

AUSTRALIA FAIR

Realities and Banalities of Nation in the Howard Era

TO TELL THE TRUTH, I was startled when I was invited by Nathan Hollier, the editor of *Overland*, to present the end of 2004 lecture. He ran through the list of luminaries who had this honour before me—Stuart Macintyre, Mark Davis, Amanda Lohrey, Marcia Langton, Bob Connell, Bob Ellis, Linda Jaivin and David Marr—all icons of the Australian intelligentsia.

I said, “about what?” and he suggested I talk on “nationalism in Australia during the Howard era, perhaps with an eye on the future”. I hesitated, rattled by the expectation. He reassured me that I would not have to deliver the lecture until after the election and things would be clearer then. The election’s over now, and when it comes to the question of nation, I am not sure whether things are any clearer.

My mind instantly flashed back to an Australian sage who had said, in a review of something I had written many years ago, that my views on the nature of nation in Australia came from the “Donald Horne School of breathless optimism”. It just happens that this man’s wife had earlier examined my PhD thesis in Australian history. It was improper of me to tell grand narratives about Australia, she had said, not only because grand narratives were themselves improper, but because my expertise was in “ethnicity”. I should really have stuck to doing a history of migration and settlement. Instead, I had interrogated the ideas and realities of Australian nationhood, assuming a role well beyond my station. Such are the inconsequential barbs that lurk in the depths of one’s consciousness. The request from *Overland* made me anxious again. Here I am again, the daughter of immigrants, presumptuously trying to talk about Australian nation and nationalism—past, present and future.

But presumptuous I am going to be. And yes, indeed I carry baggage. I was born in rural Greece at a time when it was torn apart by a civil war. The resistance fighters who had helped expel the Nazis, previously supported by the Western powers, were now the enemy within, hunted down for fear a new Greek Government might align with the Communist East. Mainly, it was the British who intervened on the side of the Right, so little wonder that, in Australia, I was shaped by a heritage of ambivalence towards all that was ‘English’, as well as a nostalgic sense of a distant homeland, a European sensibility about the ‘social’ and a fervent curiosity about the country in which I grew up and to which I had been introduced (literally) as an alien. There is no removing the effects of experience and subjectivity from our thinking. No amount of scholarship or expertise can erase life’s agendas when it comes to history and its telling, let alone imagining the future.

In my professional life, I have done three things, and each of these things connects back powerfully to my life’s concerns. First, I have done history, investigating and telling the interrelated stories of centre and margin that shaped people and events. At the risk of looking as if I’m treading into the domain of grand narrative, I have tried not to do a compartmentalised history, or even one with discrete chapters, neatly separating out the Indigenous, immigrants and nation. Rather, I have tried to tell the tangled story of the way we, as a nation, made each other, consciously and unconsciously.¹ Only big picture history can do that.

Second, in the spirit of our times, I have engaged in critique. Those who don’t find this palatable call it ‘political correctness’. Over the course of the twentieth century Australia became a very different place

to what it had been at its official birth at Federation in 1901. It has been a symbolic and practical metamorphosis, and one that is still far from complete. The nationalism of 1901 was not remarkable for its times or unique in its character. As a British colony, being white and British was its defining feature, and with this came economic and military ties to the motherland. Indigenous peoples were located outside of the imagination of the ambitious newcomers, eager to take up the resources of the new land and make something of them in exchange for its much-vaunted hardships. This resulted in systematic forms of exclusion, of Indigenous peoples within and unacceptable aliens beyond the borders of the new nation. As the century moved on, the antidotes to this legacy were multiculturalism, Indigenous self-determination, reconciliation—all the stuff of ‘political correctness’ in the eyes of those whose sensibilities are still rooted in an older version of nation.

Third (and I daresay this is where I belong to what my critic called the ‘Donald Home School’), I have maintained an active appreciation of the strain of inclusiveness that has, even in the darker moments, run alongside the tendencies to exclude. The other side of the Australian spirit has always imagined that, in this Great South Land, an egalitarian haven could be built, a place airier and lighter than the stifling, class-rigid, uncaring kingdoms the migrants had left behind. This was a place where, ahead of anywhere else in the world, a woman could vote and social security would underpin the basic wage. It was a place built on the ethos of the ‘fair go’. And, extending these principles not too much further, couldn’t that also be the case for immigrants of non-Anglophone origins, non-white immigrants and the Indigenous peoples of this continent? Despite our anxieties today, despite moments where ‘fairness’ is, once again, for them and not for us, there has been a shift in the big picture. The principles of inclusiveness that underpinned the Australian nation at its foundation have been so extended as to undermine profoundly the exclusive tendencies upon which it was also underwritten.

MAKING A NATION

Let me go back to the beginnings of nation. Then, the national anthem was one-and-the-same as the Imperial Anthem, ‘God Save the Queen’. And so it remained until 1976 when the Fraser Government set ‘Advance Australia Fair’ as the national song

alongside ‘God Save the Queen’. It was first used as the National Anthem at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984.

*Australia’s sons, let us rejoice,
For we are young and free;²*

These were the opening lines of the song, written by Glasgow-born Peter Dodds McCormick in 1878. When it became the national anthem a century later, the opening words of the first line were changed from ‘Australia’s sons . . .’, to ‘Australians all . . .’ Such political correctness is more than wanton moralising. Something profound had happened to gender relations in the intervening century: real and significant even if that something remains incomplete.

