aware of—this side of Australian social history.

He never wanted to emphasise the differences between people. And yet in his own anodyne way Howard, himself, was set apart. He was shy because he was deaf and needed a hearing aid. He excelled neither in sport nor classwork but distinguished himself as a superb debater. Although his tastes were conventional, he harboured the extraordinary ambition of one day becoming prime minister. But he was never going to do this by challenging the social status quo.

In the mid-1950s his classmates marched several abreast down Crinan Street towards Canterbury Boys' High School chanting, 'Yo, yo, heave-ho, the headmaster has got to go.' They regarded their principal as tyrannical and unfit for the job. Howard refused to join the marchers, defending the man on the grounds that he had suffered during the war. Besides, as he says now, 'I'm not a great believer in mob activity.'

In the 1960s, when many of Howard's generation were preoccupied with the tragedy of Vietnam, Bob Dylan was penning protest songs such as this:

*You fasten the triggers for the others to fire  
Then you sit back and watch when the death count gets higher*

Bob Dylan, *Masters of War*

**A**ROUND THE SAME TIME, HOWARD was arguing the case for Australia's commitment to the war. He was a true conservative. He had joined the Earlwood branch of the Young Liberals at 18; entered Sydney University's law school (off campus) at the same age and begun his rapid climb through the organisational wing of the Liberal Party.

By the age of 32 he was still living at home, although about to move into a unit in Wollstonecraft on Sydney's lower North Shore with Janette Parker, the woman he'd recently married. Like her husband, she was fascinated by politics. 'Politics is the only game in town,' she once said. 'I wonder how anyone can tire of it.' Certainly, John Howard never did.

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In 1968 he had gained preselection for the State seat of Drummoyne, but failed to wrest it from the sitting ALP member. Three years later he unsuccessfully sought preselection for the safe Liberal seat of Berowra. In 1974, with the backing of the party elder Sir John Carrick, he finally won, on the ninth ballot, preselection and then the Federal seat of Bennelong. It was just the beginning of one of Australia's most extraordinary political trials of endurance.

**I**N JANUARY 1995, THE LEADERSHIP of a disillusioned and desperate party fell to the suburban lawyer with the new capped teeth, clipped eyebrows and glasses. It was his second time around.

Howard was the incarnation of the Menzies spirit—without the great man's authority and bearing. He believed in Empire, the American alliance, free enterprise and family values. His idol was Winston Churchill; his modern political reference points the Thatcher/Reagan revolutions; and his greatest passion cricket. He was the Liberal Party's last resort. John Hewson had forfeited his position as leader after the disastrous election loss of 1993. Andrew Peacock had abandoned his perceived destiny after 28 years in Federal Parliament. Bronwyn Bishop had vaporised as rapidly as she'd appeared. Alexander Downer had self-destructed. Peter Costello, at 37, was happy to bide his time.

In a sense Howard was the last man standing after 13 years in opposition. No-one else seemed up to the job. No-one else—with the possible exception of Costello—had his skills as a political fighter on the floor of the House. No-one else could challenge his intellectual or philosophical leadership on a raft of economic and industrial issues—not least because a powerful and important tendency within the party had been killed off with the purging of moderates such as Chris Puplick, Ian Macphree, Peter Baume and Fred Chaney. Certainly, no-one else had the same unquenchable ambition as Howard.

He'd had the bit between his teeth since entering Parliament at the age of 34. He'd first challenged for the leadership in 1983 and lost to Peacock, the man who was to prove his nemesis over the next decade. Two years later, Peacock ambushed himself and the job was finally Howard's. In 1987, however, his quest for the prime ministership was derailed by the Queensland Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Two years after that he was dispatched by Peacock. The following year he considered standing once more but bowed to the internal forces arrayed against him. In 1993, after Hewson's devastating election loss, he mounted another challenge. He lost. The following year he began manoeuvring once more. Again he was

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denied. Finally, in January 1995, after nine months of farce with Alexander Downer, the job was his. He had finally made it again.

No-one had ever run such a marathon, or shown such compulsive determination. On March 2, 1996, he was rewarded for his tenacity when the nation elected him its 25th Prime Minister. True, he had none of Fraser's patrician countenance nor Whitlam's Confucian grandeur. He was not handsome and urbane like Holt or Peacock. He was certainly no popular lair like Hawke or larrikin aesthete like Keating. Indeed he was short, colourless, bespectacled and hard of hearing.

