INTRODUCTION

In the prime ministership is invested, in some respects,
the ideal of the nation and its aspirations.
—Paul Keating, September 1992[1]

THIS BOOK IS about the shaping of Australian national ideals and the voicing of national aspirations by five Australian prime ministers—from Gough Whitlam to John Howard. It explores how the various intellectual backgrounds of these men have helped to shape their language and vision; and how they, in their speeches and writings, have helped to redefine the national image. These men's evocation of history in Australian political debate has been no idle glance backwards; it has affected the way they have performed as leaders and given substance to how they have conceived Australia. The intellectual contribution made by Australian prime ministers to national life adds a significant and as yet unexamined dimension to the debate over Australian nationalism and the extent to which Australia's changing circumstances have affected it.

Each of the prime ministers discussed has sought to leave his own distinctive mark on Australia. For Paul Keating, of course, both his ideal of the nation and his aspirations for its future were inextricably linked to his 'big picture'—a national portrait in which Australia finally

emerged from the shadows of its British imperial past, embraced a republican future, engaged with Asia and achieved lasting reconciliation with its indigenous peoples. Keating took on this task with great seriousness and passionate intent. For him there was a seamless link between political leadership and the idea of the nation. In a speech to the National Press Club on the eve of his defeat at the 1996 Federal election, he warned voters that 'when the government changes, the country changes', citing the transitions from McMahon to Whitlam, from Whitlam to Fraser and from Fraser to Hawke to illustrate his point. The implication was clear: in political leadership could be found the most reliable barometer of social change and national renewal. The Labor Party's election slogan in that campaign—LEADERSHIP—was the ultimate expression of this view that leaders mattered most and that Keating as national leader had something special to offer the Australian people.

But Keating's frequent appeals to history were neither ad hoc contributions to the national debate nor a political smokescreen intended to divert the public gaze from the economic malaise of the early 1990s. They responded to a rich, continuing debate about identity produced by the rhetoric of national leaders in the post-Menzies era. In their major set-piece speeches (particularly those on ceremonial occasions such as Australia Day or Anzac Day), in their statements on foreign and economic policy or even in their party political addresses, the prime ministers of this era were reflecting on the nature and content of the national image. The unravelling of this debate has much to tell Australians about their political leaders and political culture. It has much to tell, too, about the fate of Australian nationalism in an age when the ideology of 'nationalism' was seen by many as a dangerous anachronism, inappropriate to a new era in which tolerance of difference and celebration of cultural diversity were seen as the primary social values.

For most of the Australian prime ministers of the post-Menzies era, however, the task of articulating a new language of 'national community' was undertaken with some trepidation and unease. Such discomfort derived not only from the nature of nationalism itself but from the defining features of Australia's nationalist experience. The idea of nationalism, emerging in the late eighteenth century and predominantly associated with Western Europe and the United States, prescribed intense social bonding and demanded cultural and racial uniformity and an absolute need to differentiate the unique qualities of a 'people' from those of their neighbours. It was an idea that had sparked the rise of powerful nation states, ignited two world wars and fuelled revolutions.

Nationalism also created for each 'people' a myth based on ideas of sharing a common language, lineage, history and culture. These national myths told the story of a people becoming progressively aware of its distinctiveness and of the gradual awakening of a national spirit which ultimately led a people to its independent 'destiny'.[2] In South Africa, the Great Trek undertaken by the Boers to the interior in 1838 became a focal point for the Afrikaner nationalist self-image. While the original purpose of the journey was for the Boers to achieve independence from British rule and find a promised land of their own, the trek and the ensuing battle of Blood River (in which the Boers claimed a victory against great odds) became a means of justifying the Afrikaners' racially separatist ideology and superior identity. It imbued them with Calvinist notions of pre-destination, confirmed the superiority of the Afrikaner type and became the most visible expression of Afrikaner nationalism.[3]

Nationalism, as theorist Ernest Gellner has argued, presents itself as 'natural and self-evident and self-generating', an expression of continuity with the past.[4] This relationship between nationalism and history exercised a powerful grip on the way in which peoples understood themselves. Nationalism, claimed Hans Kohn in 1944, is 'first and foremost a state of mind'. The continuity of Kohn's assessment is reflected in Benedict Anderson's concept of nationalism as constituting an 'imagined community'. It is 'imagined', Anderson argued, since 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or ever hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.[5] The test for those holding political power has been how to foster a sense of national 'communion' and how to articulate those elements that hold the nation together. Historian Walker Connor, in discussing how national leaders have appealed to notions of blood and kinship, concluded that 'It is not chronological or factual history that is the key to the nation, but sentient or felt history . . . an intuitive conviction of the group's separate origin and evolution'.[6] By 'intuitive conviction', Connor essentially agreed with the Kohn view that nationalism is an idea or myth about a 'people'.

