

Weeping politicians: The power and contingency of men's tears

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◆ indicates the next 'slide' in the presentation.

◆ Politicians cry in public. We get listicles of images and curated YouTube evidence in case you missed it first time round.

◆ We see regular news headlines wondering why it happens and debating their effect. And – because politicians are still overwhelmingly male – much of the commentary questions the manliness of the weeper.

In humans, tears are both a universal physiological response and a social performance which is highly sensitive to cultural difference: which makes them a valuable subject for historians.

◆ At least one journalist recently took note of British historian, Thomas Dixon's 2015 book *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* to conclude that the so-called 'crying game' of politics 'runs right through history'.

◆ Today I am going to look at three tearful politicians, and three particular instances of weeping, to interrogate the historical contingencies of whether, and when, men's tears become powerful.

I have chosen Robert 'Bob' Hawke, Labor prime minister of Australia from 1983 to 1991, Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, Conservative Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 and 1951 to 1955, and Charles James Fox, a Whig statesman in British parliament for nearly 40 years during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Hawke is Australia's longest-serving Labor prime minister and the changes that his government introduced are often given credit for the Australian economy's resilience during the global financial crisis of 2008. So, for many, the Hawke government is the 'gold standard' for reformist government and there is a certain nostalgia about this time when politicians could be seen as 'giants'.¹

¹ Frank Bongornio, *The Eighties: The Decade that Transformed Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Books, 2015), xi.

Winston Churchill is similarly remembered in British politics as a 'huge' figure,² mainly for his leadership during the years of the Second World War when, as described in his Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry, he 'carried the world on his shoulders'.

Charles Fox is also described as 'larger than life' – the subject of more caricatures than any other person in the late eighteenth century. He acquired a reputation for reform despite not being born a Whig – he was a direct descendant of Charles II through his mother's family.³

◆ These three politicians are by no means the only men in politics who have wept but their tearful episodes have made their way into biographies, histories, memoirs and public memory more frequently than others.

◆ Bob Hawke's first tears on television in 1984 were precipitated by the leader of the Opposition calling him a 'little crook'. In his statement denying the claims Hawke was particularly vehement about the drug trade. At the accompanying press conference he added that he had 'intimate reasons' for feeling so strongly. Hawke was thinking about his younger daughter Rosslyn whose life-threatening addiction to heroin was not public knowledge. When journalists pressed him on the matter, Hawke 'broke down and wept'.⁴

An immediate response was whether crying in public would 'help or hurt' Hawke's standing? As one political correspondent pointed out, voters 'did not automatically equate tears with weakness'. An earlier incident in 1981 had done little harm. But on this occasion, Hawke was prime minister, and there was doubt whether voters would agree with his political opponents that Hawke had cracked under pressure, or agree with a Labor colleague that 'it's not an indication of weakness to show that you love your children?'.⁵

Critics took the line that politics is 'a rough and dirty game and all who enter it should know what to expect'.⁶ In this context tears were childish and revealed the lack of 'moral fibre' necessary in a national leader.⁷

◆ Along with weakness, politicians' tears are always suspected of hypocrisy and so it was for Hawke: some journalists asked whether the tears were just a tactic to avoid answering the actual questions.

◆ But there was also quite an outpouring of admiration for Hawke: most of it from voters rather than journalists, in letters to the editor and in private correspondence to the Prime Minister. They understood the pressure that politicians work under, valued the evidence that politicians are also

² Paul Addison, 'Churchill, Sir Winston Leonard Spencer (1874–1965)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/32413>.

³ L. G. Mitchell, 'Fox, Charles James (1749–1806)', *ODNB*,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/10024>.

⁴ *Canberra Times*, 21 September 1984.

⁵ 'Hawke tearful after an emotional speech', *Canberra Times*, 30 October 1981; 'Emotion and the crime debate', *The Age*, 21 September 1984.

⁶ Editorial, *Canberra Times*, 24 September 1984.

⁷ 'The PM's public tears', *Canberra Times*, 22 September 1984.

human, and hoped that Hawke's example would loosen the stranglehold of the expectation that Australian men don't cry.