And yet he was a man whom many Australians, regardless of their political persuasion, wanted to see succeed. They wished him well, if for no other reason than that he had persisted and prevailed all these years, and he represented a clean break with the self-delusion and hubris of his predecessor. The problem for Howard was that, as with most people, his weaknesses and strengths fought for dominance inside the same psyche. He was bright but unreflective, disciplined but narrow, stubborn but often indecisive.

'I think there is an irregular but constant war in Howard to see which side triumphs,' says Pamela Williams, author of *The Victory*, the story behind Howard's ascension to The Lodge. 'We know both Howards very well in this country. We have watched the tenacious Howard who waits and watches and hangs around and hangs back and then comes forward to take another kick until he gets what he wants. But we also know the other side of the coin, the man who freezes in the spotlight.'

At no time did Howard appear more rooted to the ground than in response to Pauline Hanson's incendiary maiden speech on September 10, 1996, in which she criticised foreign investment, warned of Asian hordes and questioned the presumption of Aboriginal disadvantage.

In the weeks that followed, Howard extolled the virtues of free speech—thereby appearing tacitly to support what she'd said—and then predicted her swift political demise. It took him eight months to issue a clear and ringing denunciation of her message, despite seven of his senior ministers, the former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and Federal Liberal president Tony Staley having already done so. He looked like the wrong man for the wrong times.

'There is little doubt,' wrote Gerard Henderson in his book *Menzies' Child*, 'that had such a speech [damning to Australia's internal cohesion and external relations alike] been made at a different time, it would have been condemned by the Australian prime minister of the day, including Paul Keating, Bob Hawke, Malcolm Fraser, Gough Whitlam and Robert Menzies. But, initially, John Howard said nothing.'

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Howard gave a clue recently to the immense frustration criticism of his handling of this issue has caused him when he told Ray Martin on the Nine Network: 'This silly idea that if I had made one definitive speech two years ago she would have been knocked out of the ring and carried off is ridiculous.'

Ridiculous or not, Howard's slowness to act has diminished and helped define his prime ministership. For the moral man there needed to be the moral stance. There wasn't. And this, coupled with his attacks on ATSIC (in his first press conference and now during the election campaign), his constant upbraiding of the 'Aboriginal industry', his refusal to apologise over the 'stolen children' (and who will ever forget his inflammatory address to the historic Reconciliation Conference in Melbourne in 1997?), his hugely divisive 10-point plan on Wik and his preparedness at one stage to hold a race-based election on this issue, as well as his failure to endorse multiculturalism, made it look to many as though he was still walking in the shadows of 1988.

It was then that he had become the first parliamentary leader in more than 20 years to raise the Asian immigration issue, comments that caused an uproar at the time within his own party. Premiers and then State Opposition leaders such as Jeff Kennett, backbenchers, former ministers, and future ministers such as Philip Ruddock (Immigration) and Robert Hill (Environment) joined the chorus of complaint.

Howard felt deeply aggrieved but wouldn't clarify his position, or budge from it. As Paul Kelly wrote in *The End of Certainty*, he seemed unable to understand or deal with the policy and political implications of what he'd said. 'Howard had raised the prospect—but made no pledge—of cutting the level of Asian immigration,' Kelly wrote. 'This meant, in effect, racial targeting.'

Howard's leadership never fully recovered from these remarks. Then or now. 'In view of the controversy of the previous decade,' asserts Gerard Henderson, 'there was only one realistic line of action for the Prime Minister to pursue in September 1996—namely to distance himself from Pauline Hanson as soon and as decisively as possible.'

*I pity the poor immigrant, Who tramples through the mud  
Who fills his mouth with laughing, and who builds his town with blood*

Bob Dylan, *I Pity the Poor Immigrant*

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THESE ARE COMPLEX AND UNCERTAIN times, and this is a delicate task, trying to assess the performance of a prime minister on the eve of the last and, arguably, one of the more crucial, Federal elections of the millennium. To begin with, it is easier to target the incumbent than it is the Opposition leader. It is easier to define the ways in which he has served or failed us than it is to do likewise with his opponent. Howard's record is there to be assessed on the basis of his two-and-a-half years in office. Kim Beazley's is not. With Beazley we can only speculate as to what he might have done had the job been his. With Howard we know. We know that after his great act of statesmanship over gun laws and before his 'great adventure' on tax, indeed the bookends of his first term as Prime Minister, he has lurched from one crisis, policy mishap or backflip to another.