How then, in this the classical age of nationalism (from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s) did Australians respond? For Australians the idea of 'kith and kin', of a distinct cultural homeland which nurtured identity and instilled in them a sense of membership of a wider community, derived essentially from their identification with Britain and the British Empire. Historian Neville Meaney suggests that it is worth

contemplating 'the possibility that in the nationalist era 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.[7]

And the people's leaders gave resonant voice to this idea. Since 1901 Australian Prime Ministers had largely told the story of Australia as a white British enclave searching for security in an unfamiliar Asian–Pacific world. Confined to the fringes of empire, they nevertheless embraced the task of replicating British civilisation in the southern seas, for the empire was to be strengthened and even improved by its loyal servants on the periphery. Both sides of Australian politics embraced the basic tenets of 'British race patriotism', the idea that Australians were part of an 'organic' worldwide community of British peoples, united by blood and belonging, history and heritage, language and literature. Australians saw in the 'White Australia' Policy the means by which their racial homogeneity could be protected and preserved, therefore keeping the ever-present threat of Asia at bay. But Australia's Britishness should not be simply equated with subservience or dependence—with 'fore-lock tugging' or obsequious genuflection to its imperial 'betters'. While some saw London as the imperial metropolis directing the empire's affairs, others defined an 'organic' concept of empire in which all the dominions had equal status with the mother country and contributed on equal terms to the making of empire policy. If 'colony' implied 'dependence', then 'dominion' carried the much cherished implication of 'equality', and equality within the empire remained to a greater or lesser extent the goal of all Australian prime ministers down to the 1960s. Furthermore, while Australians thought of themselves primarily as Britons, and therefore as the unique inheritors of liberty, there was also a sense in which Australians believed their Britishness to be a purer form than that found at 'home': there was the chance to build a new British society free from the inadequacies and shortcomings of the 'old world'.

Billy Hughes, for example, was prone to roar long and loud in celebration of Australia's Britishness. Dubbed 'the little digger' by virtue of his close identification with the soldiers of the First AIF, and often lauded as a strident Australian nationalist on account of his sometimes truculent rhetoric towards the United States and Great Britain, Hughes was one of the most fervent and passionate Australian leaders of his generation to identify wholeheartedly with the British race ideal. In a speech to the London Pilgrim's Club in 1916, Hughes told his audience that the war would forever transform the known world, since the conflict had 'welded together by bonds that time will not dissolve, that nothing but our own incredible folly can break asunder, the loose federation known as the British Empire into one homogeneous nation'.[8] And this was a British 'nation' that through the bonds of blood, sympathy and tradition included Australians. The war had made all British peoples 'one' cultural entity.

This is not to say that Hughes rejected the idea of a distinct Australian political 'nation' with its own particular interests. On the contrary, as he told the Commonwealth Parliament in September 1919, the separate representation accorded to Australia at the Paris Peace Conference had been the foundation moment of Australian nationhood: 'By this recognition Australia became a nation,' he said, 'and entered into a family of nations on a footing of equality'. But the protection of Australian interests—particularly those in the Pacific—did not entail a rejection of the 'mother country'. Later in the speech, justifying his defence of the White Australia policy in the face of mounting opposition from conference delegates—the Japanese had wanted a racial equality clause inserted into the League of Nations covenant—Hughes delivered an emphatic affirmation of Australia's British self-image:

> Remember that this is the only community in the Empire, if not, indeed, in the world, where there is so little admixture of race. Do you realise that, if you go in England from one county to another, men speak with a different accent; that if you go a few miles men speak with a different tongue . . . Yet you can go from Perth to Sydney, and from Hobart to Cape York, and find men speaking the same tongue, with the same accent. Place on that bench men from Alice Springs, Cape York, Hobart, and Adelaide, and you cannot distinguish them in speech, form or feature. We are all of the same race, and speak the same tongue in the same way. That cannot be said of any other Dominion in the Empire, except New Zealand, where, after all, it can only be said with reservations, because that country has a large population of Maoris. We are more British than the people of Great Britain, and we hold firmly to the great principle of the White Australia, because we know what we know.[9]