This emotionally inexpressive Australian man was the descendent of the mostly mythical Australian described by historian Russel Ward in his influential book *The Australian Legend*: he was pragmatic, stoic, resourceful, and sceptical of authority but also a restless, drinking, swearing, irreligious gambler. Ward located the genesis of these traits in Australia's settler history.⁸

The 'mateship' that Ward described as so essential to this Australian masculinity is part of a very long history of male friendships and bondings – real and literary – but 'mateship' seems to be something more emphatic than forms of male bonding elsewhere in Western cultures and Ward helped to cast it as a national trait.⁹

◆ Despite its critics when the book was published, and since, Ward's bloke has proved remarkably enduring in popular consciousness: the film character Crocodile Dundee is just one example of the archetype.¹⁰

The Australian Legend was published in the 1950s when Hawke was in his 20s. *Crocodile Dundee* was released in 1986 during Hawke's second term as prime minister. Hawke himself seemed an embodiment of the legend – recognised in London's *Financial Times* which described Hawke as 'a fit and virile figure in his mid-fifties, who glorifies in his Australianness, which seeps from every pore'.¹¹ And Hawke invoked this masculine type in his opening address to parliament when he appealed to 'innovation, initiative, independence, tolerance – and need I say, mateship – the qualities which we like to think are distinctively Australian'.¹²

But in the 1980s Australians could also discern the emergence of a 'new man' responding sensitively to issues raised by the feminist movement. It was a time when men's groups explored intimacy and emotional commitment and opposition to violence.¹³

◆ Hawke's tears seemed to successfully add the sensitivity of newer masculine expectations to the traditional expectations that he embodied. High profile businessman and ex-footballer Lindsay Fox put it neatly when he suggested that 'only a strong man will cry in public'.

◆ If this was news to Australians in the 1980s it shows how short our memories are. One of the strongest leaders of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill had cried throughout his political career and especially during his first prime ministership only 40 years before. But the British press

⁸ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987[1958]); David Andrew Roberts, 'The Legend Turns Fifty', *Inside Story*, 27 November 2008, <http://insidestory.org.au/the-legend-turns-fifty>.

⁹ Patrick Fuery, *Representation, Discourse & Desire: Contemporary Australian Culture & Critical Theory* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1994), 116.

¹⁰ Stuart Macintyre, 2003 Russel Ward lecture, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/16/1052885396799.html>

¹¹ 19 November 1984.

¹² Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 16.

¹³ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 195, quoting Deirdre James and Graeme Russell, 'Reproduction and the New Man', *Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage & Family* 8, no 3 (August 1987): 125.

had a similarly surprised response to Hawke's tears: a psychiatrist in London's *Daily Telegraph* wrote that 'It was startling to see the Australian Prime Minister giving a television interview with tears washing his cheeks'. Though tears might be therapeutic, this psychiatrist was firm that bouts of crying should be of short duration and done in private.¹⁴

◆ Yet, Churchill cried publicly and often and commentary was brief and usually admiring. Even though Churchill's tears welled in varying circumstances and ranged from eye-filling to 'uncontrollable' they were described in terms of 'warmth and unfeigned sincerity', as a 'sign of his 'humanity': they were 'unashamed tears'. One editorial in 1940 explicitly dismissed the 'stupid notion' that 'tears are a sign of womanly weakness' and harked back to 'an earlier age' when tears were a mark of sensibility and 'even the strongest men were not ashamed to weep'.

Churchill's tears were invariably represented as evidence of the man as a great, even 'invincible', leader – and a compassionate leader. One witness recalled a visit with Churchill to the East End of London after a bombing raid, in which the prime minister 'broke down completely' and he 'heard an old woman say "You see, he really cares, he's crying"'.¹⁵

◆ One account is notable in its inference that men's tears at the time could still be unmanly. It comes from his wife Clementine Churchill (nee Hozier) in a 1945 article in *The Times*. She was in Moscow on 8 May, VE Day in Britain, and heard her husband's radio broadcast in the company of a French statesman who wept at the sound of Churchill's voice. The statesman was afraid that Mrs Churchill would think it 'unmanly', but he had seen tears stream down Churchill's own face and so he did not feel 'unmanned'.¹⁶

Churchill's uncontrollable tears were symptomatic of a more general lack of personal restraint: in his rhetoric, dress, eating and drinking as well as emotions. As the grandson and cousin of dukes we could explain Churchill's self-expression as an 'aristocratic inheritance' that offered the 'possibility of a richer, and less inhibited, approach to both emotional and political styles'.¹⁷

◆ Even so, his behaviour seemed out of step with the times because Churchill was also heir 'to the late nineteenth-century tradition of the restrained gentleman leader'¹⁸ inculcated through his boarding school and, later, Harrow and Sandhurst education, as well as his military service in India and South Africa.¹⁹

It was the Cape Colony's administrator that inspired Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If-' published in 1910 when Churchill was in his 30s. This piece of writing distils the British spirit of unsentimental stoicism

¹⁴ Dr Joan Gomez, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1984.

¹⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill. Volume VI: Finest Hour, 1939-1941* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 775.

¹⁶ *The Times*, 30 May 1945.

¹⁷ Martin Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963', *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 3 (2002): 373.

¹⁸ Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth', 366.

¹⁹ Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth', 370.

