A crisis of national meaning: Prime ministers and the dilemma of Australian nationalism

Public lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Dr James Curran on 19 April 2004.

This afternoon I would like to talk about one of the central themes addressed in my recently published book, The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image (MUP, 2004)– namely the problem of Australian nationalism, and in particular the problems faced by Australia's political leaders in defining a sense of 'national community' following the collapse of the British race patriot idea in the mid 1960s. From this time Australian Prime Ministers were faced with an emotional muddle and a rhetorical dilemma. The inability of Britishness to act as a focus for Australian policies and priorities left a void in the Australian self-image. It provoked a crisis of national meaning. One of the most fundamental ideas in Australian cultural and political life, the belief that Australians were part of an 'organic' worldwide community of British peoples – united by blood, history, language and tradition – had to be significantly revised at this time. A people who had identified themselves so intensely with the British race, who saw themselves as a bastion of this race in the southern seas, now had to shelve their race consciousness and embrace the notion of being a 'multicultural' community. As the old, monolithic British story lost its vitality, these leaders had to make sense of a new era, characterised by a diversity of cultures, especially those of Asia. Since Britishness had given such powerful meaning and cohesion to the people, what would replace it?

Only gradually – and in some cases reluctantly – are Australians coming to realise that the demise of Britishness constitutes perhaps the single most important theme in twentieth century Australian history. The emergence of multiculturalism as a response to this once intense white Britishness, the attempt to bring the indigenous

peoples – for so long excluded from an idea of the nation – into the concept of a 'new Australia', and the beginning of a serious attempt by governments to engage with the countries and cultures of Asia are all to a greater or lesser extent connected with the implosion of the British race idea. But in an era of such vast and rapid social, economic and cultural transformation Australians have not found it easy to balance a respect for the British heritage with the declining relevance of the British connection, and they have found it difficult to construct a new language of community from the ashes of the old British imperial lexicon.

Indeed since the breaking of ties with Britain there has been a curious attempt to either ignore or to play down the significance of the British heritage in the Australian experience. If we are a nation of immigrants, so this orthodoxy runs, why give the British heritage pride of place? David Malouf's recent Quarterly Essay on Australia's British inheritance is a case in point. Whilst on the one hand he is unafraid to affirm the defining influence of Britishness in Australian national life and culture, and whilst he is understandably frustrated at the tendency amongst some to reduce the Anglo-Australian relationship to tired caricatures of children pulling on their mother's apron-strings – his treatment of the subject is largely silent on the intensity of the race patriotism that lay at the core of the British idea. Malouf's contention that imperial sentiment 'is not what really moved' the likes of prime ministers Deakin and Reid when they spoke to and defined their people, that they were 'canny' in using the language of Britishness to secure a place in a powerful empire, similarly stems from an unwillingness to accept the power of the British race myth and to assess it on its own terms. In this view, Deakin and Reid were not being true to themselves and were in fact manipulating a shallow and submissive populace. True enough, Australians have never been greatly enamoured of official orations, but the question must be why the Prime Ministers of this era were using such language. And the answer must surely be that they felt such language best connected them to the people and best expressed Australia's own view of itself and its place in the wider British world. Barton, Deakin, Fisher, Reid and Hughes were not simply bootlicking toadies or forelock-tugging Horatios – they were creatures of their culture: British-Australians fighting for Australian interests within the empire.

Let me be clear at the outset – in arguing for a renewed focus on the importance of Britishness in Australian life I am not indulging in a good old fashioned imperial lament. My emphasis on the need to understand the importance of Britishness as an idea in Australian political culture is not driven by a desire to reestablish the Australian branch of the League of Empire Loyalists. But in examining the confused responses to current debates over the Australian self-image, an understanding of the way in which Britishness for so long answered Australia's need for a nationalism is essential. It would of course be easier to just sigh and leave the national identity debate behind, or to assert the existence of 'multiple identities' as a solution to Australia's identity crisis, but these huffs and puffs of despair do not take us very far in the search for understanding.

The crisis of national meaning for Australian political leaders in the post-Menzies era is intimately connected with the eventual demise of the British race patriot ideal. In his important and timely work, Australia and the British Embrace – The Demise of the Imperial Ideal(MUP, 2001), historian Stuart Ward critically examined Australian reactions to Britain's decision to seek membership of the EEC between 1961-63 and concluded that the 'remarkably sudden realisation that Britain was determined to pursue a new relationship with Western Europe, which could no longer be reconciled with the idea of a worldwide community of British peoples, served to render the imperial imagination obsolete in Australian political discourse, and ushered in new ways of thinking about an exclusively national Australian future.'

