

Michael Fullilove

## **Speaking Up**

James Curran

*The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image*

A decade ago, former Prime Minister Paul Keating made a telling comment on the treatment of speeches in modern politics. 'If Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address in 1992', he said, 'the chances are the journalists wouldn't report the speech but the 'doorstop' that followed it. And the first question they'd ask is, "How come you're talking about democracy and freedom when there's a war going on?" And there'd be learned articles at the weekend about whether it had been a lapse of political judgement for Mr Lincoln to deliver the Gettysburg Address in Gettysburg instead of Philadelphia.'

Keating was right. The speech is losing the battle for attention with the doorstep, the media grab and the press release, and in no country more so than in Australia. Being a laconic and rather vernacular people – 'taciturn rather than talkative', as Russel Ward put it – we were never overly disposed to big set-piece speeches anyway. Australian kids could easily grow up thinking that great speeches are delivered in a Churchillian growl or a Kennedyesque brogue, but never with an Aussie twang.

James Curran's book will help to right this imbalance. His study of prime ministerial rhetoric on national identity is very welcome, because it takes Australian speeches seriously.

According to Curran, a national consensus existed for two decades after the end of World War II that Australia was essentially British, and that nationhood existed within the framework of British racial unity. He usefully explodes the myth that John Curtin and Ben Chifley were rabid republicans, arguing that the 'crimson thread of kinship' was 'as central to their idea of Australia as it was for that of the subsequent Menzies ascendancy.' Curtin saw the British as our 'kith and kin'; the future Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports expressed the same idea in rather more corporeal language: 'bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh.'

In the 1960s came a series of shocks that demolished this clubby edifice – notably the British application to join the European Economic Community, much to the consternation of Commonwealth politicians, who were used to a special economic relationship with the mother country. Gradually it dawned on opinion leaders here that Britishness was not a sustainable organising principle for an independent nation. Harold Holt, John Gorton and Billy McMahon

began the search for an alternative, but Curran's story focuses chiefly on the five PMs beginning with Gough Whitlam.

Whitlam's 'New Nationalism', which presaged Tony Blair's Newness by a quarter of a century, included changes to Australia's symbols and a more independent foreign policy within the framework of the United States alliance. (Remarkably, the alliance survived this heresy.) Malcolm Fraser's fear of Soviet aggression saw him hew more closely to the US; on the question of multiculturalism, though, he was less orthodox, enthusiastically endorsing the conclusions of the Galbally Report and establishing SBS. Bob Hawke took his 1983 campaign theme of 'reconciliation, recovery and reconstruction' as a governing credo, and Curran notes that the first of these was soon applied to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and was embedded in our political culture.

The two stars of the Curran show, however, are Paul Keating and John Howard. Curran depicts Keating as a 'radical nationalist', the student of Jack Lang and the heir of Ned Kelly, who railed against an Anglophile middle class which had conspired to prevent the flowering of Australian independence. Alone among recent PMs, according to Curran, Keating 'retained a bitter demonology about those who had betrayed the emergence of an "unambiguously" Australian identity.' Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke had 'all recognised that Australia's need for an intense nationalism had long since passed... Only Paul Keating could not so easily resist the allure of nationalism.'

In striking contrast, John Howard has stressed the continuity of Australian values and institutions, protecting the monarchy and appropriating the concept of mateship. Howard's proudest claim is to have put a stop to 'endless national navel gazing', although Curran notes that his conception of Australia's national identity is inconsistent and confusing.

All this adds up to an interesting, though occasionally heavy, narrative, with some excellent speech extracts and a number of instructive yarns. My favourite is the story of the Whitlam-era official who proposed that Australian diplomats wear an appropriately nationalistic uniform for official engagements: 'a Mao-style suit which sported embroidered sprigs of golden wattle on chokered collars.'

That said, the book is not without its flaws. In making the case that the mid-1960s represented the turning-point in our national story, Curran skates over significant and enduring differences between individuals and parties in earlier periods. He plays down Curtin's historic statement in December 1941 that 'Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or

kinship with the United Kingdom', pointing out that Curtin quickly moved to affirm publicly Australia's British ties. However, soothing rhetoric is a standard tactic after a leader makes a bold move. And there should be no doubt that this was an important turn indeed – immediately labelled 'a great blunder' by the conservatives but in retrospect very canny indeed.

A related criticism is that Curran's analysis of individual prime ministers is sometimes tendentious. He writes, for example, that Paul Keating's 'stridently anti-British' nationalism sat next to a declared respect for British institutions, indeed he declares this to be 'the central conundrum of the Keating prime ministership.' But this is less a conundrum than a nuance. Keating was capable of separating his regard for Britain – he once said 'I was raised on her heritage and the exploits of British heroes and remain a grateful and, in many regards, passionate advocate of things British' – from his conviction that the Australian people have a separate lot in life and their own destiny. Similarly, much of the brushwork on Keating's 'big picture' – liberal economic reform, native title, engagement with Asia and the Pacific – bears no resemblance to the Australian tradition of radical nationalism, and marks him as a more interesting thinker and leader than Curran allows.

Notwithstanding these imperfections, Curran's book remains a valuable contribution to a topic about which a great deal remains to be said. Curran refers only briefly, for example, to the question of an Australian republic, and he says nothing about a looming next-generation national identity issue: the one million citizens who comprise the Australian diaspora. A second edition may also require a chapter on a Prime Minister Latham, who is showing signs of being able to square the Keating-Howard circle, recently arguing both that 'the country has moved on' from history wars and crises of faith, and that this renewed confidence deserves to be reflected in the person of a popularly elected head of state who is, in Keating's phrase, 'one of us.' These are important matters. It is right and proper that this national conversation should continue, and we are indebted to Curran for his contribution.

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