

Julia Gillard book launch a relaxed rerun of the 43rd Parliament, without the Liberals

Jacqueline Maley

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It was like a reunion of the 43rd Parliament, except, well, it was pleasant. The harbour was drenched in the solar glitter of the Sydney spring. Wayne Swan looked cheerful and Tanya Plibersek relaxed. The canapes were elegant. Ray Martin wore Ray-Bans, Tim Mathieson a tan, and the Indies – Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott – larked together like long-lost school chums.

There were legions of former staff. One frontbencher hoped aloud the experience was healing for them, as opposed to retraumatising. Bob Hawke wore a smart corduroy jacket and Greg Combet was seen smiling. Quite broadly, too.

Our author arrived, resplendent in a royal purple suit, straight off the plane from New York. There, she had been with Hillary Clinton, who had pledged \$US600 million for girls' education to the Global Partnership for Education, of which Gillard is chairwoman.

Following her thanks yous, Julia Gillard's first words were frank and just a little bit swearsy.

"Hell, am I glad to be here," she said, and the room visibly relaxed.

Here was Gillard the author, speaking frankly about the writing process. Readers will either be impressed or horrified to learn how quickly she wrote the book. Having gotten a good start by Christmas last year, she punched out 145,000 words between January and February 14. And that is only a small portion of the finished product; it is about 500 pages long.

Ever the swot, the former prime minister met every deadline, including the final one, not realising, she said "how unfashionable it is for authors to hand in their manuscripts on time".

The central questions she sought to answer in the book were "how I did it" and "why I did it", she said, while admitting her greatest difficulty in writing was to overcome her "high degree of personal reserve" and let her feelings show, this being the most dangerous thing you can do as a politician, but the most essential as a memoirist.

Gillard was introduced by former governor-general, the Honorable Dame Quentin Bryce, who gave a long speech that unashamedly focused on the former prime minister's gender and her "firstness", the "enormous rucksack" Gillard carried when she ascended to the prime ministership, weighted with the expectations of Australian women and girls.

"It won't be the same for the next woman," she said.

Dame Quentin described the quiet, private moments she spent with Gillard during her tumultuous prime ministership, sinking gallons of tea in the chesterfields at Yarralumla House. She spoke about their last meeting there, the day last year when Gillard stood down as prime minister.

"There was about her a sense of stillness and aloneness," she said.

Gillard allowed herself one jet-lagged swipe at the political journalists who picked over her as prime minister and who have already begun picking over her book.

She said she was now so world-weary you could give her the name of a particular political journalist, and a topic, and she was confident she could write a correct impersonation of what that person would say.

"So, knock yourselves out," she dared us.

Gillard stayed for hours into the mellow Sydney afternoon, signing books for her guests. Many of her former Labor colleagues repaired to the pub across the road.

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