The initial response to this development betrayed a sense of shock and uncertainty about how to deal with Australia's new circumstances. In addition to finding new markets for Australian products and confronting the basic economic implications of Britain's decision, both the intellectual and political class were forced to confront the problem of identity. As historian Geoffrey Serle commented in 1967, 'There has been such a vacuum since the decline of standard imperial rhetoric that it is difficult to make any sure statement'. And Serle was not confident that a distinctively Australian sentiment was strong enough to withstand the onslaught of Americanisation. 'Anzackery', as he described it, was simply not enough. In 1969, Prime Minister John Gorton admitted that he had not known a time 'when change is

more in the air, both in our external policies and in our internal reappraisals of things which have for so long been taken for granted. It is a time when statements never previously questioned are increasingly subject to analysis and criticism'.

One of the more perceptive witnesses to the national mood at this time was Donald Horne. In 1966 he admonished the nation's political class because he felt that they did not know what to say once the idea of Britishness had shown itself to be no longer relevant: Posing the hypothetical question of how they were to respond to events other than those dictated by the daily crises of domestic politics, he asked them: 'what use is Britishry to you now? ... what point of reference does your Britishry give you as a prompting to action? And when you speak to the people you govern what do you say to them, when almost all that still touches your imagination is something they are likely to laugh at anyway?'. By this reading, the Britishness of the Menzies era had become not only a laughing stock but a dangerous anachronism – a mindset that threatened to stifle the long awaited process of national self-renewal. The problem, though, was what to put in its place. In The Lucky Country, Horne argued confidently that: 'The very lack of any definite nationalism, of statements on who Australians are and where they stand in history, cannot be wholeheartedly deplored in an age that has seen so much horror and cruelty unleashed in the name of nationalism'. Two years later, at the beginning of John Gorton's prime ministership, he similarly observed that 'There is a commendable emptiness in Australians about their place in the world, the need for a new rhetoric, a new approach, as if Australia were beginning all over again.' Horne understood the dangers of nationalistic excess and the problem of the void in national meaning, but he did not have an alternative national myth to which the people might turn. Though he called for a return to the rhetoric of 'comradeship', he knew that the image of Australia as a nation of 'bushwhackers' was demographically unbearable. And he might well have added that the radical nationalist bush legend never in any case seriously challenged Britishness as the core national myth giving meaning to the people.

So how have Australians fared in this endeavour of finding a new language of national community to fit the new circumstances? If we are to accept the verdict of

an editorial in The Australian of January 2003, the answer is not very well at all. Approaching the celebration of Australia Day, the editorial announced that 'the days of great unifying statements that define national identity are probably gone forever' and further that 'there is no point in lamenting if we cannot find any form of words which explains our nation's history, defines its values and sets out its aspirations for the generations to come'. The Prime Minister on more than one occasion recently has remarked that 'we've brought to a respectable conclusion this perpetual seminar on our national identity that went on'. For John Howard there should never have been the 'agony' of 'navel-gazing' over being 'too Asian...or too British, too American. We've suddenly realised what we've been all along, we're just 100 per cent Australian'. This is the core of John Howard's nationalism: that Australians have never been in any doubt as to their national self-image and that debates over the republic, reconciliation and engagement with Asia were not only a dangerous self-indulgence, they betrayed Australia's true self and undermined the cultural and emotional pillars of the 'old Australia': respect for the British inheritance; attachment to mateship and reverence for the Anzac legend.

How is it, then, that in the space of only four decades Australia is, in one sense, right back where it started, echoing Donald Horne and emphasising the difficulty of finding a new language to give meaning to the life of the nation. Have we really reached the end of identity?

In getting to the heart of the matter what needs to be explained of course is the problem of nationalism itself and how it has been understood in the Australian experience.