The first public performance was at the St Andrew’s Day concert of the Highland Society on 30 November 1878. McCormick was a prominent member of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, and one of his better known musical works was ‘The Bonnie Banks of Clyde’. Only a Scot would have granted the Celtic margins of England—and its first colonies—a part in the Australian story, as he did in the third stanza:

*From English soil and Fatherland,
Scotia and Erin fair,
Let all combine with heart and hand
To advance Australia fair.*

He was, nevertheless, a Scot fully reconciled to Empire. How else would the song have become such a huge success, even in McCormick’s own lifetime?

*When gallant Cook from Albion sail’d,
To trace wide oceans o’er;
True British courage bore him on,
Till he landed on our shore;
Then here he raised Old England’s flag,
The standard of the brave;
“With all her faults we love her still
Britannia rules the wave.”
In joyful strains then let us sing
Advance Australia fair.*

I want to concentrate, however, on the word ‘fair’. If Australia at Federation was to be anything, it was to be ‘fair’, to be a place which aspired, if not to equality, then a more limited promise of equity—equal chances for all to share in its material benefits. This, surely, was the aspiration to which McCormick was referring in the song, a promise that arose in the

settlement of the great conflict of class and the emergence of trade unions and the Labor Party in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. But a promise to whom? For whom? And at the expense of whom?

Take, for instance, the Chinese, who had been coming to Australia in large numbers since the gold rushes in the mid nineteenth century. This is Edmund Barton's view of what was 'fair', our first Prime Minister, speaking here to the first Australian Parliament:

The fear of Chinese immigration which the Australian democracy cherishes . . . is, in fact, the instinct of self-preservation, quickened by experience. We know that coloured and white labour cannot exist side by side . . . Transform the northern half of our continent into a Natal, with thirteen out of fourteen belonging to an inferior race, and the southern half will speedily approximate to the condition of the Cape Colony, where the white are indeed a masterful minority, but still only as one in four. We are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can live and increase freely for the higher civilisation.³

The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is a deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others.⁴

The Immigration Restriction Act and the legislation to repatriate the South Sea Islanders who had worked in the sugar industry in Northern Australia were two of the highest priorities of the first Parliament.

McCormick's 'fair' had a double meaning. The maiden of nation was clearly fair in complexion before she was fair by nature. And so, the settlement as to what was procedurally 'fair' (a living wage, social security, national industries protected from foreign competition) was to be limited to the fair-skinned descendants of migrants from the British Isles.

THE MENZIES YEARS

I want to take this doubly fair Australia of Federation as my counterpoint for considering contemporary Australian nationhood. To do this, I will focus for a moment on the life and times of Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies,

and then the man who has become our second longest serving Prime Minister, John Howard. Both, at first glance, seem men who are true to the exclusivist rhetoric of Federation. Neither man, however, was true to his own times. In both cases their exclusivist rhetoric proved to be increasingly anachronistic. Both men followed more than they led, and insofar as they led, changing realities proved both wrong. This is the enduring irony captured in Donald Horne's notion of the 'Lucky Country':

Australia is a country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck . . . Although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders . . . so lack curiosity in the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise. A nation more concerned with styles of life than with achievement has managed to achieve what may be the most evenly prosperous society in the world. It has done so in a social climate largely inimical to originality and the desire for excellence (except in sport) . . . According to the rules Australia has not deserved its good fortune.⁵

Our good fortune, I will argue, has been not only to have prospered, but also to have developed by world standards a diverse, tolerant, outward looking, cosmopolitan society. And this, despite our leaders.

Menzies had a clear view of nation, and who were acceptable outsiders. Supporting appeasement, Menzies had visited that paragon of nationalism, Adolf Hitler, in August 1938, and praised the 'spiritual quality' and 'national pride' Hitler had invoked in the German people. When, in the lead-up to the war, he was asked mischievously by Winston Churchill, "Hitler says that sixteen million Jews ought to go and live in Australia. What do you say to that?" we are told by an observer that he "had no good quick answer".⁶ Half a century later, John Howard was to show a similar lack of sympathy towards refugees. Meanwhile, the Australian press of Menzies' time were supporting the notion that Australia should accept Jewish refugees. The usual labour complaints, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted in December 1939, had been "removed by the approval given to the project by the Australasian Council of Trade Unions" and this "would not only make a contribution to the solution of the refugee problem" but would "justify our right to" retain "this great continent" in the face of "a land-hungry world".⁷ Menzies demurred.

After the war, Menzies led a country which seemed to define itself largely in terms of its English

connections. The British Commonwealth of Nations had replaced the Empire. “Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom, Australia and her other realms and territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, already enshrined by ancient ritual in her noble heritage, is now enshrined in the hearts of the people of her great southern Dominion.”⁸ So began the *Official Commemorative Volume* created by Menzies’ Australian News and Information Bureau to mark the occasion of the Queen’s first visit to Australia in 1954. The success of the visit was a measure of the considerable effort and expense that the Menzies Government invested into it. Seventy-five per cent of Australia’s nine million people saw the Queen at least once.⁹

But by the time of her second visit, in 1963, the crowds were much smaller. Only three thousand people turned out to see the Queen when she arrived in Canberra. And when, in a welcome speech, Menzies quoted the Elizabethan poet Barnabe Googe “I did but see her passing by and yet I love her till I die”, even the Queen is reported to have looked embarrassed.¹⁰ An Anglophile to the end, Menzies did have to relent when his suggestion that the new Australian currency be called the Royal, rather than the dollar, was overruled by his cabinet colleagues. When Winston Churchill died in 1965, the Queen appointed Menzies to succeed him as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, an arcane English honour.