Although he would rather we concentrate on the economic competence of his Government—and there are considerable achievements here, especially with regard to him having so far insulated the Australian economy from the ravages of Asia—we know that, despite his coming to office promising to raise parliamentary standards, five of his ministers, two of his parliamentary secretaries and two long-time staffers were forced to resign over real or perceived conflicts of interest. (Warwick Parer still eludes the political dragnet, and Howard will not offer him up.) 'Never before,' Gerard Henderson has written, 'in the history of Australian Federal politics has there been so much blood-letting in so short a time.'

We are forced to square his own attacks on the Keating government for looking after its 'mates' with the cosy sinecures he has offered John Spender, Michael Baume, Jim Short and David Connolly in far-flung places. We are reminded that Howard promised there would never be a GST. ('There's no way we will introduce a GST,' he said in May 1995. 'The public killed [it] at the last election. It's dead and completely off the Australian political agenda.') And that not long after winning office he coined a new kind of political-speak when he declared that any covenant with the Australian people could be split now into 'core' and 'non-core' promises.

We remember the fiasco that was the government's nursing homes user-pays policy, one that the Prime Minister abandoned after first frightening the daylight out of the frail and elderly. We know, too, that in the name of wiping out the deficit he has also wiped out the dental health program for the disadvantaged, gutted legal aid, slugged students with higher-education repayments, created mayhem among job seekers and agencies by in effect privatising the Commonwealth Employment Service and, contrary to a pledge to leave the ABC alone, denied \$55 million in funding a year to the national broadcaster and pulled the plug on Radio Australia's

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broadcasts to the Asia-Pacific region. All necessary, some might argue, if we are to get back in the black. But hugely controversial nonetheless. We can also recall that after a year of pleading and disputation over media ownership laws, this was put in the too-hard basket, and that heroin trials, notwithstanding the exhortations of many experts, were dispensed with.

We are reminded of his stance before the historic Kyoto summit on greenhouse gas pollutants when Howard's Australia was seen as captive to the polluting fossil fuel industries rather than as a champion of international action against global warming. We are especially reminded of this in the face of record heatwaves, more powerful El Niños, melting ice sheets and the American President, himself, exhorting the world to action while standing on Australian soil. And then, of course, there was the debacle of the waterfront, where the imperatives of reform were overwhelmed by the strong whiff of collusion and the ugly spectre of dogs and balaclavas.

'With Howard it is almost as if becoming Prime Minister was the end result,' says the *Herald* columnist Alan Ramsey. 'Having got there, he has had no real idea of what to do, except to follow an ideological agenda. His political management has been absolutely atrocious.'

**G**ETTING CLOSE TO JOHN HOWARD is no simple matter. Years of political battle and an innate caution have made him wary of strangers. It's only when discussing politics, economics, cricket and those periods of history that genuinely excite him—Europe between the wars and Australia immediately after World War II—that he seems like he could talk for hours. Our interview is conducted over two sittings, the first aboard the prime ministerial jet en route to Hobart; the second in his hotel suite in Melbourne. It begins with a measured smile and a handshake that could just about crack a walnut. 'Hi, good to see ya,' he says unconvincingly.

It has been said that Howard is so lacking in charisma that he never walks into a room; he just walks out of the previous one. That's only partly true. What's also true is that stubborn self-belief has created its own kind of force-field. A steam born from political battle.

At my request our discussion is to be largely non-political. It is an attempt to get beneath the political suit—to try to find the blood and the bones and the heart of the warrior. Which is not to say, of course, that Howard is lacking in humanity. Within his own restricted universe, he is capable of displaying deep emotion.

Anyone who observed him, for instance, on the hustings in Maitland recently would have been struck by his response to a grief-stricken mother



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whose small child had just gone into remission from cancer. As she explained her circumstances to the Prime Minister, you could see that he had become so visibly moved he could barely speak. He just held her in his arms. 'I am quite a spontaneous person,' he says, contrary to the prevailing view. 'If I meet somebody who's been through an unhappy experience I find it easy to embrace them.'