For Hughes the Australian was a purer and better Briton. Australia may well have had her own interests in terms of security, trade and commerce, but in a cultural and emotional sense she was wholly British. Here, the British idea found more fertile soil in which to grow than it did in Britain, for there were no other loyalties to dilute its purity and power. While in Britain the various counties have their own distinguishing accents, traditions and customs, the Australian 'nation' is depicted as a unified British people, culturally and racially one. Hughes's pride in a common accent was intended not as an expression of Australianness but as a marker of Australia's uniformly British racial character. His intense Britishness, along with his keen eye for Australian interests, presents a classic case of what Neville Meaney has termed the 'riddle of Australian nationalism'. This riddle can be solved only if it is appreciated that while 'Australia's first response in terms of sentiment was to British race patriotism' rather than a distinctive national culture, Australians insisted they should maintain exclusive control over the direction of their political affairs.[10]

In 1930 the Australian historian W K (Keith) Hancock delivered the classic assessment of Australia's dual loyalties, that 'Among the Australians pride of race counted for more than love of country'. They exulted in the

> process of consanguineous peopling of the land, in the crimson thread of kinship which ran through them all; and declared that the unity of Australia meant nothing if it did not imply a united race. Defining themselves as 'independent Australian Britons', they believed each word essential and exact, but laid most stress upon the last.[11]

In 1947, when only nine per cent of the Australian population were listed as having been born overseas, a Gallup poll found that 'an overwhelming majority of Australians prefer their legal nationality to be British' rather than Australian.[12] The continuing pervasiveness of Britishness in Australian society and culture had its most fervent, quasi-religious manifestation in the Royal Tour of 1954. On this occasion, the *Sydney Morning Herald* observed that 'To Australians the Queen especially represents the tradition they have inherited from England . . . Australia is still and always will be a British nation whose greatest strength lies in the tradition she has inherited from England'. Or as the *Bulletin* even more decisively declared, 'the Royal visit completes the nationhood of Australia'.[13] Loyalty to Britain and a commitment to White Australia—these were grist to the prime ministerial mill from 1901 to the early 1960s as the prime ministers responded to and defined the Australian people.

But from this time Australian prime ministers faced a crisis of national meaning. The most fundamental idea in Australian cultural and political life, that of Britishness, had to be significantly revised. 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 slowly gave up their race consciousness and in its place embraced the contrary notion of being a 'multicultural' community. The British decision to seek membership of the European Economic Community between 1961 and 1963 had taken Australians by surprise. As Stuart Ward has demonstrated, 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.[14]

The result was indeed dramatic. The speed of the change and its effect on the nation's leaders produced a reaction akin to psychic shock. In 1966 Prime Minister Harold Holt gave expression to the utter confusion in which Australians of his generation suddenly found themselves. When forced to define themselves and their place in world affairs in new terms, they found it difficult to free themselves of the old mindset. Addressing the first convention of the Young Australian Foundation at the University of Melbourne in March 1966, just two months after taking over the prime ministership from Sir Robert Menzies, Holt confessed:

> In my day, we looked to the United Kingdom and the strength of the British Navy. People thought in terms of the British Isles as home. Here, while our affection remains for the lands of our kith and kin—for most of us that has been the situation—we have now realised that Australia has a national independent entity of its own and that Australia faces problems and has obligations which are quite unlike anything the earlier

> generations of Australians had to meet. And so we can't offer you a tremendous amount by way of guidance because a precedent hasn't been able to serve us for the kind of situations we now face. But what we—and I now speak for the older generation of Australians—do offer to you is a comradeship together as we face the difficulties and at the same time the fantastic possibilities that we see ahead of a growing nation.[15]

