

The Howard Years: Cultural Ambivalence and Political Dogma

The relatively short history of non-Indigenous Australia continues to intrigue and fascinate the student of national identity and national culture. It is not just that a relatively small group of white settlers came to inhabit a vast and relatively inhospitable continent, knowing little or nothing of the traditions, lifestyles or wisdom of its original inhabitants, or even that the imperial power had chosen Australia as a convenient dumping ground for a motley group of convicts, mostly repeat offenders who had been found guilty of minor crimes in their homeland. It is rather that both convicts and free settlers, of predominantly English, Irish and Scottish extraction, had settled on a land whose location placed them in relative proximity of much larger Asian populations about whom they knew little and with whom they had little or no affinity. White Australia seemed as far as it is possible to be from kith and kin, whereas strangers and potential enemies seemed uncomfortably close.

The deeply ingrained racism of 'White Australia' that continues to hamper reconciliation with 'Indigenous Australia' and the ensuing culture of *dependency* that combines a high degree of insularity with reliance on great and powerful friends are symptoms of a deeper and lingering ailment, namely the psychologically and culturally unresolved tension between the country's history and geography (Walker 1999). It is only by placing it in this context that we can make sense of Australia's troubled relationship with Asia, and begin to identify the anxieties and insecurities that continue to shape Australia's image of itself and its place in the world. In this respect *Australia's Ambivalence towards Asia* has made an invaluable contribution. Its analysis of the 'formative elements of white Australia' paves the way for an insightful characterisation of Anglo-Australia's self-perception. D'Cruz and Steele suggest that in their relations with people-of-colour, Australians experience a mixture of insecurity and discomfort (2003, 33). The net effect is chronic ambivalence towards Asia that leads in the present period 'to a type of incapacity to engage in constructive and continuous relations in Asia generally, to disillusionment, to sorties, or mere start-stop ventures in Asia . . . a foreboding paralysis of action and disengagement' (2003, 34). This is no doubt a reasonably accurate description of Howard's Australia, but ambivalence has at least two important connotations. On the one hand, it connotes perceptions and attitudes which, though held concurrently, point in quite different directions, and on the other, it may imply perceptions and attitudes that fluctuate over time. Although the two are intricately interconnected, it is the second connotation which needs further exploration, if we are to make sense of the apparent regression of the Howard years.

At the risk of oversimplifying a tumultuous and highly complex period of Australian history, it may be said that from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s Australian governments, attempted, however cautiously, to reshape the rhetoric and symbolic imagery that had traditionally underpinned the domestic and foreign policy agenda. With John Gorton's prime ministership – by which time the senselessness of the Vietnam War had become increasingly apparent – we see the first tentative steps to construct a more independent Australian foreign policy, one less tied to America's apron strings and less committed to treating Asia as an arena of subversion and instability posing a direct threat to Australian security. After the brief aberration of McMahon's prime ministership, Gough Whitlam sought again, but in more forceful and eloquent language, to redefine Australia's self-understanding and its place in the region. 'Regional co-operation' was advanced as 'one of the keystones of Australia's foreign policy for the 1970s'. The intention was to chart a new course 'with less emphasis on military pacts', based on 'an independent outlook in foreign affairs', and directed towards 'a new regional community' (Address to the Australian Institute of Political Science Summer

School, 27 January 1973). Though Fraser brought to the task a much more hostile attitude to the Soviet Union and a corresponding conviction that the United States had to stiffen its resolve to oppose Soviet expansionism, he was nevertheless prepared to voice a distinctively Australian perspective, not least on issues of race and Third World poverty, and to canvas possibilities for a much closer relationship with China.

Under Hawke and Keating the themes first elaborated by Whitlam were given added flesh. A stream of initiatives suggested an unprecedented commitment to a policy of engagement with Asia (Evans 1995; Keating 2000). Especially noteworthy were Australia's high profile in the Cambodian peace process, the eventual resumption of aid to Vietnam, a series of steps culminating in the formation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group, and the assiduous diplomacy that saw the establishment of a 'special relationship' with Indonesia, including the signing of a bilateral security agreement on the eve of the 1996 election. Gareth Evans went so far as to argue: 'Australians now accept, not grudgingly but enthusiastically, the idea that the East Asian hemisphere is where we live, where we must find our security and where we can best guarantee our prosperity' (Address to Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, Kuala Lumpur, 20 February 1995). The decade of Labor government was labelled a 'remarkable decade of transition' that had witnessed 'an explosion of Asia consciousness'. A number of indicators appeared to support the claim: Australian firms were increasingly attracted by Asia's booming markets; the social and political life of Asian countries received more extensive media coverage; the study of Asian languages became more popular; the immigrant community of Asian origin expanded significantly, as did the number of Asian tourists and students visiting Australia.