Writing in 1965, Hans Kohn argued that 'the twentieth century since 1945 has become the first period in history in which the whole of mankind has accepted one and the same political attitude, that of nationalism'. It should be remembered therefore that the 'world-views' of Prime Ministers Holt, Gorton, McMahon Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating and Howard were being shaped in an era where nationalism was the key idea or myth connecting the individual to society. But this classical idea of nationalism had a turbulent past, given its prescription for cultural and racial uniformity, its absolute need to differentiate the unique qualities of a 'people' from

those of their neighbours and its intrinsic capacity for hostility to and oppression of the outsider. The nationalist myth tells the story of a people becoming progressively aware of their distinctiveness and of the gradual awakening of a national spirit which will ultimately lead them to their independent 'destiny'. But scholars are increasingly questioning the aura of inevitability in which nationalism clothes itself – the pre-destined journey towards being a 'nation at last'. As Ernest Gellner concluded, 'nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long delayed political destiny, are a myth'. Thus nationalism, which on this point is not what it claims, has zealously promoted a complementary self-image of itself as an innate, latent force in human affairs.

In a perceptive series of articles in the early 1970s the historian Douglas Cole emphasised the semantic and ideological confusion which had beset those attempting to explain the concepts of 'nationalism' and 'imperialism' in British settlement colonies. The essential problem, according to Cole, was that 'The historians of Dominion nationalism have usually been believers in the nationalist legend', and that the 'study of the ideology has been infected by the ideology'. Hence Cole asserted that 'An Australian nationalism, based on a consciousness of ethnic differentiation, would have been incompatible with an imperial ideology based upon the unity of blood, language, ancestry and tradition'.

More recently historian Neville Meaney has argued that what needs to be remembered in dealing with nationalism is 'the nature of the phenomenon', and that 'the tests of nationalism for Australians are not how partisan Australian spectators are at Test Matches, whether Australians have different accents from the English or whether Australians dislike inherited class distinctions or warm beer' in English pubs. What has to be examined is the 'idea that Australians have of themselves as a people'. Meaney suggests it is worth contemplating 'the possibility that in the nationalist era – that is from the late nineteenth century down to the 1960s – Britishness was the dominant cultural myth in Australia, the dominant social idea giving meaning to the people'. In oaths of loyalty recited at public schools, in history curricula, on public ceremonial occasions such as Anzac Day and Empire Day, and in their anthems and patriotic songs, it is clear that Australians from the late

nineteenth century down to the 1960s thought of themselves as 'primarily a British people'.

And the nation's leaders gave resonant voice to this idea. Even a cursory glance at the rhetoric of Britishness reveals that the common bonds of blood, heritage, history, language and literature tied Australia firmly to the 'mother country' for much of the twentieth century. Both sides of Australian politics embraced the basic tenets of the myth of 'British Race patriotism'. Alfred Deakin, in his 1905 Imperial Federation address, articulated the kindred nature of the relationship between Australians and Britons and the mystic ties of Empire: 'The same ties of blood, sympathy, and tradition which make us one Commonwealth here make the British of to-day one people everywhere'. Whilst Deakin used the word 'nation' seven times in this address, only once did it refer to Australia. He mostly implied a British 'nation' – which included Australians. Andrew Fisher's 1914 pledge to fight 'to the last man and the last shilling' and WM Hughes' 1921 declaration that Australia was 'a nation by the grace of God and the British Empire' were the types of statements which led the Australian historian WK Hancock to express in the late 1920s the classic assessment of Australia's dual loyalties, that 'among Australians pride of race counted for more than love of country'. Defining themselves as "independent Australian Britons", they believed each word essential and exact, but laid most stress upon the last'.

Even in the 1940s, the period supposed to mark the great turning point in the direction of Australian foreign policy and the shaping of the nation's cultural identity, Labor Prime Minister John Curtin could proclaim the following to the Australian Club in London during his visit for the 1944 Prime Ministers conference:

'I can say that the dominant point of view in Australia – and I know it to be the dominant point of view here in Britain – is that we are one people. We are not only kith and kin, we have the same cultural heritage, we speak the same language, we claim that all the struggles for liberty that have been waged in this land, the motherland and cradle of the rights of the people, were just as much the history of the people of Australia as they were the history of the people of Britain'.

And it is this idea of being 'one people' that constitutes the true test of nationalism. Curtin and Chifley, it must be remembered, also defined Australians as a 'bastion of the British speaking race', and they used the phrase both in Australia and in Britain. Notwithstanding the significant changes in the Australia-Britain relationship in the post-war period – particularly in the areas of trade, defence and diplomacy – the Prime Ministers in their rhetoric still maintained the emotional link to the United Kingdom, recognised it as the foundation of their values and traditions, and saw in the halcyon days of British colonialism the birth of their own story.