– and its gendered significance – more effectively than any other.²⁰ Its sentiments were seen that same year in the *Sunday Times* when a columnist claimed that ‘Lachrymose politicians cannot rule a nation.’²¹

◆ In 1939, however, a columnist in the same paper expressed doubts about Neville Chamberlain’s ability to lead the country in wartime. It was not his judgement that was suspect but his lack of ‘showmanship’, that is, the passion to counter an evil enemy. Chamberlain’s critics said ‘the public wanted to feel, not to think’, ‘It wanted tears, and was given reasoned argument’.²²

◆ Churchill, famously, promised those tears along with blood, toil, and sweat in his first speech as prime minister in 1940.

The opposition of feeling and thinking, of tears and reasoned argument would have made little sense in the House of Commons in 1791 when Charles James Fox made a habit of tearing up.

◆ The particular Fox tears on which historians of the eighteenth century dwell occurred in May 1791 when the House of Commons discussed the ‘Quebec Bill’: a bill to produce a new constitution for the two colonies of Lower Canada. The Bill had already been debated on six previous occasions and on this day the clauses of the bill were to be read paragraph by paragraph.

Not, on the face of it, business that would move parliamentarians to tears. But in 1791 so soon after the constitution of the United States of America had gone into effect and France’s revolutionary assembly had adopted the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen’, debates about constitutional matters could raise heart rates and destroy friendships. Despite Edmund Burke being his long time mentor and friend, Fox was diametrically opposed to Burke’s arguments in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in November 1790.

Burke had previously stated that he would sacrifice friendship for principles and this is what he did on 6 May. When Fox whispered that ‘there was no loss of friends’, Burke replied, for everyone to hear, ‘Yes, there was a loss of friends ... their friendship was at an end’.

◆ The evocative editorialising of the parliamentary transcript was repeated in many London newspaper reports which used superlatives to describe the tears and the emotions they were expressing. Fox’s tears, according to these papers, showed ‘the excellence of his heart’ and they did ‘great honour to his feelings’.

◆ The *Oracle* did point out that such a performance might be considered ‘ludicrous’ in other circumstances: a view taken by the *World*, a tabloid of its day, that published a gossipy snippet claiming that the sculptor who exhibited Fox’s bust in the Royal Academy had asked to withdraw it in order to add ‘its most appropriate character’ – tears. More than one newspaper carried a satirical

²⁰ Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 200.

²¹ *Sunday Times*, 10 January 1910.

²² *Sunday Times*, 15 October 1939.

squib titled 'How to Cry!', supposedly by 'a junior MP seeking advice on ... the deployment of parliamentary sobs as a technique for passing legislation'.²³

◆ And political cartoonists took delight in images of a tearful Fox. This commentary was sarcastic but it did not portray Fox's tears as unmanly.

The sarcasm does, however, point to Thomas Dixon's conclusion that the 'undoubted heyday of British tears' had been during the 50 years leading up to 1789. The so-called cult or culture of sensibility during these years had always been accompanied by suspicion of insincerity, but the unrestrained passions of the French Revolution confirmed excessive emotion as foreign, dangerous, and effeminate. Just as significantly, the French Revolution precipitated a fundamental shift at the end of which emotion and reason became opposed forces in the early nineteenth century.²⁴

During the few decades before 1794 'emotions were deemed to be as important as reason in the foundation of states and conduct of politics'.²⁵ Fox in the House of Commons in May 1791 is a vivid illustration of this historical moment.

◆ Did these tears change anything?

◆ We can arguably credit Hawke's tears with some direct consequences. An immediate one was to sway public opinion on the issue of organised crime in favour of the Government. We can also argue that Churchill's weeping was a large part of his popularity: people saw his tears as a sign of genuine care for the people of Britain when they were in peril.

Hawke's tears over his daughter's heroin addiction was also the impetus for a national campaign against drug abuse, launched by him in April 1985, a little more than six months later. Similarly, Churchill's 1941 tears in a bombed country town prompted the development of the War Damage Commission.

◆ And possibly, though harder to measure, there may be some truth in the satirist's assertion in 1989 that 'thanks to the example set by Mr Hawke, the whole nation is feeling free to burst into tears'.²⁶ Historian Frank Bongiorno came to a similar suggestion recently, describing Hawke's public weeping as 'a notable landmark in the history of Australian masculinity and the evolution of its emotional life'.

Churchill's public tears seem integral to the British war effort but they are somewhat of a paradox if we accept Dixon's assertion that the prevailing attitude among the British during the Second World War was 'that the blood, toil, and sweat should be endured without tears', that 'hysterical weeping' was 'selfish' 'when the whole nation was suffering together'.²⁷ It is an anomaly worth further investigation.

²³ Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*, 115.

²⁴ William M Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 216.

²⁵ Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 143.

²⁶ Ian Warden, *Canberra Times*, 13 November 1989.