Meanwhile, the real business of transforming Australia was being undertaken by Menzies’ ministers, business which would, in the passage of time, turn Menzies’ Anglophilia into an anachronism. Harold Holt, destined to be Menzies’ successor as Prime Minister, was installed as the Minister for Immigration when the Liberals came to power in 1949. Not only did Holt continue the immigration program begun by Labor’s Arthur Calwell at the end of the Second World War; he worked vigorously to expand it well beyond his predecessor’s expectations. He set a target of two hundred thousand immigrants annually from 1950—a far cry from Calwell’s target of seventy thousand or 1 per cent annual population increase through immigration. With a target of this size, together with the failure to attract sufficient numbers of British immigrants, it became “clear, therefore that new sources of foreign migration must be tapped”.¹¹ The three Immigration Ministers that followed Harold Holt during the Menzies years, Athol Townley, Alexander Downer

and Hubert Opperman, all presided over a program which moved progressively further away from the old framework of White Australia and immigration restriction.

The image of Anglo-Tory conservatism projected by the persona of Menzies is really quite deceptive. During Downer’s ministry, the new 1958 Migration Act abolished the centrepiece of the old White Australia Policy, the dictation test. Downer was the father of another Alexander, who would, decades later and by dint of political inheritance, become John Howard’s Minister for Foreign Affairs.

If the Citizenship Convention of 1958 was any measure, the tenor of nation had unmistakably shifted away from Anglophilia. At the back of the stage was a mural which incongruously juxtaposed immigrants folk dancing with the iconography of Australian development—its steel mills, its muscled shirtless male workers, its scientists in lab coats. To this backdrop, Alexander Downer said “we have received that indefinably precious infusion of ideas from the Continent: new ways of living, looking at life, of painting, architecture and other emanations of the mind. These are attributes which our rather stodgy Anglo-Saxon communities are much in need of”.¹² He spoke of an historical mission that would shift Australia away from a predominantly British self-image, “so that we can mould Australia into an Anglo-European community”.¹³ In fact, in the light of this new conception of Australia, the story of its past itself needed to be rewritten. Take Arthur Phillip, that old hero of the moment when imperial Britain consummated its claim to sovereignty over New Holland:

Apart from his fine personal qualities, there is one aspect of Phillip which is not widely recognised. Wrapped up in his genealogy was a portent of the Australia he was destined to found: for whilst his mother was English, his father was a German, from Frankfurt, who in his youth had settled in London. Thus, right from the start the signpost pointed to the creation of an Anglo-European community.¹⁴

A similar transformation was underway in Australia’s sense of its place in the region. Here is Downer again, this time speaking to the Australian Institute of International Affairs in 1960, and referring to the Colombo Plan which was by then bringing thousands of Asian students to study in Australia, the new Australian diplomatic and trade missions in Asia,



CEMENTING HIS PLACE IN HISTORY

and the South-East Asian Treaty Organisation. These were evidence that Australia was creating a more positive sense of its place in Asia:

What we are doing is only a beginning; the pro-Asian momentum in knowledge, understanding and outlook must gather speed in the mutual interests of ourselves and our neighbours . . . Does the wisdom of attuning our minds to Asian ideas and requirements imply that our future lies with Asia, that in fact Australia is an Asian country, that sooner or later to the unbroken stream of peoples pouring in from Europe there must be added a confluent flow from Asia?

. . . Part of our destiny may well be with Asia; if so, we must fulfil it spiritually, unselfishly, with shining enlightenment.¹⁵

This destiny was to be realised sooner than Downer might have expected. The Australian Labor Party deleted White Australia from its policies in 1965, the last party to do so. Downer's successor as Immigration Minister, Hubert Opperman, announced limited Asian Immigration in 1966, and the first large-scale Asian immigration to Australia for more than a century recommenced under the Fraser Government in 1976.

Menzies left office in 1966. By then, his vision had well and truly become something of the past. Australia had changed, and a lucky thing too. To return to Donald Horne, the luck was undeserved given the country's second-rate leadership. But the fact is that we didn't end up trading in 'Royals', and we got a society that was diverse, cosmopolitan and outward looking, less and less like Menzies' national vision, which amounted to the creation of a 'new Britannia in another world', to reuse an expression of the prominent nineteenth-century New South Wales colonist William Charles Wentworth.

THE WHITE PICKET FENCE

John Howard became Leader of the Opposition in 1985. In 1988, he released the Liberal Party's 'Future Directions' policy. On the cover was the image of a family behind a white picket fence. On the inside was all the rhetoric of Anglophone conservatism—Thatcher was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom at the time and Reagan the US President—small government, labour-market deregulation and supporting individual initiative and enterprise. Howard's extra touches to economic neo-liberalism were drawn from his personal repertoire of cultural conservatism, particularly the traditional family and the dangers of identifying with groups—one of the key failings, in his view, of the multicultural and indigenous policies of the time. These views Howard rolled into a policy he called 'One Australia'. In the sharp light of retrospect, the name and the rhetoric eerily foreshadow the One Nation Party that emerged after Howard's election as Prime Minister eight years later.

