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Jim Waley: For once, Labor's numbers men got it wrong. Wednesday, July 11 was generally felt to be the day Bob Hawke would go into the record book as Australia's second longest serving Prime Minister. Perhaps they forgot a leap year. But when former Science Minister, Barry Jones, checked the sums he declared Tuesday the day Mr Hawke displaces Malcolm Fraser as runner-up to the all-time champ, Sir Robert Menzies. Sunday's political editor, Laurie Oakes, wasn't caught out though. He prepared our cover story on the Hawke factor, 2,679 days on.

LAURIE OAKES: When Bob Hawke extended his winning to streak to four elections in a row last March he shared his triumph with his staff at the Lodge. The staff have served him for seven years and four months, almost double the average tenure of Australia's 23 Prime Ministers and come Tuesday, when he exceeds Malcolm Fraser's term, longer than any save Sir Robert Menzies.

MALCOLM FRASER: I would like to congratulate him. Australian Prime Ministers have often been very short-lived except Sir Robert Menzies and Bob has come up into second place. Good luck.

LAURIE OAKES: For a man who likes breaking records it is a particularly satisfying milestone.

BOB HAWKE: It is a matter of pride. The satisfaction is basically that we have been in office long enough now to do things. The great problem of Labor in the past was that they were there for short period of time and couldn't really have a lasting impact. I think we have been able to do

that.

LAURIE OAKES: The Hawke Government has purged the memory of the turbulent Whitlam years. His Prime Ministership has coincided with an unprecedented period of Labor dominance at both the State and Federal level and while there are signs that dominance may now be waning, the achievement wins praise even from the man he defeated in 1983 and whose record he is about to overtake.

MALCOLM FRASER: There aren't too many Australians who like their politics. When one half of us were frightened by the policies of one party and the other half were frightened by the policies of the other party. It was a deep ideological divide and the Labor Party under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating seems to have put all that into the past. It is not a socialist ideological debate any more. It ought to be a debate purely about competence. Who can do the job best. Whose balance of policies is best. This really is the major benefit that has come from the Hawke/Keating axis.

BOB HAWKE: I think Malcolm Fraser is right if he has said that I have had that preparedness to adapt. Now some of your opponents outside your party and perhaps at times more vehemently within your party will describe that as a weakness or as betrayal. I think it is a betrayal of your trust if you are not prepared to adhere to the goal of creating the greatest amount of happiness and prosperity and security that you can for your country. That what's your responsibility is.

LAURIE OAKES: With the Government battling deep-seated economic problems, happiness and prosperity haven't exactly been Australia's lot for a sizeable chunk of the Hawke years. Yet no modern Prime Minister has been so consistently popular. Another of his records is a 78 per cent public approval rating early in his term and it has only been in the last two months that an Opposition leader has managed to get his nose in front and keep it there for more than one poll.

TONY EGGLETON: I think that Menzies's dominance of the

political scene was quite different from Hawke's. Hawke has been liked, even though that liking may be receding now, but Menzies was not ever a popular figure in the same sense. He was a much respected figure.

BARRY COHEN: The public like him and they trust him. He has certainly got something that no Labor politician in history has had. A continuing - to use his words - love affair with the Australian people.

BOB HAWKE: And for a fair bit of the time a lot of them reciprocated not with a constancy that measures changes but I think we are basically good mates.

TONY EGGLETON: One of his strengths has actually been another personality. I think that his credibility has been greatly supported by Paul Keating as his Treasurer. I think it has been a combination of the likeable Bob with the tough Treasurer that has actually provided the combination that has been successful.

PAUL KEATING: I think Bob himself would say that a substantial part of that is the team. I think the team would say the substantial part of it is him. He has had, I think, exceptionally good Cabinets. The part of the strength he has drawn from that has been his style of leadership which has been to let those Cabinets and those Ministers go about their portfolio responsibilities and to make and recommend changes in their own right.

SIR JOHN GORTON: I think it is almost all Hawke personally. The team helps of course. It also hinders quite a bit. But I think it is Hawke personally and the feeling he has got among the people.

LAURIE OAKES: There was a time when you wouldn't have had a schooner on Hawke becoming Prime Minister at all let alone a sober and enduring one. He drank, swore and womanised with a recklessness that was unprecedented in public life but a lot of Australians loved the larrikin image. And at ALP gatherings it wasn't Whitlam's autograph they gave their shirts for, it was Hawke's. Sir John Gorton recalls how the then head of Australian Council of Trade Unions used to

behave in the Prime Minister's Office in those days.