Holt, though clearly hapless in trying to address the question of a possible new Australian identity, was nevertheless fundamentally correct in his view of history. Precedents did not exist. The past could neither instruct nor guide. Britain's decision that she would withdraw her military presence from East of Suez by the early 1970s only added to the anxiety. The dawning of the idea that Australia might be now 'independent' carried not only a certain responsibility but also the need for self-confidence and self-assurance which, by implication, Australians had previously based on a British identity that had now been taken from them. The question was now to define a sense of nationhood which, rather than being keenly sought, had been thrust upon them by the unwanted decisions of the 'mother country'. The air of resignation in Holt's words betrayed puzzlement, almost helplessness—as if such a reorientation of the traditional framework of Australian loyalties was beyond comprehension for those of his ilk. The sense of Britishness had been so deeply internalised that its rapid removal left leaders such as Holt grasping for alternatives. Since Britishness, as Billy Hughes had so well illustrated, had been so all-encompassing, Australia had no alternative national myth to which it could turn. This is the critical problem posed by Holt's emotional and rhetorical turmoil.

John Gorton, Holt's successor, simply spoke in a more upbeat tone when he declared that an 'urgent task of leadership' for his government was to 'give to Australians . . . that pride in achievement which is latent in them and which I believe, stirred properly, will make us the greatest nation in the world in time'. The language here, though more confident, still remained hesitant. Whatever Australian 'pride' might be uncovered, it had to be 'stirred properly'. But the very fact that the cultivation of a distinctively Australian national sentiment was 'urgent' suggests an impatience within Gorton to come to terms with Australia's new circumstances, to find a new language which would give meaning to the nation. Thus the demise of Britishness, rather than the dawning of a more exclusive Australian nationalism, had compelled national leaders to initiate a process of self-examination, a process which did not seem to lead in any clear direction. Pointedly, Gorton used his first speech as prime minister, at a Young Liberal gathering, to deliver a passionate defence of *Waltzing Matilda* as the country's legitimate national song, but his concluding remarks were testament to the urgency he intended to bring to the task of national self-definition:

> I haven't much more to say to you. I don't propose to talk on details of politics or details of policies—some other time. This is the first speech that I have made since becoming Prime Minister, and I wanted to make it to young people. I wanted to make it not on what the rate of taxation should be, or what the rate of excise should be, or what there should be given to this or to that, but rather on the motivating forces, on the real wellsprings of a nation which alone will keep a party great, which alone will keep a country great, and I believe that I see here before me living examples that that spring is in this party and is in Australia.[16]

The words may have been sprinkled with a little partisan flavour, and young Liberals may well have breathed a collective sigh of relief at escaping an economic lecture, but Gorton had made it clear that the emotional life of the nation would assume top priority during his leadership. The economy could wait—for the moment—it was imperative first to tap into the 'real wellsprings' of the nation and uncover its 'motivating forces'. Gorton understood too that party-political supremacy would be more likely achieved if the Liberals could be successfully identified as the agents of national renewal. Like Holt, however, he was unable to define what these 'wellsprings' or 'forces' actually were.

Nevertheless, Gorton's words set the tone for the post-Menzies prime ministers. In their speeches each of them was forced to ponder how the nation could define itself in a new and different era. Each, in trying to plumb these national 'wellsprings', brought with them their own intellectual history and their own idea of the nation. And each was confronted with the same problem of trying to find the delicate balance between the need for national unity and a tolerance of ethnic diversity, a means of balancing respect and affection for the British connection with its declining relevance for Australia, and a way of bringing the

indigenous peoples—for so long excluded from any idea of the nation —into the concept of a new Australia. Although from the late 1960s Australia's treatment of its indigenous peoples was critical to its standing in the eyes of the world, few prime ministers subsequently endeavoured to incorporate them into a new myth of Australian nationalism. The old British myth of 'whiteness' had defined Australians not against Aborigines but primarily against Asians. The prime ministers may have devoted considerable energy to policies supporting Aboriginal 'advancement', 'integration', 'self-determination' or 'practical reconciliation', but rarely did they go so far as to say that the Aborigines were now well and truly 'one of us'.

The process by which the idea of an Australian 'national community' was developed and adapted to these new circumstances by the post-1960s Australian prime ministers raises a question of central significance for Australian political culture during this period: what happened to the need for nationalism—did it really disappear or was it merely transformed into a more appropriate ideal for the modern era? How did Australians, having found in their identification with Britishness so much of their emotional needs, adjust to an era in which the intense social bonding which nationalism requires was seemingly no longer necessary? 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.