His starting point was what was then publicly termed the 'Asianisation' of Australia. In an August 1988 radio interview, he said, "I believe that Asian migration is in the eyes of some of the community too great; it would be in our immediate term interests in terms of social cohesion if we could slow down a little so that the capacity of the community to absorb this would become greater".¹⁶ "I do . . . think that the pace of change brought about by the migrant intake is an issue that any government has to keep in mind." This was why he was going to run "very strongly on the concept of One Australia" at the next election. More broadly he claimed that multiculturalism had left the country facing a "cultural identity crisis". "At the end of the day, we all have to be Australians above anything else. We have apologised too much for our past, and we are apolo-

gising too much for our current identity".¹⁷

Bob Hawke was Prime Minister at the time, and seized on the opportunity to condemn Howard. On 25 August 1988, he moved a motion in the Federal Parliament:

That this house, (1) acknowledges the historic action of the Holt Government, with bipartisan support from the ALP, in initiating the dismantling of the White Australia policy; (2) recognises that, since 1973, successive Labor and Coalition governments have, with bipartisan support, pursued a racially non-discriminatory immigration policy to the overwhelming national and international benefit of Australia; and (3) gives its unambiguous and unqualified commitment to the principle that, whatever criteria are applied by Australian governments in exercising their sovereign right to determine the composition of the immigration intake, race or ethnic origin shall never, explicitly or implicitly, be among them.¹⁸

Four Liberals crossed the floor to vote against Howard, including the future Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock—a source of the deep antipathy between the two men that was to last for many years. It was one of the things that spelt the end of Howard's leadership. Andrew Peacock replaced him as leader in May 1989.

For the moment at least, Howard remained unrepentant. He replied to one of his constituents in his electorate of Bennelong, a Mr C. Dawson, as follows:

22 May 1991

Dear Mr Dawson,

Thank you for sending me a copy of your letter of 23 April 1991 addressed to the Prime Minister.

You have raised a large number of issues concerning immigration and multiculturalism. I share some of the concerns you have expressed, but not others.

My own view on this issue is that Australia made an error in abandoning its former policy of encouraging assimilation and integration in favour of multiculturalism.

I do not mind where immigrants come from. However, once in Australia the goal must surely be to establish a completely cohesive integrated society and not encourage separatism.

Yours Sincerely
(John Howard)¹⁹

After Howard, the Liberals aborted the ‘One Australia’ policy and desisted from attacking multiculturalism. In fact, rubbing salt into the wound, Howard’s enemy and supporter of multiculturalism, Philip Ruddock, was elevated to shadow Immigration Minister. However, the Liberals continued to flounder under Andrew Peacock, then John Hewson, then Alexander Downer the younger.

In desperation, the Liberals turned back to their old warhorse, John Howard, in January 1995. It is no small irony that his first public event after being re-installed as leader was a citizenship ceremony at Ryde Civic Centre in Sydney. As he entered the hall, the Ryde District Band played the theme to *The Mouseketeers*, ‘Who’s the leader of the band? . . . Mickey Mouse’.²⁰

One of the first things Howard needed to do was make a public confession of past error. Within a few days of being elevated to the leadership, he was to reflect on what he had said back in 1988 in the following terms:

I obviously used clumsy language. I obviously didn’t handle that thing with the right degree of sensitivity and I’ve dealt with that. I don’t intend to go on repeating what I’ve said previously.²¹

In the lead-up to the March 1996 elections, the Liberals’ policies on immigration, multiculturalism and Indigenous affairs were virtually indistinguishable from Labor’s. Howard’s Liberal-National Party Coalition won a convincing victory.

Despite his apparent backtracking, Howard still had a distinctive nation-building agenda. In an August 1996 interview, of the likely length of his term given a hostile Senate in which the Coalition did not have a majority, he said:

There are a whole lot of reasons why it’s far better to have our three years and then go to the people in ’99 in the lead-up to the centenary of Federation and the Olympic Games. It’s much better we have our three years. You’ve got an opportunity to change the culture, you’ve got an opportunity for there to be a flow-through benefit and you’ve got an opportunity for the Government to really take root in the community.²²

Politics for Howard was to be a lot more than a management exercise—the job of balancing the nation’s books and creating an environment that was good for business. More than mere looking after business,

he also had a cultural project. As he reminded a gathering of Liberal Party faithful in Sydney, “government is not only about dollars and cents and economic goals and economic objectives but government is also about values, and government is also about the way we think about ourselves”.²³

So what were Howard’s values? One of his persistent early themes as Prime Minister was ‘Political Correctness’, a code for the panoply of cultural evils perpetrated by the former Labor Government and, indirectly, a statement of Howard’s contrasting values and cultural priorities. When he became Prime Minister, he said:

one of the goals I set myself, was quite simply to bring about a restoration where people felt a little more freely, if the mood struck them, to talk about controversial issues without fear of being branded as a racist or some other kind of bigot for daring to bring up those subjects. I think one of the many criticisms I had of the former Government was the way in which it used a form of social censorship to intimidate people out of debating difficult, sensitive and controversial issues. I think we had become almost too politically correct to a fault before the [election on the] second of March.²⁴

Another theme was the so-called ‘black armband’ view of history. He laid down the challenge:

. . . to ensure that our history as a nation is not written definitively by those who take the view that Australians should apologise for most of it. This ‘black armband’ view of our past reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. I take a very different view. I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed . . . The debate over Australian history, however, risks being distorted if its focus is confined only to the shortcomings of previous generations. It risks being further distorted if highly selective views of Australian history are used as the basis for endless and agonised navel-gazing about who we are or, as seems to have happened over recent years, as part of a ‘perpetual seminar’ for elite opinion about our national identity.²⁵

And still another was developing Australia’s relationships with Asia, one of the ‘big picture’ themes of

the former Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, and his Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans. Howard said he was not going to trade ‘our history’ (British, Christian, European) against our geography (Asian, Western Pacific, Indian Ocean):

