

Howard

CORRESPONDENCE

Letter From Australia

by R.J. Stove

Two Cheers for Howard

“It ain’t over till it’s over,” said Yogi Berra at his most Chestertonian. Charles de Gaulle, in more meditative style, observed: “*Les fins des régimes sont toujours tristes.*” Both maxims are relevant in the context of Australia’s general election on November 24, 2007, which saw John Howard—prime minister since 1996—crushed by an untried but personally popular Australian Labor Party leader, Kevin Rudd. Mr. Howard thus followed into the sunset Tony Blair and Spain’s José-María Aznar, his fellow lieutenants in the so-called War on Terror. He had the additional humiliation of being defeated in his own electorate, the first Australian prime minister since 1929 to suffer this punishment.

Drawing up a balance sheet for assessing Mr. Howard’s reign (the longest of any Australian leader save for Sir Robert Menzies) is difficult, purely because its highlights bear no discernible relation to the rest of his actions and give the impression of having been brought about by a different person. These highlights, which deserve to be remembered amid the general scorn Mr. Howard now inspires, are two in number: the freeing of East Timor in 1999, and the *de facto* ending two years later of mass illegal immigration.

Perhaps one day, when the principal actors in Australia’s political dramas of the 1970’s, 80’s and early 90’s are all dead, it will be possible to discuss both temperately and lengthily that hoariest and most squalid of Australian political delusions: the belief—religiously upheld by Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke, and Paul Keating—that Australia’s basic survival depended on abjectly appeasing Indonesia. The more obviously immoral Jakarta’s leading

mullahs and their nominally secular stooges became, and the more blatant their genocide against Catholics in East Timor (which they invaded with full Australian approval in 1975), the larger the blank checks that successive Australian governments signed over to them; and the more desperate the defenses of this Danegeld which the “Jakarta lobby” of think tanks and foreign-policy bureaucrats resorted to making. It is not as if we can even trace all of this craven behavior to Australian sectarianism. After all, the most degenerate and embarrassing apologist for Indonesia was a self-proclaimed Catholic—namely, Mr. Keating. Meanwhile successive Indonesian presidents merely took Australian money—and, in particular, Australian military training—as if it were their God-given right. In 1998, one such president (B.J. Habibie), more honest than the rest, explained in pellucid language to his country’s militia what their own peacemaking role would be: “Your job

is to clean East Timor from the East to the West and leave nothing alive but ants.”

No more. Once disgust among Australian voters at Jakarta’s murder machine proved too great for even Mr. Howard to overlook, he sent Australian armed forces into East Timor. In so doing, he ended the quarter-century-old antipodean policy of craven groveling to Indonesia’s tinpot tyrants. The threats of Indonesian *revanchisme*, with which that failed state’s Australian toadies sought to terrify us, proved as insubstantial as dreams.

Mr. Howard’s other worthwhile achievement had connections with the first. Indonesia, however humiliated, could still be a nuisance to Australia. Successive boatloads of Third World arrivals on Australian soil attested to this fact, as well as to other Third World nations’ tendency to consider Australia a garbage dump for their own “wretched refuse.” It seemed unimaginable that Mr. How-

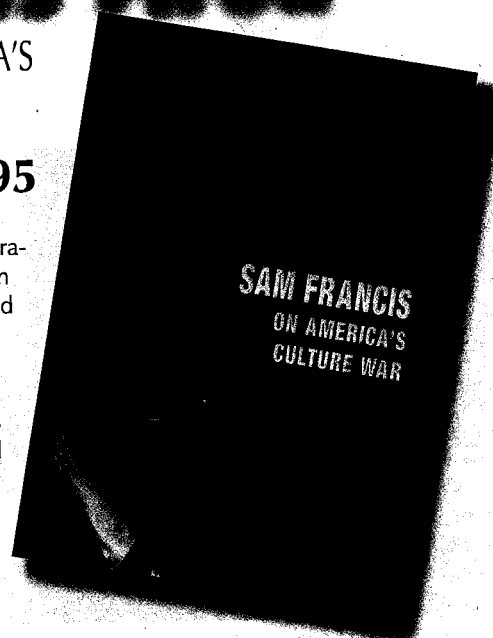
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