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James Button grew up immersed in the Australian Labor Party as the son of the street-fighting Senator John Button, an environment that encouraged him to become a political journalist and then a speechwriter for former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. His firsthand experiences are collected in this highly personal account of the rough and tumble world of modern politics and the growing disenchantment with Australia's Labor Party. Button describes how politics took a detrimental toll on his own family, revealing that the death of his brother haunted their father—who in turn blamed the tragedy on his all-consuming absorption of politics. This moving memoir paints a colorful picture of the machinations of government and shows how far the party has strayed from the idealism and pragmatism of previous generations, ending on a hopeful note for the party's revival.

Speechless: A Year in My Father's Business Details

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Lisa says

Books on politics will never have mass appeal but this is a great musing on left(ish) politics in modern Australia, told in a personal way.

The history and analysis of the ALP and the Australian Public Service, the debate about 'plain English' vs 'government speak' (particularly interesting to me as a public servant who deals in words) and family stories about his father's life in politics were all illuminating.

Jillwilson says

As I get older there are more gaps in my knowledge of my mother that I wish I could repair. It's not possible now to ask the questions that I want to ask; she's been dead for a number of years. The impact is a kind of quiet sadness. I felt the same kind of yearning resonating out of James Button's account of his father's life. This book is part biography, part autobiography, part a meditation on contemporary politics. He is an engaging writer; immediately I trusted what he had to say as a Canberra outsider employed for about 16 months in the Rudd government (first time around), initially as a speechwriter for Rudd and then as a writer for specific units within the bureaucracy.

The book has been described as falling into the category of "vampire fiction" – a phrase coined apparently by Bob Carr about the recent spate of books about the ALP. I love this phrase – it really sums up the primal behaviour, self-serving vendettas and internal bleeding that has taken place in the last few years.

When this book was published, it was attacked by Ian Watt, the head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, head of Rudd's department as a "corrosive disclosure of conversations with Rudd". In fact, I think Button met Rudd only two or three times and while Rudd emerges as an unpredictable, egocentric and driven character, I have the feeling that Button was restrained in what he wrote. Comparisons with Don Watson's book are inevitable. Writer Shaun Crowe says: "Reflecting on his time as Paul Keating's speechwriter, Watson managed to do two remarkable things: he painted both an intimate portrait of a Prime Minister and a memorable picture of Australia in the early 1990s. With a novelist's instinct for detail and character, Watson showed that the speechwriter is well positioned to understand both the mechanics of government and the sweep of history. When viewed alongside Watson, James Button's recent offering, *Speechless*, is, in many ways, the anti-*Recollections*. Not because Button is a bad writer (he certainly isn't), but because he simply wasn't given the same access. Where Watson's evocative portrait gave us an insight into Keating the man (no reader could forget his mercurial Keating, consistently choosing the company of Mahler over his advisers and colleagues), Button's time as Kevin Rudd's speechwriter was largely defined by the Prime Minister's absence." (<http://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/but...>)

Another reviewer also wrote about the book's bedfellows: "McKew writes with passionate decency while Button has a fine turn of phrase – Canberra is "a city of words, permeated with an immense silence" – but neither the melancholy depth of Don Watson's *Memoirs of a Bleeding Heart* nor the manic wit and candour of *The Latham Diaries* are to be found here." (Amanda Lohrey)

The title 'Speechless' works on so many levels – it is emblematic of the relationship between Rudd and Button, it is about the things unsaid in the relationship between John and James Button, and it also represents

the clause in the public service contract that renders public servants mute. One of the most interesting parts of the book is about his time in the public service and his (mostly positive) reflections on that group of people.