[The Coalition Parties] do not believe that Australia faces some kind of exclusive choice between our past and our future, between our history and our geography. Such a choice is a phoney and irrelevant one proposed by those with ulterior motives. We do not have to abandon or apologise for our heritage to contribute to Asia.²⁶

So, what, in Howard’s view, was Australian national identity? The answer was to be found in the ‘great mainstream’ of Australian life, the people who do not benefit from being a member of a special interest group. Here, Howard harked back to what he perceived to be Menzies’ success as a politician, and a Prime Minister:

Menzies’ political success lay in building an enduring and broadly-based constituency that supported Liberalism’s values and priorities. At the heart of that constituency were ‘the forgotten people’ of that era—the men and women of the great Australian mainstream who felt excluded from the special interest elitism of the Liberal Party’s immediate predecessors and from the trade union dominance of the Labor Party . . . Liberalism faces the ongoing challenge of building an enduring and broadly-based constituency across the great mainstream of our rapidly changing society. Over recent times, a new constituency has galvanised around new issues and in support of Liberal priorities. It includes many of the ‘battlers’ and families who are struggling to get ahead . . . It includes all those who do not want their national government to respond to the loudest clamour of the noisiest minority . . . Liberalism now has an opportunity, unparalleled for almost fifty years, to consolidate a new coalition of support among the broad cross-section of the Australian people. It will only prove enduring if Liberalism continues to relate its fundamental values and principles to the concerns and aspirations of the Australian mainstream, rather than the narrower agendas of elites and special interests. This means building a genuinely shared sense of national purpose rather than an amalgamation of special interests.²⁷

These were Howard’s words about the Australian nation. His actions, however, spoke larger than

words: refusal to condemn maverick MP Pauline Hanson and founder of the One Nation Party; abolition of the Office of Multicultural Affairs; cutbacks in the immigration program that were unprecedented in a time of prosperity; refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generation; closing the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation; the ‘Ten Point Plan’ to restrict the impact of the High Court’s Wik decision on Native Title—these are just a few examples of Howard’s cultural activism in his first term.²⁸ Then, in the second and third terms of office, there was the refugee crisis, the abolition of ATSIC, signing Australia up to the Axis of Anglos for the war against Iraq without UN or even broad-based international support for the invasion.

MR HOWARD BECOMES A NEW AUSTRALIAN

As the Howard years have passed, the Prime Minister’s rhetoric and his practice seem to have changed in some of the defining borderlands of nation and identity. This is not so much the case for Indigenous Affairs, where the abolition of ATSIC, the return of programs to the Federal bureaucracy and the project of ‘practical reconciliation’ amount to a de facto return to the assimilation policies of the forties and fifties. However, since the late nineties, Howard’s political stance has changed in the areas of immigration, multiculturalism and Australia’s relations with Asia, although this should not necessarily be taken to reflect a parallel change in his private views. It is certainly not the result of some kind of epiphany in which the character of Australia was somehow revealed to the Prime Minister, and this in turn, has mutated into ‘leadership’—there is little evidence of that. It is more a reflection of the strange life of a man whose primary virtues are pragmatism and resilience, a great stayer who has had to make himself, or at least his public persona, into a new Australian, if only to keep the job in which he evidently revels.

To take the issue of immigration and border control, Howard’s hard line on refugees has been in the headlines for years on end, the high point of which was the *Tampa* incident of 2001. A Norwegian ship, the *Tampa*, picked up asylum seekers heading to Australia and whose boat was sinking. The Government subsequently refused the ship entry to Australia, and then concocted the ‘Pacific Solution’ in which the asylum seekers were detained at the Australian Government’s expense in various locations in neighbouring countries, mainly Nauru.²⁹ The story

If you were appalled by the Howard Government's stand on asylum seekers, there were no political alternatives. One thing for certain, though, with Latham as Leader and Ferguson as Shadow Immigration Minister—both opponents of immigration and less than enthusiastic about refugees—Labor would reduce immigration if elected.

doesn't bear telling again. Suffice it to say, the Opposition equivocated and the Government won a convincing third-term election some months later.

The less known story is that, however reprehensible the posturing and the now well-documented politics of deceit, the refugee program remained substantial and immigration was significantly growing. The story unfolds as a personal drama fought out between the two longest serving members of the Federal Parliament, John Howard and Philip Ruddock. Both were elected in 1974, midway through the years of the Whitlam Government. Howard's dislike of Ruddock was intense. Giving Ruddock what was then the outer Ministry of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs—Howard stripped the Office of Multicultural Affairs out of the Prime Minister's Department within days of taking office and threw Immigration out of Cabinet—was little more than a sign of his contempt for the person who had contributed to his demise as Opposition Leader in 1988.

Ruddock set about running the Immigration Portfolio in his characteristically plodding, methodical way.³⁰ He knew the area well from his earlier stint as Shadow Minister. One of his prime objectives, he said, was to “restore public confidence in the immigration program”. He was a high immigration man, and believed the program should be rigorously non-discriminatory—quite the reverse of Howard in these respects. However, as a devout Sydney Anglican, teetotaler and a man who never swears (and unlike Howard in these respects, too), he considered ‘queue-jumping’ by asylum seekers to be an affront to Anglo rectitude, and one of the things that eroded public confidence in the program.³¹ Australia had an obligation to resettle refugees, and it would continue to do this at a per capita rate higher than almost every other country in the world, but Ruddock was determined that priority and need should be determined by the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, and not by whichever ‘queue-jumpers’ happened to present themselves on Australia's shores.