The crisis of meaning for Australian leaders from the mid-1960s was therefore double edged. On the one hand they had to accommodate the lingering attachment which many felt to the idea of Britain as the 'mother-country' and as the great protector. On the other hand they had to discard the more problematic aspects of their British-centred past – namely its prescription for a white, British Australia and fashion a new language about the nation as a multicultural community. Initially, the old language lived on side by side with the new. Thus Harold Holt could talk of White Australia and British Imperialism dropping 'away into the mists' – a poignant image which still left the question of what might appear once the mists cleared. As historian RG Collingwood might have said – the prime ministers were indeed 'wrestling with a fog'. Holt's successor, John Gorton, realised a problem of identity that Curtin, Chifley and Menzies could never have imagined: 'Who would have thought', he told a Liberal party dinner in 1968, 'that suddenly at this point in our nation's history, all the old conceptions would have to be taken out, have to be re-examined, to be re-assessed because the world had changed and we had changed…no longer, as was the case until a short time ago, do we live under the protection of Great Britain and the British navy. That has gone'. But whilst Gorton had shown an awareness of the problem, he did not make any significant progress in resolving it. As political journalist Alan Reid noted, Gorton wanted to 'deepen the sense of Australian nationalism, the type of emotional nationalism that caused him to advocate adoption of Waltzing Matilda' as Australia's national song, but he clearly had not thought how to achieve rather than exhort'.

My recent book is an attempt to show that the central challenge for the five major prime ministers in the post Menzies period has been whether or not they could offer an alternative myth of community which would preserve social cohesion in the new era. Each of these leaders has brought his unique 'world-view' to this question, but there is nevertheless a discernible pattern in their rhetoric.

Gough Whitlam's 'new nationalism' of the early 1970s was to be above all 'benign and constructive', emerging as it did from Australia's 'quiescent and colonial past' and rejecting the need for cultural and racial homogeneity. For Whitlam, the lack of 'focus for nationalistic fervour and popular emotion' in Australia was cause for optimism rather than despair. Whitlam had recognised that Australia's national story could not match nationalism's European equivalent for blood or civil strife, and he would not wish it to do so even if it could. As one who had lived through and participated in the second great European war of nationalism, Whitlam valued the Australian difference. In early 1974 he urged the people to commit themselves to a 'greater Australia, not in any bombastic or chauvinistic sense, but generously, humanely, out of regard for the welfare of our fellow man and our neighbours'. In this guise the 'new nationalism' was equated with the welfare state at home and internationalism abroad. The radical nationalists may have cheered Whitlam's rise to the prime ministership, but his own rhetoric is a study in care and caution in the articulation of a new kind of Australian nationalism.

Malcolm Fraser similarly dismissed the need for a boisterous Australian nationalism, and was unequivocal in his acceptance that the British race myth was no longer compatible with Australia's changing circumstances. In his Australia Day speech of 1977, he said: 'Fortunately the days of Anglo-Saxon conformity are over', he said, 'and I believe we are all better off as a nation and as individuals because of this.' He defined the new realities of Australian political culture thus: 'Ethnic cultures have added a new dimension of diversity and richness to the traditions of those other migrants, the English, Scots and Irish. What is emerging from this is a distinctive Australian culture…'. This was the first time an Australian Prime Minister had so enthusiastically welcomed an end to Australia's once coveted racial homogeneity. The very word 'conformity' carried a negative, oppressive connotation, and the idea

of Britishness itself was fragmented into its constituent parts: the English, Scots and Irish were merely 'those other migrants' who were incorporated into a continuum of migration.

But the question remained, how precisely had this 'distinctive Australian culture' emerged and what was its content? Fraser's embrace of the concept of 'multiculturalism' – he defined it as Australia's 'unique achievement' – gave him the opportunity to try to define the basis of Australia's coalescence. For Fraser, it was the 'relative speed' with which the British myth, so integral to the 'Australian tradition', had been diluted in the post-war period which had made the multicultural 'achievement' all the more remarkable. But beneath this confidence, Fraser gave voice to the residual difficulty in marking Australia's transition from monoculture to 'multiculture'. Australia, 'small in size and insular in outlook', had more or less 'stumbled into the multicultural epoch'. Like Holt's evocation of 'White Australia' simply dropping 'away into the mists', Fraser's description of the nation 'stumbling' into an era of ethnic diversity evinced a similar haziness, as if the change was unforeseeable, as if it had taken them by surprise. Multiculturalism may well have offered a new myth of Australian distinctiveness, by virtue of its stark contrast to British racial homogeneity, but it still struggled to offer a new myth of national cohesion.