The book reminded me of one of my favourite novels, *Ransom*, by David Malouf. Like this take on Greek tragedy, it explored power, the relationship between father and son, ruler (!) and subject, and what sacrifices might be made when someone takes up power. John Button's son died of a heroin overdose while he was a politician. At least one marriage failed. His children grew up with a mostly absent father. And James Button repeats this pattern for a short time. His descriptions of life alone in Canberra say quite a bit about the strange life that our federal politicians must leave. The book is also a musing on the ALP starting with his father's funeral. "They were old men singing their ballads," James Button writes – about his father's funeral, "telling of the years camped on the plains before they finally took Troy". Afterwards, ever the tribal chieftain, Keating said of the service, "No one puts on a show like the Labor Party. The other lot could never have done this." (<http://inside.org.au/father-and-sons/>)

The yearning in the book is for many things; to have known his father better, for political processes and traditions now gone, for a world where the political speech is about something genuine and meaningful. It filled me with sadness but it's a great read.

Emma Balkin says

I think that James Button is a talented writer but the structure of this book was not clear. He seemed confused as to whether this was a memoir of being a speechwriter, observations on the public service or a biography of his father, John. The start and end were interesting but the middle of the book didn't interest me. A book about politics.

Laura says

I loved this book - part memoir, part reflection on the Australian public service, and the ALP, Button writes about a fascinating time spent in Canberra as a speechwriter for Kevin Rudd. It is very well written, weaving a personal history in with a wider discussion about Canberra, while presenting thoughts about the future direction of the Labor party. Well worth a read.

Fiona says

Jame's experience as a journalist is on show in this book. He has an eye for an interesting story but also the small details that may lead to a bigger story. Uniquely placed with his family history, he approaches the topic of the public service and the political system in Canberra with a kind heart but a clear vision. Feeling neither the need to justify the basis of the public service or the Labor Government's decision, he does not fall into the trap of using his experience to demolish the service from the inside. Instead, he writes an account of the APS that truly reflects, in my experience, the reality of working life for so many in the public service. I think many Australians would have a kinder and gentler approach to the political class if they read this book.

Sam says

Fascinating insight into Australian political life.

Katherine says

James Button's book is an insightful, personal and candid account into being the son of a politician whilst seeking to understand what motivated his father, Senator John Button, to become a politician and join the Labor Party. He also reflects on the impact his brother's death had on his father and himself. It's with a sense of humility that he writes about his short time in Canberra working as a speechwriter for Kevin Rudd in PM&C. He details his interactions with the public service with a sense of respect and appreciation as he comes to understand the role and impact the public service has on society.

Peter Geyer says

Much of my current reading results from wandering into bookshops dealing with remaindered or discounted material, which means that something of interest that I wouldn't have considered at full price now has an appeal sufficient to buy it. My library expands exponentially that way, which has its good and bad points, the latter essentially financial and space limitations.

This is a book written around Australian politics and political history, but certain elements of it have universal appeal:

the relationship between fathers and sons and how one deals with personal tragedy;
the world of politics and its ethics and practice;
what happens when someone achieves power but is not up to the job;
a related question of whether current politicians have the capacity for what is required to govern, or inquire;
how do families and relationships operate when one spouse or parent has work that takes them elsewhere;
the nature and role of language and jargon in public institutions and how it affects effective communication;
the role of the media in politics and how that shapes policy and decisionmaking;
the writing of speeches and other documents and their purpose.

James Button is a son of the respected Labor politician John Button, and in this book he recounts his year of being a speechwriter for the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd in which period, as the title indicates, he wrote almost nothing for that person.

A subtext here is Rudd's inability to manage people, notwithstanding popularity with the electorate and his penchant for micromanaging and obsession with detail which, to this observer, suggested the anxiety of a person looking to defend himself, but unable to let others in, or consider their viewpoints. Button suggests that this was why Rudd was removed from his position by his own colleagues, albeit done badly, and that if it hadn't happened at the time it did, his demise was inevitable.

Another subtext is Button's interaction with the public service, about which he knew almost nothing, before

joining it as a speechwriter. He astutely notes that this is the norm for Australians and thinks this a bad thing for society and politics in general. As a person who spent almost half his working life in the public sector, I can only agree, in that there are valuable and important roles and process undertaken. There are problems and errors of course, and he's also referring to a Canberra experience. I can't agree with his apparent approval of the management of Centrelink, for instance, in either policy or practice. At any rate, he's impressed by the intelligence and capacity of the people he works with.