The irony was that, although Ruddock's and Howard's underlying agendas were fundamentally different, they converged at the flashpoint of Howard's political pragmatism. Ruddock was elevated to the Cabinet in 1998 when Howard came close to losing the election in the wake of the meteoric rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. He became a hero of the Liberal Party and John Howard's saviour at the 2001 ‘*Tampa* Election’.

In Howard's first term, Ruddock had not been a happy man. His submissions to Cabinet on the immigration program (on the few occasions when he, as a Junior Minister, was invited in), were all cut back. He nearly resigned from the Government when Howard wanted to allow Holocaust-denying historian, David Irving, to be given a visitor's visa to speak in Australia. Howard relented. However, the more Ruddock made himself indispensable to Howard's survival, the more wins he started having against Howard on the key issues upon which they had always disagreed. This was a peculiar victory, because Ruddock's public rhetoric and the way it had been used by Howard, was at the expense of his own integrity and the respect he had garnered in his courageous stand against Howard in 1988.

Take immigration: The program had been set at 82,000 in 1995–96, the last year of the Keating Government. Despite Ruddock's protestations, Howard reduced the program to 67,000 in 1997–98 and 68,000 in 1998–99—the lowest immigration levels ever for a period of economic prosperity. By 2002–03, this number had jumped to 108,000, with 116,500 projected in 2003–04.³² These were the program settings; the actual outcomes were even higher. In the year after the *Tampa* incident, net overseas migration reached its highest level since the 1980s, 126,000. Of these, only 22.2 per cent were European. It was the least white immigration program ever. At the same time, the pace of human movement has been quickening. Leaving aside tourism, there were 280,000 long-term arrivals (includ-

ing temporary workers, business people and students) to Australia in 2002–03, nearly double the figure for the last year of the Keating Government. Twenty-seven thousand of these were from China alone. New visa categories were even introduced, such as nine thousand onshore permanent residence visas for international students. Family migration grew, even for aged parents.³³ These results, paradoxically given his developing public persona, were a testimony to Ruddock's persistence, and then that of his factional friend, Amanda Vanstone, who took over the Immigration portfolio in October 2003. Finally, Ruddock had won the practical battle against John Howard's anti-immigration sentiments.

Meanwhile, the refugee program, large by world standards, remained steady, even through the most negative moments in the public storm: 13,700 in 2001–02 and 12,500 in 2002–03. It has been estimated that, on average, it costs \$100,000 to settle each refugee. This contrasts with other areas of government, such as foreign aid, which has significantly dropped during the Howard years. Moreover, there has been a progressive shift of refugee intake in recent years, away from Eastern Europe, towards Africa (now 47 per cent of refugees) and the Middle East (37 per cent). In just a few years, the program had changed in such a way that it now consists almost exclusively of non-whites or non-Christians.³⁴

And the Labor Opposition's view? After its fourth consecutive election loss in October 2004, Shadow Immigration Minister Laurie Ferguson questioned the very nature of the refugee program. Refugee advocates would have a more realistic view if they lived in areas where most refugees resided, he said, as the Member for Reid in Sydney's west, where many refugees settled. As for asylum seekers, "I get a bit sick of being lectured to by people," he said. "What I do question is that people who don't want any rules, don't want any controls, don't want any checking (of refugee claims) are usually people whose contact is limited to a few niche cases that they get very emotionally involved in. These people lack knowledge, quite frankly, of the broader issues."³⁵ If you were appalled by the Howard Government's stand on asylum seekers, there were no political alternatives. One thing for certain, though, with Latham as Leader and Ferguson as Shadow Immigration Minister—both opponents of immigration and less than enthusiastic about refugees—Labor would have reduced immigration if elected.

As if the Government had some kind of personality disorder, it expressed two kinds of vision, perhaps cynically designed to be regarded positively by two kinds of person. Some people were happy because the Government had got tough on border control. It had taken a 'tough stand', but perhaps they hadn't noticed the substantial rise in levels of immigration? Interestingly, high immigration had been a constant anxiety, constantly in the news, during the Hawke period, but this issue seemed to have been completely displaced in the Howard era by the fracas about a few thousand people in a few dozen boats. Whereas the Hawke and Keating Governments had tried to assuage people's fears with multiculturalism, the Howard Government used unfounded fear as a ruse.

This was one kind of person. Another kind of person whose attention was elsewhere would have noticed, however, a reassuring rhetoric of nation around immigration and multiculturalism. As it turns out, this rhetoric was substantially the same as Hawke and Keating's. This is typical of the way in which the Howard Government has catered for multiple constituencies, even if this meant they had to feed them conflicting and mutually contradictory messages. The political impact was immediate. In the wake of Howard's refusal to speak out against Pauline Hanson, there was a substantial swing within the nearly half a million Chinese community behind Labor; by the 2004 election, many had swung back to the Liberals, a natural choice given their background as migrants and their economic aspirations in Australia. Howard had made himself over sufficiently to win their support. The Labor Party seemed to have forgotten that these were issues which had some influence on election results.

