Kevin Rudd: Foucault's more painful than the knife in my back

Kevin Rudd, the Australian prime minister ousted by his deputy, tells Leaf Arbuthnot his Oxford PhD course can be brutal too

Leaf Arbuthnot

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Kevin Rudd at the Oxford Union: 'I'm a fan of this country'
OXFORD UNION/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Kevin Rudd, the apple-cheeked former prime minister of Australia, is not going gently into that good night. Aged 60 and four years out of office, he has just embarked on a PhD at Oxford and seems exhilarated to be learning again.

"I'm into dreaming spires," he says languidly when I meet him for a morning coffee. "There's enough of a romantic in me to enjoy this city and its history." Outside, drowsy undergraduates are cycling to their first lectures of the day and tourists are already beginning to roam the city's cobbled streets.

2013.

Although we talk under the silent stare of one of his minders, Rudd is evidently throwing himself into student life. He enthuses about the "great minds" he is encountering and taking part in Oxford's "weird" rituals — including the matriculation ceremony at the start of the academic year, where new university members parade through town in gowns.

Not so long ago Rudd was routinely the most important man in the room. No longer. He is surrounded by younger people who are not his underlings. "It's pleasantly humbling," he says. Being in charge of his own schedule, however, is taking some getting used to.

He recently arrived "at the right time in the right building" for a lecture and spent the hour cheerfully participating, only to realise afterwards that the lecture he was meant to be in was happening next door: "In the great triumph of English manners, no one actually told me I was in the wrong room."

Since leaving office he has not been idle. He has written a memoir and flits around the globe to weigh in on what he grandly calls the "big questions" — climate change, global poverty and so on. So why slum it with a time-consuming PhD leaving his wife, children and grandchildren to languish without him in Australia?

"Frankly, if you have served as prime minister I think the smartest thing you can do once you cease serving is get out of the country for a while," he reflects.

"In a smaller country you are automatically drawn into day-to-day politics."

Staying in the country also makes it "much more difficult to engage with new projects", he points out. Moreover, his wife

Are the other doctoral candidates in his department clamouring to make friends with the former prime minister? "I got coffee for everyone yesterday," Rudd nods. "We chewed the fat on theoretical frameworks and research methodologies." Naturally.

Rudd's college, Jesus, is clearly welcoming him with open arms. Its undergraduate committee recently passed a curious motion allowing anyone who had served as prime minister of Australia between 2007 and 2010 — and who is currently a member of the college — to be granted "full access to the (undergraduate) pool room".

The past six years have seen four changes of prime ministership in Australia. Three resulted from brutal party coups. In mid-2010, having started the year with sky-high popularity ratings, Rudd was knifed in the back by his own deputy, Julia Gillard.

He then replaced Gillard as prime minister three years later, before being brusquely ousted by Tony Abbott. Is he relieved to be out of the choppy waters of Australian politics?

"[They're] not nearly as choppy as UK politics," he retorts. "It's a western disease."

How did he keep his cool in the snake pit? "I've always been a person of faith, so for me it's been a cocktail of faith and family that have held me together through thick and thin."

Yet to claim that he had emerged from politics unscathed would not be true, he admits: "The key question is whether you allow political success or failure to fundamentally change you and, in the case of failure, to then embitter you. That becomes deeply scarring."

Rudd's doctorate focuses on the Chinese leader Xi Jinping, whom he has met, and he has visited the country more than 100 times.

decades, he tells me, he has accumulated a "set of experiences and conclusions" that he was burning to test "against some of the rigour of academic method to make sure it wasn't all bullshit".

The youngest of four, Rudd grew up on a dairy farm in Queensland. His father was active in local politics for the conservative Country Party. He died after a car crash when Rudd was 11, leaving his mother with "nothing other than a pile of bills". The family was "kicked around the place from post to post" for a couple of years. "Poverty is not a lot of fun and that ignites a fire in your soul," Rudd says.

He was eventually sent to a Catholic boarding school in Brisbane, which he hated. Was he caned? "Yeah. It seemed to be almost part of the Catholic catechism most days to beat kids for no reason. I would never, ever, ever send my kids to a boarding school of any description."

Salvation came, at least in part, in literature: "My mother was one of those classic self-educated wartime-generation women. She bought lots of Reader's Digest books that she kept feeding to us."

An eighth generation Australian, Rudd seems rather proud of what he calls his "impeccably criminal pedigree". He reminds me that most Australians can trace their roots back to Britain — "your 16th century is our 16th century" — so living in Oxford is bringing to life that "shared western experience" for him.

His closest British ancestor is a man called Thomas Rudd, who was sent to Australia after stealing a pair of shoes in Britain in 1787: "It was his word against the scullery maid's."

Rudd Sr served seven years before being sent back to Britain. Then he was convicted once more — this time for stealing a bag of sugar. Finally, in "about 1807", he was emancipated and

Doctoral programmes typically last three years. Does Rudd intend to stay in Britain for all that time — or even for good?

"My starting point is that I'm a fan of this country," he says.

"I think the truth is that the vast majority of Australians, whether they're from the left or the right, have a deep affection for the UK.

"Overall, Oxford is a great place to be," he adds, gesturing at the picturesque street outside.

Yet he is clearly still adjusting to the demands of academic work. "The other day I endured my first lecture on Derrida and Foucault," he recalls with a laugh. "I'm still in the recovery ward."

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