SIR JOHN GORTON: He used to come up to the office to see me when he was up here and he would sit down and he would talk to you very sensibly. He would have a can a beer and he would sit and talk to you. He would have another can of beer and then he would talk not so sensibly and in the finish he was just arrogant and just laying everything down and bashing the table and I am very glad he is not like that now.

LAURIE OAKES: When you look back on the old Hawke, I think it is fairly true to say that you were a drunk, loud-mouthed, aggressive person. None of that is unfair, is it?

BOB HAWKE: No, there were all those things there but there was a constancy. I was always a very, very hard worker. I was a hard drinker. I can't disguise that fact and I don't intend to but I was never an alcoholic in the sense that most alcoholics can't work. When I made the very conscious decision which is now just over 10 years ago - it was May 1980, a decade without a drop - it was a tough decision but one that I have never regretted because I could never have been Prime Minister if I hadn't made the decision.

LAURIE OAKES: In the mid-1970s when he announced that he would give up the grog if he decided to enter Parliament, Hawke also promised to swear off swearing if he made a run for the Prime Ministership. A newspaper editorial said with considerable prescience at the time, a non-drinking Hawke is conceivable but a non-swearing Hawke is not bloody likely. But from the moment he got the Labor leadership Hawke underwent what amounted almost to a personality change. It wasn't only the drinking though. You changed the way you dressed, you changed your grooming.

BOB HAWKE: I was never very flash on fashion everyone tells me and the fact that I was colour blind didn't help. Now I get a bit more guidance about it and I probably take a bit more notice because I am not just Bob Hawke. I am representing the country. I think Australians would want me to look pretty respectable.

TONY EGGLETON: The tribute I would pay to Bob Hawke has been in fact his capacity to discipline himself since he became Prime Minister. I think the way he changed his style, his approach to life and disciplined himself was really quite amazing.

BOB HAWKE: I am saying that I made that statement that I will not be making a challenge and I adhere to that statement. If you want to make your speculation, do it without me. I have made my position clear.

REPORTER: But you could cut it stone dead right now.

BOB HAWKE: I have made it quite clear. I have said it three times. You are just being a bloody pest. I have made it quite clear and you know it. Play that program to yourself. I have said it three times.

LAURIE OAKES: That side of the old Hawke has come through much less often since he decided to act with Prime Ministerial dignity and got a group of minders around him to keep him on the straight and narrow. But Liberal Party research shows that when he lapses the effect on his standing in the electorate is noticeable.

TONY EGGLETON: The angry, aggressive abrasive side of Mr Hawke is not an attractive aspect in the community and whenever he has lost that discipline the blip that shows up in the research is quite immediate. You will see an angry outburst and a moment of lost control and because the electorate really just like him as a person basically - they feel he would make quite a nice chap to live next door and he seems quite a nice fellow - but as soon as that image changes by an angry outburst it does have an immediate effect in the polls.

BARRY COHEN: He can show tears, he can cry and he can also do his lolly. He also, incidentally, is oversensitive on some issues and sometimes you know he is wrong because it is bluster. You know he is in trouble.

RICHARD CARLETON: Mr Hawke, can I ask you if you feel a little bit embarrassed tonight at the blood bits on your hands?

BOB HAWKE: You're not improving are you? I thought you would make a better start to the year than that. It is a ridiculous question and you know it is ridiculous. I have no blood on my hands.

RICHARD CARLETON: Do you expect people to believe that you didn't know that meeting was taking place?

BOB HAWKE: I would expect them to believe that you are a damned impertinent.

BARRY COHEN: You will find that is one of his not-so-nice qualities. That he can be a bully. The only answer with Bob when he is doing his bullying is to call his bluff. I have seen those that do and he backs off.

LAURIE OAKES: Hawke didn't follow the traditional parliamentary path to leadership. He was an MP for less than three years before getting the top job. He believes that has affected the media coverage of his Prime Ministership.

BOB HAWKE: When I came to Canberra I was unique as far as the Press was concerned because I was already a national figure having been President of the ACTU for a decade. I owed nothing to the Canberra gallery. Not a thing. I didn't need them. I didn't go to them. I didn't use them. I became Prime Minister without them. I think - and I am not saying this in a bitchy way or a complaining way - that subconsciously that has been something that the Canberra gallery has been aware of.