²⁷ Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*, 238

◆ It is also difficult to talk of the consequence of Fox's tears. But they were invariably described as integral to his effectiveness and popularity as a politician, a sign of the depth and sincerity of his feelings.²⁸ Fox's influence was made clear when his supporters began calling themselves 'Foxite' rather than 'Whig'. The first Fox Club was formed in London and copied all over the country – the last recorded Fox Club dinner took place in 1907. Whig politics into the nineteenth century cannot be properly understood without taking into account the enduring power of Fox's career and personality.

◆ Timing in politics is everything and it is critical in the power of a leader's tears. It is the one crucial thing that, according to Australian psychologist and sociologist Graham Little, links leadership and the emotions: Machiavelli called it *fortuna*, 'or having fortune on your side'.²⁹

The significance of timing becomes clear when we consider the reception of the tears shed by these three politicians across their careers along with the fate of their contemporaries who also wept.

◆ Hawke's 1984 tears over his daughter cast him as a winner but the self pitying tears of the outgoing prime minister at the 1983 election made him doubly a loser.³⁰ In 1990, however, Liberal MP Wilson Tuckey's tearfulness over a family member were less generously depicted. Tuckey was notorious for using parliamentary privilege to attack his political opponents and rather than sympathy his obvious emotion was seen more as 'a long-overdue comeuppance'.³¹

◆ Hawke himself eventually fell prey to a mismatch of tears and circumstance. The suspicion that Hawke's tears merely diverted attention from his lack of action came to the fore towards the end of his prime ministership when his tears for Indigenous Australians were not taken seriously.³²

◆ Early in his career, Churchill's tears were portrayed as immature. And while there was huge respect and adulation for Churchill in the postwar years, after the 1940s his passionate political style looked increasingly incongruous in comparison to the 'dispassionate', 'coolheaded' and restrained political style of his successors Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan.³³ Churchill was fortunate – if we can mention that term in the same sentence as world war – in his timing.

◆ And Fox wept in 1791 when emotion and reason were not yet mutually exclusive. Fox and Burke's tears during debates about political constitutions enforced rather than detracted from their rational arguments. By 1798 both excessive emotion and radical politics were recast as French and dangerous.

◆ But as crucial as timing in politics is the negotiation of tension between emotional expression and rational argument, on the one hand, and between emotional control and authenticity, on the other. All men, at all times have had to handle a balancing act between what is expected of them with what

²⁸ William Godwin, *London Chronicle* 25 November 1806; Samuel Parr, *Characters of the late Charles James Fox, vol 1* (London: J. Mawman, Poultry, 1809), 158.

²⁹ Graham Little, *The Public Emotions: From Mourning to Hope* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1999), 274.

³⁰ Teresa Mannix, 'PM takes blame', *Canberra Times*, 6 March 1983.

³¹ Jeremy Thompson, 'Few rules in politics' "tough game", *Canberra Times*, 22 September 1990.

³² Little, *The Public Emotions*, 102, 266.

³³ Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth', 375.

is possible in their individual lives – and the specificities of class, age, occupation, geography, religion, and so forth, determine where the successful point of balance is. Successful leadership is successful masculinity writ large.

Hawke abandoned, or at least moderated, his drinking, philandering and larrikinism to become prime minister. The self-discipline necessary for such change was central to Hawke's image³⁴ as a strong leader but in 1980s Australia his tears reminded people that he was still 'human', that he was authentic.

A tearful Lloyd George was seen as a weak leader in 1910 and an emotionless Neville Chamberlain was also seen as a weak leader in 1939, but Churchill was able to cry in the 1940s and be a strong leader. The emotionally raw circumstances of wartime Britain allowed Churchill to assert both his authenticity and his strength in emotionally intemperate expressions.

For Fox in 1791, the tension between emotional expression and rational argument was easier to negotiate as the two were not yet polarised.

For all three politicians tears were integral to their successful negotiation of these tensions.

When and where tears are shed, by who and for whom, makes a difference to how they are described and judged.

It does seem, however, that if a man's masculine credentials are well-established according to the prescriptions of the time, then his tears can make him stronger – but a weak man's tears will make him appear weaker.

◆ So for politicians, a strong man's tears may add to his reputation – but they will detract if his leadership is questionable.

Underlying these seemingly consistent responses and attitudes to weeping politicians are the historical contingencies of what constitutes strength or weakness in a man and the particular nuances of authenticity and emotional expression in a given circumstance.

Weeping politicians are barometers of the emotional regimes of their time and place – and they reveal the ever-present potential for failure in men's attempts to negotiate prescriptions and possibilities. But whether politicians have the power to change those emotional regimes – the question we would like to see answered in the affirmative – remains an open question. ◆

³⁴ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 290.