And yet for the most part Howard appears so uncomfortable in his own skin that you almost wish you could pour him a tall Scotch and soda, his preferred drink, to get him to loosen up. Unfortunately, this doesn't seem like the appropriate moment.

Our discussion begins with books. Although a 'spasmodic reader', Howard says he's just finished *Demanding Heights*, an analysis of the conflict between government and the marketplace. His favourite novel remains Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. 'That's the best one I've read in 20 years,' he says cheerfully. And music? 'Well, I like a mixture of folk music and I like Bob Dylan [but] I could take or leave his words.' Which was your favourite Bob Dylan album? 'Well, I like *Blowing in the Wind* as a track. I can't remember a particular album. I just liked him a long time ago.'

*Yes 'n' how many times can a man turn his head  
Pretending he just doesn't see?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind*

Films? 'Oh, look, I could name half a dozen. In recent years *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. I also liked *Shadowlands*. I thought that was brilliant.' I ask him what his most shocking personal experience has been. He pauses. 'I suppose the fairly sudden death of my father when I was 16. He had been ill but was sort of getting better and then he suddenly died. I was playing cricket in an oval opposite school and my eldest brother came and told me that he'd died.'

And then, of course, there was his wife's cancer scare in 1996. In July of that year Janette Howard underwent her first operation. The following year she had a second one, this time to remove lumps from her neck. Shortly afterwards the Howards went to London and the United States, Janette still carrying the stitches. Ask him whether he would have stepped down had they been told the cancer was terminal and Howard reels back in his seat with discomfort. 'Well, I don't think I can fairly—I mean, that is a hypothetical question—we didn't really talk about my getting out of politics because we had a positive view that the operation would be a

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success. It *was* successful. It's two years now and we keep our fingers crossed and hope it's okay.'

Janette Howard is considered by many to be the key to John Howard. There are few who have ever opened the padlock. She is deeply distrustful of the media, blaming them for many of her husband's political misfortunes. She rarely gives interviews. This occasion is no exception. What can safely be said is that she has long been as ambitious for her husband as he has been for himself. Those who were invited to the Howard home on the evening of September 7, 1985, to celebrate Howard's first ascension to the leadership of the party will never forget her kicking off her shoes, clambering onto a table and declaring to one and all: 'Next stop, The Lodge.'

Although her husband insists his wife is a 'follower of contemporary fashion', she is also known to be deeply conservative on a range of issues such as capital punishment—which she supports—and tax incentives for mothers remaining at home, the latter, of course, now government policy. Being a woman of her generation, she has always proudly played homemaker and mother to their three children. At times, naturally, she has found the job stressful but, as she once remarked, that could always be fixed by doing the laundry. Another indication of her capital C conservatism was in evidence during the Clintons' visit to Australia in late 1996. Hillary Clinton was so displeased with the Liberal-dominated guest list for the reception Janette had organised that the American First Lady arranged to have extra guests smuggled in through a service corridor.

In public Janette Howard can often be seen loyally and demurely by her husband's side, wearing the same trademark imperishable smile as Howard himself. Privately, she is known to be much more hard-boiled. 'She is a cosmic force to be reckoned with,' says one prime ministerial source. Says another long-time observer of her role as political wife: 'Anyone who has witnessed her speaking with John in an environment where she feels safe has seen her really let go. She is very forceful. She says things like, "You're too soft on X and too soft on Y." She is much more strident than John.'

She is without doubt his closest political confidante and the one to whom he most looks for approval. On the evening after the Queensland elections this year, senators and members were summoned to The Lodge for supper to find none of Howard's staff in attendance, just Janette. Her presence was a signal to all just how seriously the Prime Minister regarded the calamitous result for the Coalition parties.

Howard says it was the happiest time in his life falling in love with Janette and having their three children. When I ask him, in the interests of levity, how he courted her, the Prime Minister breaks into loud and

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forced laughter. 'Now, that's none of your bloody business,' he says. 'But it was effective. I thought she was instantaneously attractive. And I never let up.'