While the Labor Opposition backed away from multiculturalism, even removing the word from the name of its shadow ministry, John Howard, of all people, could be talking the talk. In 2003, the Prime Minister wrote the foreword to its renewed policy, *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity*, launched to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary year of Malcolm Fraser's first national multicultural policy. "The Government remains committed to nurturing our inclusive society with its proud record of community harmony," Howard said. The policy reaffirms "the Government's commitment to promoting diversity" and represents a "renewed statement of our multicultural policy".³⁶ Even to get Howard to say the 'm' word had been a huge achievement. And the

basic ideas behind multiculturalism and the programs enunciated in the document remained unchanged from the Hawke–Keating era—the Access and Equity Program, the Productive Diversity Program and the Living in Harmony community relations program. The engineer of these ideas back in the 1980s had been the former head of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Peter Shergold, new head of Howard’s Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Government even changed the *Citizenship Act* in 2003 to allow Australians to take up a second citizenship—something that had been tried during the Labor years, but which had never won sufficient support.³⁷

All this because the realities of nation were such that there was no other reasonable way to put it. Some six million people have migrated to Australia since 1945, including 650,000 refugees. Forty-three per cent of the population is either born overseas or had one parent born overseas. Overseas-born comprise 23.4 per cent of the population, more than double that of the other great country of immigration, the United States. The consequence was a nation which, in Ruddock’s words, had “brought people from across the globe and with them their diverse cultural heritages”. Central to this ongoing nation-building exercise was “a migration program that does not discriminate on the basis of ethnic origin, gender, race or religion”. “Together, we have built a country that is vibrant, successful and outward looking, a country that provides safe haven for the dispossessed, and a bright future for us all.”³⁸ The realities of nation were so incontrovertible as to be on the verge of sounding like banalities. This was not a country where the older John Howard could have found a viable role. The pragmatist had at last caught up with the realities.

Much the same can be said of Australia’s relations in Asia. Here is John Howard speaking, the same man who in 1988 had expressed his serious reservations about the pace of ‘Asianisation’. The occasion was the address of China’s President Hu Jintao to a joint sitting of both houses of the Australian Parliament, and Howard was speaking of the state of Australia–China relations:

It is a very mature and practical relationship. The people-to-people links are immensely important. If I can describe it this way: the most widely spoken foreign language in Australia today is a dialect of Chinese.

Three per cent of the Australian population—no fewer than 550,000—claim Chinese ancestry. Speaking personally, 13.3 per cent of my own electorate of Bennelong in Sydney claims Chinese ancestry. There are 34,000 students from China studying in Australia. Mr Speaker, China is now Australia’s third largest trading partner. Last year, the signing of the natural gas contract for the supply over twenty-five years of natural gas to the Guangdong province was a veritable landmark in the evolution of the economic relationship between our two nations. Two-way trade between Australia and China has trebled since 1996.³⁹

Nor has the Howard Government toed the US line on Taiwan, something that is noted with appreciation by the Chinese leadership.⁴⁰

Howard is now sounding more and more like the man he scorned as trading our history for our geography, former Prime Minister Keating. In fact, Howard has made twenty-three visits to countries in the region during his eight years as Prime Minister, compared to Hawke’s nine and Keating’s thirteen.⁴¹ After his fourth consecutive election win, he said it was time for a “rebalancing” back to the region and the “great opportunities” that lay there:

There’s the building on what we’ve achieved in China, the election of a new president in Indonesia . . . a new Prime Minister in Malaysia, the good state of our relations with Thailand, the fact that we’ve kept our relations with Korea and Japan (in good shape) . . . I see myself focusing, spending quite a bit of time dealing with the region, countries in the region, over the next year or two.⁴²

The Howard Government, needless to say, rushed to join the Axis of Anglos in its crusade against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, even though the latter was largely unsupported outside the Anglophone world. And Howard the man still showed traces of his old Anglophilia in his visits to the Queen and attendance at cricket matches at Lords. He also managed to derail the shift towards a republic, despite polls showing majority support, by craftily splitting the ‘yes’ vote. His message to the Constitutional Convention of 1998, held in Canberra’s Old Parliament House, was nevertheless ‘politically correct’ to a word, albeit disingenuously so:

Never before has this historic chamber received such a wonderfully diverse gathering of Australians . . . It is a vastly different assembly from that which met in

Melbourne a century ago: there were no Indigenous Australians present at the 1898 Convention; it was an all male gathering; the names of the delegates were overwhelming Anglo Celtic, and I doubt that any delegate was aged under 25-years-old.⁴³

Even his defence of the case to retain the monarchy was close to apologetic:

Paradoxically, the developments of the past forty years are both the main reason why this issue is now under debate yet not necessarily a conclusive argument for change. In my view, the only argument of substance in favour of an Australian republic is that the symbolism of Australia sharing its legal head of state with a number of other nations is no longer appropriate. As a matter of law, Elizabeth II is Queen of Australia. As a matter of indisputable constitutional convention, the Governor-General has become Australia's effective head of state.⁴⁴

The republic was unnecessary, Howard seemed to be saying, because Australia was already a virtual republic, and ultimately the question was not one of “removing the symbolism which many see as inappropriate in our present arrangements”; rather it was whether “the alternatives so far canvassed will deliver a better system of government than the one we currently have”.⁴⁵ If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it, and the question of whether the symbols are appropriate or not is the last thing we should be worrying about.

So, what is Howard's nation at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Here he is trying to explain things to that paragon of New World nations, the United States, at a joint sitting of both houses of the Congress in 2002:

Our pioneer past, so similar to your own, has produced a spirit that can overcome adversity and pursue great dreams. We've pursued a society of opportunity, fairness and hope, leaving—as you did—the divisions and prejudices of the Old World far behind. Like your own, our culture continues to be immeasurably enriched by immigration from the four corners of the world. We believe as you do that nations are strengthened not weakened, broadened and not diminished, by a variety of views and an atmosphere of open debate. Most of all, we value loyalty given and loyalty gained. The concept of mateship runs deeply through the Australian character.⁴⁶

That old chestnut, ‘mateship’ still pops up now and

again, the glue that supposedly holds the ‘mainstream’ together, or its boys at least. But set against this is the image of an immigrant nation and a diverse nation.