None of this is to suggest that engagement with Asia was a fully coherent policy, that relations with great and power friends had been adequately reconceptualised, or that Australia's vision of an Asia-Pacific community accorded fully with East Asian notions of regional co-operation. Nor could one entirely avoid the conclusion that the higher priority Australia now attached to Asia was largely a direct response to the Asian economic miracle and the perceived business opportunities which it seemed to offer. The economic component of engagement undoubtedly loomed large in government thinking, and cultural, intellectual and political connections played very much second fiddle. Australians were still a long way from developing the knowledge, confidence and sensitivity needed to nurture reciprocal trust and sustainable dialogue. By the same token, Aboriginal reconciliation, the severing of residual links with the British crown, the development of a more mature multicultural ethos, and a renewed enthusiasm for multilateral diplomacy were now distinctive features of the emerging official discourse, all of which neatly dovetailed with and reinforced the push to Asia.

Well before Keating's election defeat, however, numerous voices could be heard questioning each and every aspect of the new discourse. Constitutional change, even of the symbolic variety, recognition of indigenous rights, Australia's changing demographic composition, and the complexities of the new regional diplomacy were all seen by certain sections of society as at best irrelevant diversions from the more pressing concerns of everyday life or at worst as disturbing trends which ought to be reversed. The economic discontents of globalisation which were sharper than many had realised served to deepen the sense of social and cultural unease, not least amongst those who had benefited little from Australia's rapid integration into increasingly deregulated regional and global markets. It was Howard's great skill to read this psychological undercurrent, to give it added legitimacy and to harness it for political ends

both before and after the 1996 election.

For the best part of a decade Australia's profound ambivalence towards Asia resurfaced with a vengeance (Adams 1997; Broinowski 1998; Macintyre 2003). It is as if many Australians, frightened by the discourse of the 1980s and early 1990s, were only too keen to return to more familiar terrain. The offending discourse was disquieting enough. The thought of seeing it translated into action, with all that this might imply for cultural and educational processes, not to mention personal attitudes and political institutions, was all too painful. Australian society preferred to close in on itself, and return to the language and symbolism of an earlier period. Under Howard, Australia once again opted for a conception of the world, as much psychological as intellectual, in which western and in particular American notions of cultural and political superiority constituted the central frame of reference. This conception in part reflects a deeper sense of white Australia's cultural and racial identity, and helps to explain the awkwardness – not to say reticence – with which the political phenomenon of Hansonism was handled. The triumphalism that accompanied Australia's intervention in East Timor, the insensitive way in which the entire relationship with Indonesia was recalibrated following Suharto's fall from power, the 'deputy sheriff' pronouncements which came to be known as the 'Howard doctrine', the treatment of asylum seekers of Muslim provenance, the 'children overboard' affair, and the threat to take anti-terrorist pre-emptive action in the region all attest to the same mindset (Manne 2001; Mares 2002).

Howard's conception of the world mirrors his image of Australia. When he speaks of Australia's 'national character', of its 'distinct and enduring values', and of 'an Australian way', he is using code language to refer to key aspects of the white Anglo-Australian heritage (Camilleri 2004). Placed in this context, the 'national interest', which has become the linchpin of foreign and security policy discourse under Howard, especially in relation to Asia, is in practice another linguistic device which conveys the same culturally and ideologically charged view of the world and of Australia's place in it. The United States assumes a pervasive presence in the Howard cosmology precisely because it finds in it much needed psychological comfort and sustenance (Camilleri 2003). By identifying so closely with the great and powerful friend, the US alliance is once again placed at the centre of Australia's diplomatic, strategic, economic and cultural connections with the outside world. The United States is a European, English-speaking superpower with whom racial, cultural and ideological affinities offer Australians the comfort zone they so desperately seek to occupy. The result is familiar enough: abject dependence in almost every area of policy – from Iraq and the 'war on terror' to civil liberties, the role of the United Nations, global warming, international trade, attitudes to Islam and Southeast Asia, and much else.