In the end, though, this is a memoir about his dad, who he was, how he felt, why he did what he did, even relations with his own father, which come together in the last part of the book. It's as though the opportunity to go to Canberra was also an opportunity to find out more about his father and resolve some issues.

Button writes well and this is an easy read. He's recently put out a book on the Geelong Football Club, which isn't my team, but the way he weaves in the personal with the political here means to me it's probably worth a look.

Julie Purdey says

I loved reading this book, a personal account by a son of his respected well loved politician father, told with compassion and honesty. I was a big fan of Senator John Button. I very much appreciated his analysis of today's ALP and the difficulty of engaging with the ordinary voter. I also learnt from his description of his time as a public servant in Canberra and the hard work and service performed for the benefit of the Australian public who mostly do not understand or care. I was particularly engaged by this thread of his book and shall remain grateful for the insight. I highly recommend this beautiful book.

Kathy Landvogt says

I enjoyed this book from so many points of view, soaking up insights into policy-making and its many players, into politics and its fundamentally human nature, into journalism and the work of word-smithing, and into one man's discovery of his vocational lineage. He worries about the balance between truth-telling and respectful silence about the past in this book, but James Button has done us all a favour in illuminating these influential worlds, not least of all the Australian Public Service, with his fine observations and decent sensibilities.

Matt Dawson says

This was a re-read of a re-read. It is probably the fifth or sixth time I've read this book and I find myself coming back to it.

I don't think any other writer has got the experience of Canberra down in such a poetic way, but more than that the way he writes about his hopes for the ALP and his relationship with his father is absolutely fascinating. It is part memoir, part blueprint for the future.

Above all Speechless is a beautifully written book about a son trying to understand his deceased father.

5 stars.

Helen King says

Really insightful balancing of the politics of working between the political (for Kevin Rudd when PM, and other Ministers) and the bureaucracy (from the senior level - Secretaries, head of Reserve Bank, etc - to being part of a department team), as well as exploring the insights this provided James Button of his father's experiences as a government minister (and a greater understanding of the emotional impacts this created). Ending with the question 'is it worth (being in government?)' - yes, we need people of commitment and resolution, and no, there is too much sacrificed.

As a public servant, a few points rang out for me: '(Ken) Henry said public servants who understand that (their advice is only good if it is compelling) paid as much attention to the construction and presentation of the argument - to telling a story - as they do to the quality of their analysis'.

'So much of government jargon is about managing risk .. it points to some of government's deepest problems ... it is trying to do hard stuff ...the writers of such language cannot know whether the promises of the words is being kept. Also writers in the public service are usually lower on the ladder than the policy creators. So the larger narrative behind a policy is not always clear to them ... what looks to outsiders like an exercise of power; an intent to shut people out, in fact expresses a kind of powerlessness'.

'So it (the death of his son) never left him, then. How he carried it through his life, and especially a life in politics, I do not know. We are all icebergs, four-fifths of us below the surface. The Irish writer, Colm Tóibín, once wrote of 'how much sorrow can be held within, and how nothing seems to have any shape or meaning until it is well past and lost and ...how much, under the weight of pure determination, can be forgotten and left aside, only to return in the night as piercing pain'.

Jeanette says

Great insight into Kevin Rudd's working, especially with the PMO and PM&C, and some good observations of working within the public service from an "outsiders" perspective. If you work in the public service, especially in one of the central agencies, or think you might one day, then you must read this. Its an easy read, and has some great dimensions re growing up as the son on a labor politician.

Mark Lauchs says

The author thought the PM existed as a mechanism to promote his personal, self absorbed views on society and got upset when Rudd disagreed. He also forgot that speeches have a policy role as well as a performance aspect, and the speechwriter is not the policy maker.

Maddy says

An excellent account of working in the very heart of politics and the public service in Canberra. Button writes in a style that is clear, concise, and moving, and his journalistic style becomes evident from the beginning. Throughout the book, he explores the differences he faces between being a journalist and a public servant. Also provides excellent and fascinating insight into what it is like to work for a PM.