Bob Hawke faced the problem of how to marry his deep-seated commitment to consensus politics to a nation rapidly opening itself to the outside world. But he too was keenly aware of nationalism's tendencies to the jingoistic. Hawke was adamant that the Australian Bicentenary in 1988 was no time for 'vain glory or empty boasting' nor 'meaningless flag-waving or drum-thumping'. Australia, he believed, had reached a 'new maturity', the purpose of which was to indicate that Australians acknowledged the detrimental impact of European civilisation on the Aboriginal population and appreciated the role of diverse immigration in national life and growth. On Australia Day 1988 he described Australia as a 'nation of immigrants' and defined the cardinal virtue of a 'true Australian' as being the 'commitment to Australia…None of us is entitled to claim real 'Australianness' on the basis of ancestry alone'. However, at a citizenship ceremony later that year Hawke was much

more assertive in establishing what it meant to be 'Australian': 'In pinpointing what makes us distinctively Australian', he said, 'we acknowledge the enormous debt we owe to Britain. Britain has given us the basis of many of the institutions of our free society: our system of parliamentary democracy, the principles of rule by law and the protection of the rights of the individual under the law, our system of liberal education'. Hawke formalised this view when he provided the foreword to the 1989 National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia. Australia's British inheritance was placed at the centre of Australian multiculturalism: 'Immigrants and refugees, selected from more than 140 countries, have been attracted by our British heritage and institutions'.

Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke had all recognised that the need for an intense nationalism had long since passed. Their response to the world and to history had convinced them that a conformist, race-based nationalism was a danger to freedom.

However, Paul Keating could not so easily let the idea of nationalism fade from the Australian political spectrum. His was a concept of nationhood which 'went beyond constitutional things' to the question of 'attitudes' – primarily those Anglo-centric attitudes which he believed had 'cost' Australia a more independent voice in world affairs in the post-war era. Keating's 'aggressive Australianism' again sought for Australia a romantic nationalism. He wanted Australians to have an identity separate from the British race patriot tradition, since British imperialism had denied them a true nationalist experience of their own. Yet Keating also came to express an awareness of nationalism's limits. Forced by the demands of national leadership to periodically relinquish his deeply internalised view of Australian nationalism, in which 'Britishness' and 'Australianness' were irreconcilable, Keating came to express a more moderate, inclusive concept of 'nation' – one which provided the framework for many of his speeches about indigenous affairs, engagement with Asia, and the question of an Australian Republic.

As I have argued in The Power of Speech, the idea that Australians have never been an overtly nationalistic people is only half-right. For much of last century, there was simply no need for Australians to craft their own unique national myth, because the myth of Britishness fulfilled so much of their cultural and emotional needs.

Australians were once fervently patriotic – for the British race. Australians did once define themselves as 'ancient' and 'unique' – but also as valued members of an indissoluble worldwide community of British peoples. The implosion of this idea sometimes left Australian leaders confused and confounded. Almost overnight they saw their identity fade 'into the mists' and then they 'stumbled' into a multicultural era, leaving their own history behind and instead imposing on the past a new but ultimately artificial story – that Australia had been multicultural since the beginning. Only gradually did they come to recognise that it was the British institutional heritage – adapted by Australians to suit their own circumstances – that provided the framework within which a tolerance of diversity could thrive.

The ongoing confusion about the content and context of an Australian nationalism is very much a product of this transitional era. The slogan adopted for the Centenary of Federation in 2001– 'Australia: it's what we make it' – did not call forth a shared Australian experience nor did it evoke any specific values or ideals that might shape the life of the Commonwealth in its second political century. It showed that the dismissal of the British heritage in all its forms denied the very values and traditions which help to shape a sense of political community and social cohesion.

Doubtless the argument about the national self-image will continue. But Australian Prime Ministers have, for the most part, resisted the lure of nationalism. Not for them the purple prose of the Oval office. Not for them providentialist missions about manifest destiny. Australia presents a unique case study for scholars of nationalism. At Federation it created a nation but remained firmly ensconced within the empire, but when that empire and its myth faded Australians did not call forth their own exclusive nationalism to fill the void. Instead they quickly shuffled their Britishness to one side and embraced diversity. In this transition lies the source of so much of the ongoing angst about the nation's identity. My expectation is that the emotional muddle and the rhetorical dilemma will continue for some time to come.