There is more, however, to the umbilical connection with the United States than cultural or ideological empathy. Power is the other pivotal dimension. For the Howard government, and one suspects for a large segment of Australian society, the United States dazzles and comforts by virtue of its economic, technological and military prowess. The 'shock and awe' tactics that characterised the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 were, after all, directed as much at friends and allies as they were at enemies in the Islamic world. Not surprisingly, one of the recurring themes of the second white paper on Australia's foreign policy (DFAT 2003), even more than the first (DFAT 1997), was America's 'global pre-eminence', the cost, technological sophistication and global reach of its military forces, and the size of its economy. As I have argued elsewhere, for many Australians

. . . the unchallengeable power of the United States is doubly reassuring: it provides protection against the ultimate threat to 'national security', and enables Australia to speak and act in its neighbourhood with a louder voice than would otherwise be the case. Australia's little stick is reinforced and legitimised by America's big stick (Camilleri 2003, 448).

Understood in this sense, the US alliance underpins and legitimises Australia's regional policing role, whether in Iraq, East Timor or the South Pacific, and even the scarcely believable, not to say pointless, commitment to regional pre-emption. Beyond these two gains, which at face value appear to be primarily of a strategic and diplomatic kind, the insurance policy carries a third, less tangible but no less reassuring, and ultimately more important promise, which in fact connects with and sustains the other two. Precisely because of its global pre-eminence, the United States, as the world's only superpower, is seen as uniquely placed to remake the world in its own image, to establish a global order based on free markets and democratic institutions, and create the conditions most likely to deliver the prosperity and stability to which Australians aspire. The reassurance, however, is not purely or even primarily economic and political. It is fundamentally psychological, for it provides Australians a way out of the dilemma which they would otherwise need to confront, namely, the unresolved tension between history and geography. To put it crudely, but not inaccurately, the attachment to America as 'hyperpower' helps to postpone the evil day when Australia will need to come to terms with its Indigenous heritage, its recent demographic and cultural evolution, and its Asian neighbourhood.

Putting all one's eggs in the American basket is, however, a hazardous and ultimately self-defeating exercise. Notwithstanding the 2004 election result, there is little reason to think that the traditional values of white Anglo-Australia will continue to have the same resonance, let alone utility, that they did fifty or a hundred years ago. Today's multi-ethnic, multi-religious Australia faces entirely new circumstances as much at home as abroad. Rapidly changing demographic, economic and geographic circumstances dictate a new relationship with Asia, across issues of trade, investment, diplomacy and security, but also around the critical issues of education and the dialogue of cultures and civilisations. A relationship with the United States, that breeds a culture of dependence and emulation, is likely to deepen the gulf that separates Australia from its neighbours, and close doors to fruitful interaction, (Mackie 2003) as Australia's exclusion from a number of important regional fora already indicates. Nor is US power as unchallengeable as some have come to believe. The extraordinary difficulties it has encountered in Afghanistan, Iraq and the 'war on terror' are indicative of imperial decline. The multiple sources of resistance to US policies in the Middle East and elsewhere show no sign of abating. In the longer term, the wider geopolitical landscape looks less than promising. Washington's unilateral responses to terrorism and the actions of 'rogue' states has already exacted a heavy financial and human price at home, which may prove beyond the tolerance of the American electorate. In Europe, governments and populations alike have lost faith in America's capacity to lead. In East Asia, developments in the Korean peninsula, China's rise as the dominant regional power, and developments in Southeast Asia all suggest that US power is being effectively bypassed.

The connection with the United States, even more than the residual links with Britain, may therefore be said to present a critical test of Australia's capacity to diagnose, let alone remedy, its current predicament. Over the next several years, Australian society will have to make two difficult choices. First, it will have to choose between continuing with its present role of junior policeman or pursuing regional co-operation on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. Secondly, it will have to decide whether to subordinate the discourse and practice of

multiculturalism to the demands of the dominant Anglo culture, or mould a richer intercultural dialogue that sheds the stereotypical perception and demonisation of the 'other', and embraces new friendships and insights.

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