LAURIE OAKES: He did owe a great deal to Bill Hayden, worn down by constant sniping and pressure until he agreed to step aside as the Labor leader and hand over to Hawke on the very day in February 1983 that Malcolm Fraser made his fateful decision to call an election.

BILL HAYDEN: I am not convinced that the Labor Party would not win under my leadership. I think that a drover's dog could lead the Labor Party to victory.

TONY EGGLETON: I think Mr Hawke actually has been a very lucky Prime Minister in many ways from the very moment he came in and how he came in as leader because I think Mr

Hawke would have made a very poor Opposition Leader.

LAURIE OAKES: Leaders of the bloodless coup that put Hawke into the leadership and the Lodge thought he would act as a popular figurehead while more serious politicians got on with the business of Government. But Hawke's new deputy, the heir apparent, and briefly a rival for the leadership two years ago says he has turned out to be a very serious Prime Minister.

PAUL KEATING: The Prime Ministership is a serious job. I am not for a moment implying that anyone who has had it hasn't for a moment been serious about it but none in the post-War years have really been as serious about re-establishing the basis of Australian wealth. If you actually look for the Prime Minister who actually faced real problems squarely, and adjusted the nation accordingly, I think you have probably got to go back to Curtin.

TOM UREN: I think there are too many of his Ministers that are, in fact, economic rationalists first and Labor politicians secondly and I think that Hawke fills the gap that they don't really understand and that is the great thing about Hawke.

LAURIE OAKES: Twenty years at the ACTU did breed in him the feel for a constituency far broader than any Parliamentary seat. An identification with ordinary Australians few contemporary politicians can match.

BOB HAWKE: I feel still very close to them but you are right in the sense that I don't have the same amount of time to be as close as I was.

LAURIE OAKES: Do you feel cut off. For instance, in the election when you didn't know the price of beer which I suppose is understandable for a teetotaller but that kind of thing. Knowing the price of bread and butter.

BOB HAWKE: You certainly don't have the same knowledge of detail because you are isolated from a lot of it. That is true but the real question is are you isolated from what people are thinking and the concerns and do they write to you and do you write back to them. You have a look at my

correspondence and people are writing to me all the time and I am responding to them particularly young people. I know what their concerns are.

LAURIE OAKES: What some Labor colleagues find hard to accept is that Hawke is also able to get close to people at the top of the wealth and social scale.

TOM UREN: I would say that the thing that irks me more about Hawke at present, apart from our ideological differences, is his interests with some of the captains of industry. I think that some of his relationships with some of those people would curdle a Labor man a little bit because you can't have all things. You can't represent the whole of the people. That's all Irish. Labor Parties were elected to represent the class and I think that imprint should be made a bit more clearly.

LAURIE OAKES: There must be some regrets and disappointments.

BOB HAWKE: I must say that I am terribly disappointed about the child poverty issue. I made a mistake in not using the exact language in the delivered policy speech that was in the document.

'By 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty'. What we were going to do was to remove the financial need for any child to live in poverty. But that enormous achievement of which I am inordinately proud has been unquestionably clouded by the shorthand language that was used and that's a disappointment.

LAURIE OAKES: After more than 7 years the constant pressure, media attention, lose of privacy might be expected to be taking its toll but this Prime Minister the positives easily outweigh the negatives.

BOB HAWKE: Laurie, it is impossible for me to convey to you or to your viewers out there the sense of pride and the pleasure that goes with this job. Those costs are there but when you do the balance sheet it is overwhelmingly that side.

LAURIE OAKES: Does the milestone matter?

PAUL KEATING: No, it doesn't matter a bit. It is only about the quality, never the time.

LAURIE OAKES: Do you now start thinking about winding down or hanging up the gloves or do you look at the next one and look at Menzies record?

BOB HAWKE: I am not looking at Menzies record but I am in no sense winding down. To do so would be an insult to the Australian people. If I were to say now that I have passed some record milestone I will start to take it easy, I wouldn't deserve to be Prime Minister for another day.

LAURIE OAKES: How will you celebrate on the day?

BOB HAWKE: I might have an extra cup of tea, Laurie.

Jim Waley: Laurie Oakes reporting on Bob Hawke's record. In case you wondered we did invite Gough Whitlam to contribute his view on the subject. An offer he politely declined.

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(Transcript by Monitair Pty Limited)

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