**I**N MANY RESPECTS, HOWARD IS like the kid who won first prize at school, not through natural flair or brilliance but by sticking to the task at hand. He has just never let up. But as Opposition leader in the 1980s, he was never able to translate his diligence and undoubted skills as an economic reformer into personal popularity or party unity.

Today, despite all appearances to the contrary during this election campaign, he is still, according to numerous Liberal sources, intensely disliked by many of his colleagues, even though a lot of them owe their very political existence to him.

In April this year, for example, Anthony Albanese, the ALP's co-convenor of the parliamentary Left, delivered a scathing summation of Howard during a grievance debate. 'Some have said that he [Howard] is the worst prime minister since Billy McMahon,' Albanese told Parliament. 'That is unfair to Billy McMahon . . . This is a man in refuge from himself and from the rest of Australia.'

What was interesting about the speech was not that it was delivered by a left-wing political opponent—that's to be expected—but rather that a number of Howard's own colleagues had fed Albanese crucial bits of information. They then congratulated him on the style and accuracy of the speech before circulating it to fellow Liberals around the country. This antipathy towards their Prime Minister is based as much on personality as any political differences. Like many Australians, they believe they see a small-minded man who confuses stubbornness with strength, who seems to have measured his life by the quest for political advantage. They also feel embarrassed and diminished by his conservatism and lack of statesmanship on issues ranging from the republic to race relations.

Overseas he has proved himself one of the most uncomfortable prime ministers we have had, uninterested in foreign affairs and out of his depth with other cultures. According to one senior Australian diplomat who spoke with me on condition of anonymity, the basic attitude towards Howard's Australia within the diplomatic community is 'one of lamentation. The feeling is that the larger Australia which had always punched its way above its natural weight has been put on hold. The attitude is, "Well, we have lost Australia for a few years. That Australia is on ice."'

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Craig Skehan, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* South-East Asia correspondent, recalls Howard's trip to the Marshall Islands in 1996 to meet the leaders of the 16-nation South Pacific Forum. The meeting was difficult enough, given that Australia faced diplomatic isolation over Howard's refusal to endorse international greenhouse reduction targets. It was made all the more so by the Prime Minister's own social unease.

'All the leaders were mixing one evening, talking to each other and having drinks,' Skehan says. 'It was a great social event. Howard just stood in a corner talking to an Australian patrol boat captain and his mate. He just didn't seem able to mix. He stayed for about an hour and then went to bed.'

Later on the same trip, in the Cook Islands, Howard refused to be photographed wearing a traditional garland of flowers. Similarly, the following year, when opening an Indian community centre in Canberra, the Prime Minister declined to have a traditional Indian mark daubed on his forehead. The ACT's Liberal Chief Minister, Kate Carnell, had no such problems. It was another sign of Howard's awkwardness in the face of difference.

'He has missed a great opportunity to broaden and open up,' says Gerard Henderson. 'He has not grown in office. He has performed as one would expect on economic matters, but on social issues he hasn't grown. If anything he has shrunk.'

And this at a time when nearly every aspect of Australian society is undergoing dramatic change; a time when we can no longer rely on the old view of who we were; a time when people are yearning more than ever for the kind of stability and safety that doesn't just come in the form of a tax package.

It comes from having a fairer society and, in the words of the author Morris West, having 'a leader capable of encapsulating the desires for his country as well as its fears for the future'. It comes from having someone who is able to create links between elites and non-elites, someone who can build cohesion, heal wounds and talk, not in platitudes but in ways that indicate a feel for issues, social, philosophical and environmental, not just economic. It comes, too, from having a leader unafraid of vision, one who sees that it costs nothing to say sorry and who recognises that despite his great personal and political triumph of 1996, not all the moral questions in this country have yet been settled. Yes, finally it comes from having someone capable of hearing the musical strains, and paying heed to the stories that accompany them.

### **The Whites of their Eyes**

*Your old road is rapidly agin'  
Please get out of the new one if  
you can't lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin'*

Bob Dylan, *The Times they are a-Changin'*

### **Postscript**

*On October 3, 1998 John Howard was re-elected Prime Minister with less than 50 per cent of the two-party preferred vote and a majority that had been slashed from 48 to 13 seats. He claimed the victory as one of the best the party had ever had.*