

to avoid clashing with him. He never uses notes, and never appears to think about what he's going to say before he leaves the table; there's never a stumble or, heaven forbid, a "you know" or "um" or "ah". I once met one of Howard's speechwriters, the one who wrote his address at Gallipoli, which was widely acclaimed at the time; he said he used the book *Language of Leadership* by Winston Churchill for inspiration.

"Howard speaks so well off the cuff that he hardly needs a speechwriter," he lamented. "Quite often he just throws the notes away." I tried to emulate Howard but, let's face it, I was a poor imitation.

The Howards left the dinner early, to conserve energy for the vital last week of the campaign, but on the short 30-minute flight to Launceston next morning I sat next to them as promised.

Beside me was a vastly different PM from the night before. He and Janette looked like a couple of recently retired, middle-class Australians using their hard-won super to go on holiday and see the grandchildren; the giveaway was most ordinary Australians don't travel with a swag of minders and media down the back.

The PM looked tired and Janette fussed over him, bringing the comforts of home to the campaign trail. She scolded him about a mark on his trousers and dabbed at it with a handkerchief.

"I'm so busy early with calls I'm not getting time for my walks," Howard lamented during the trouser cleaning. "I feel much better when I have a walk."

He admitted that the US terrorist attacks had helped his campaign, but most of all he put his resurgence down to Kim Beazley.

"He's our greatest asset," he said. "We call him the newsagency billboard because he changes his story every day."

Howard said he had some good news for me and produced a thick document on Bass Strait ferry subsidies, as part of a Tasmania package, which he intended to announce in Launceston. I'd spoken to the PM at the State Council in August about extending the existing Bass Strait vehicle equalisation subsidy (making cars cheaper to ship across the strait) to passengers; this would allow foot traffic to board the ferries for as low as \$50. At that stage the subsidy was for vehicles only, so you had to take a car to get any benefit; again, it was geared to the all-powerful tourism industry, who wanted mobile passengers. I wanted

a fare to benefit all Tasmanian businesses so it was like getting on a bus to cross the strait. Howard had given me a good hearing and my advisers, in constant contact with the PM's office, were convinced he was going to come good. The news was passed on to the National Sea Highway Committee, a business lobby group led by Melbourne lawyer Peter Brohier, who had been pushing this principle for 10 years. They were ecstatic.

I excitedly gripped the PM's offering:

"You've got everything you wanted there," he said smiling, confident he'd met all my expectations."

Sorry, PM. To the contrary, there was nothing in the proposal about passengers, just a further sweetening of the existing vehicle subsidy as a sop to the tourism industry. I was totally confused.

"Thank you, PM, anything is welcome, but this is not what we asked for. We wanted the subsidy on passengers as well as cars."

Howard seemed genuinely shocked. "That's what it is, isn't it?" He called over his chief of staff, Arthur Sinodinos. "Is this the right one?" he asked.

Arthur assured him it was and a perplexed Howard muttered: "I was sure we did what you asked?"

This was a far different Howard from last night's self-assured statesman holding an audience spellbound with a riveting, noteless address about his vision for the country. He looked dithery, almost stumbling, as he scratched his head about our Bass Strait policy. In a way, it was good to see his frailties.

I genuinely believe the PM thought he'd delivered what I sought; or he put on a very good act. I later discovered that a group of Tasmanian senators, acting on behalf of the Tourism Council, who wanted the subsidy kept to vehicles, had stymied the passenger proposal. Howard wasn't aware of it. The tourism boys had won again. The National Sea Highway Committee was devastated: they'd been at it for 10 years and this was their last chance. They disbanded soon afterwards.

Howard's often brusque façade veiled a good sense of humour. At an impromptu meeting of state and territory leaders at the Liberal Federal Council in Canberra in April 2002, unique because for the first time all eight of us were in opposition, Howard joked:

STOP THE GREENS SAVE TASMANIA

- Labor, Liberals and the Greens are taking money from companies who have a monopoly over Bass Strait transport
- These companies choke your children's future and create unemployment and misery for the sake of profit!
- Only the Palmer United Party is fearless! Help us stop the rot!
- Release 51% of the state that has been locked up by Liberals, Greens and Labor since the mid 1980's!

Stop the merry-go-round – Tasmania wants to get off!



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