By the beginning of his fourth term, Howard had also proved himself to be a middle-of-the-road politician in the areas of social and economic policy. He had initiated less privatisation than the Hawke and Keating Governments. Even economic hawks, like the *Economist*, admitted that the real structural ‘reforms’ preceded Howard.⁴⁷ Indeed, Howard decisively turned his back on the rigours of ‘economic rationalism’ as espoused by former Liberal leader John Hewson and practiced by Victorian Premier Kennett. He was to increase Federal taxation and government spending as a percentage of GDP. Bizarrely, one of the planks of the Labor Party's losing platform in the 2004 election was to shrink the size of government. Meanwhile the Government was spending big on iconic infrastructure projects, such as the Alice Springs–Darwin railway, a decision hardly motivated by immediate business opportunity. “There is a desire on the part of the community”, Howard said, “for an investment in infrastructure and human resources and I think there has been a shift in attitude in the community on this, even among the most ardent economic rationalists.”⁴⁸ Howard also gave cash bribes to ‘mainstream Australia’ for buying a new house and having babies. And, reminiscent of the Whitlam years, Howard was to pull the centre of gravity of government programs and activities away from the states and back towards Canberra. National accreditation of teachers, the establishment of Vocational Education Colleges and the abolition of the Australian National Training Authority, are just a few examples of this in one portfolio area. Being a centralist on economic policy was an easy row to hoe given that Australia had one of the most buoyant economies in the developed world. Interest rates were low, and steady. Per capita GDP was growing to such an extent that Australia's rank in the league table of the world's richest countries rose from 10 in 1990 to 7 in 2000.⁴⁹ This is the stuff that election victories are made of. Plus the cunning of out-Laboring Labor.

WE, THE PEOPLE

So, here is one version of Australia halfway into the first decade of the twenty-first century. We have showed ourselves to be heartless by denying refuge

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to people fleeing regimes which are undeniably ugly. We have shown ourselves capable of passing laws that flaunt international human rights protocols to which we are signatory. We have proven ourselves to be slippery characters by consorting with the bankrupt and corrupt state of Nauru, and for no better reason than to buy political advantage during an election campaign. We have taken back the reigns of Indigenous development and cast Indigenous People as irresponsible abusers of each other. We have turned narrowly to the USA, not expansively to our neighbours, particularly the communities to our immediate North. We have made ourselves vulnerable and even possible targets by highlighting to the world our xenophobia in recent years. Worst of all, we have shown ourselves to be willing to betray our historical trajectory as an inclusive nation.

In these respects, Mr Howard has managed to change our sense of ourselves. He has made us believe ourselves to be smaller and meaner than we are. His continuing success in the polls reflects his narrow vision of Australia, manipulated by five years of wedge politics and disingenuous talkback radio gigs. We appear under Howard's leadership to have turned our backs on the necessary, difficult dialogues that had led us on the path to reconciliation, multiculturalism and openness to our region. This, incidentally, would be the stuff of a serious and effective 'war against terror', one which tackles its root causes.

But there's another version of the Australian nation, to which even Mr Howard has been forced to adjust. Our curious good luck has been the ambivalence about who we are and our diversity as a nation of immigrants, as a nation in Asia and as a nation facing the moral inevitability of having to address the question of original Indigenous ownership of this continent. The last of these questions, Howard does seem to have successfully swept under the carpet for the moment at least. But on the former two questions, the reality of the Howard Government, although not its fear-inducing border control talk, has been to continue the trajectory of national self-trans-

formation. This trajectory takes us still further away from the foundational premises of nation at the time of Federation. Mr Howard has been forced, reluctantly perhaps, to reinvent himself, to become a new Australian.

Just as Howard cannot claim the prosperous Australian economy as his own doing, nor can he claim a role of any significance in the shaping of national identity. His principles may have sometimes acted as a brake, but not for too long, as pragmatism kicks in. Howard is a man being dragged into the future, more than he has managed to shape the future. We are a nation whose changing shape is being chiselled by underlying historical trajectories rather than leadership and vision. We are 'lucky' (Donald Horne's ironical 'lucky' again) despite the lack of national leadership. There's plenty of historical precedent for this in Australia. As a country, we seem to have thrived on weak leaders and in spite of their anachronistic understandings of nation. Menzies and Howard have now been Prime Minister for twenty-five of the post-war years, and we've still managed to come a long way towards creating an open, cosmopolitan, outward looking country.

It is easy from a conservative perspective to be triumphalist and from a progressive perspective to feel cast into the wilderness by the events of the Howard years. Neither view is accurate. In fact, speaking for the moment as a strategic optimist, not even the most atavistic leader has been able to define Australia in old-fashioned ethnic terms, aligned only to an imagined Western, or even more narrowly, Anglo kith and kin. This is ineluctably a nation where you can have multiple loyalties to other places and communities in the world, where you can speak any language and practice a wide range of acceptably different lifestyles, and still be a good citizen. This is a lesson that still has to be learnt in many of the world's trouble spots. It has been something that was possible for us to achieve in Australia. This is a nation that could show moral, cultural and political leadership in a world pulled apart by conflicts over

borders and belonging. And when our leaders won't or can't articulate our achievement, we, the people, will have to do it for ourselves.

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Professor Mary Kalantzis holds a Chair in Education and is a Research Professor with the Globalism Institute at RMIT University. She has been a Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Chair of the Queensland Ethnic Affairs Ministerial Advisory Committee and a member of the Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Board.