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## Majesty missing, and so was the media's focus

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Few Australians are aware how Kevin Rudd this week rid us of another brick in John Howard's wall. When Howard was sworn in by the then governor-general, Sir William Deane, on March 11, 1996, as Australia's 25th prime minister, he did so by pledging, bible in hand, to "be faithful and bear true allegiance to her majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second". On Monday, when Rudd, with trembling hand, was sworn in as our 26th prime minister by Deane's ultimate successor, Michael Jeffery, a retired soldier, Rudd's oath of office, which he'd brought with him, pledged simply to "well and truly serve the Commonwealth of Australia, her land and her people, so help me God".

There was no mention of the 81-year-old British monarch, our constitutional head of state.

Not by Rudd and not by any of his 29 ministers and 12 parliamentary secretaries who followed him, one by one, in taking the oath of office formally presided over by the Queen's man, who never batted an eye at the amended wording. Truly splendiferous, don't you think?

What Rudd had done was adopt Paul Keating's "republican" oath of office, administered by Deane's predecessor, Bill Hayden, after the Keating government's lone 1993 election victory. It was this oath which Howard, ever the ardent monarchist bent on remaking Labor's 13 years in office, in turn had jettisoned after the Coalition ousted Keating in 1996.

Just as wondrous, when Rudd revived the Keating model on Monday, was that almost the whole of the national press missed it. A great gaggle of reporters, representing press, radio and television, had been present at Government House for the formal ceremony. But when that night's news broadcasts went to air, and in the following morning's breathless newspaper accounts, none reported the obvious story. They all simply hadn't realised what had happened.

Well, almost all. The lone newspaper to twig was the national capital's only daily, *The Canberra Times*, whose reporter Megan Doherty scooped her colleagues blind with her front-page exclusive "Queen goes missing from family affair". She had all the detail of the excluded monarch and the restored Keating oath of office, including the line: "The Queen's man, Governor-General Michael Jeffery, didn't seem to take Labor's dumping of her majesty personally, congratulating the new Prime Minister and telling him the 'smooth transition of power' had been a wonderful example to much of the world of 'of our democratic process at its best'."