But these leaders were themselves, in one sense, ill-equipped for such a task. The world-views of Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating and Howard had been shaped in an era in which nationalism was the key idea or myth connecting the individual to society. As Hans Kohn remarked in the mid-1960s, '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'.[17] But the acceptance of nationalism as a positive, unifying social and cultural force had become problematic. The legacy of the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe before World War II meant that nationalism became predominantly stained with its more oppressive and hostile qualities. Australian leaders, like many of their Western counterparts, also feared the chauvinism and jingoism of extreme nationalism. They too recognised that the scales of twentieth-century nationalism had more often tipped over in favour of its conformist, illiberal and aggressive features and that the viability of nationalism itself as a means of mobilising the people in support of ideas and ideals was in decline.

But the ambivalence of Australian leaders in the 1960s was complicated further by the collapse of the British race ideal. Since their notion of community had been sustained by the very elements that had so discredited the idea of nationalism—cultural homogeneity and absolute racial unity—they were faced with the task not only of disowning these conformist aspects of their identity but with finding a substitute to maintain a sense of social cohesion. In a climate of growing international hostility towards racism, and in response to their changing geopolitical circumstances which prompted increasing engagement with Asia, Australian policy-makers from the late 1950s introduced a number of piecemeal adjustments to the White Australia policy. This process of 'modification by degrees', as historian Matt Jordan has shown, was specifically designed to placate Asian and world opinion. As Jordan notes, the nation's leaders 'still spoke of the need to maintain a generally integrated and predominantly homogeneous population. But unlike Deakin, Calwell and Menzies, their understanding of a homogeneous society was no longer defined exclusively by colour.'[18] And it was this process that inevitably led to new ways of thinking about how a sense of Australian national community might be defined.

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 felt by many 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 as they tried to adapt it to the nation's changing circumstances. My main concern here is to show how each of these prime ministers understood the concept of nationalism itself and whether or not, as leaders in the post-1972 era, they gave voice to a new rhetoric of nationalism for Australia as it sought to adjust to a different world.

Yet this sensitivity to nationalism has introduced problems and perplexities in dealing with Australia's experience of nationalism in the post-Menzies era. It is as if the policy of multiculturalism easily, naturally and inevitably became the new orthodoxy for the Australian self-image. Some intellectuals tend to have a sense of profound embarrassment at the once stridently racial component of Australian nationalism, with its prescription for a white, British Australia defending the last citadel of imperial civilisation in the Pacific. The transformation to a multicultural era is interpreted by some as a natural progression—Australia has become 'a nation of immigrants' and the British heritage is viewed merely as one of a number of cultures that forms a richly diverse social fabric.

Political commentator Paul Kelly, for example, argued in 1992 that Prime Minister Keating championed the idea of a 'multicultural nationalism'.[19] Aside from the oxymoronic nature of the term, such a view displays the extent to which this understanding of Australia's progress has become the conventional wisdom. According to Kelly, this 'multicultural nationalism' was the essence of Keating's 'contemporary nationalism', thus resolving the post-1960s national question and at a single stroke reconciling the old and new Australias. This downplays the other side of Keating's nationalism, which was founded not only on old-style, aggressive 'radical nationalism', with its anti-British tones, but also on his frustration with multiculturalism for having combined with a 'lingering Britishness' to thwart the emergence of a singular Australian identity.

An alternative way of dealing with the end of Britishness was to assert the fulfilment of a distinctive Australian nationalism which had been latent from the beginning of European settlement, needing only the removal of an alien, oppressive British yoke before Australia could achieve independence and become 'a nation at last'. To those who hold this view, the gradual dismantling of the once intimate Anglo–Australian relationship is seen as the necessary catalyst for the emergence of a more exclusively defined concept of Australian nationalism. Though Britishness had been the dominant idea giving meaning to the people, the idea of Australia as a 'New Britannia in another world' was not left unchallenged. In the post-war period, some historians, writers, artists and public intellectuals began to conceive a new story of Australia, one based on the complementary objectives of social reform and national independence.

Australian history in this guise became a triumphant story of the progression from 'dependent' colony to 'independent' nation. The most pervasive and dominant exponents of this myth were those historians who helped to shape a 'radical nationalist' tradition in Australian historiography. Built on the work of Brian Fitzpatrick, the 'spiritual father of all the radical nationalist historians in Australia',[20] and the literary nationalists of the 1890s such as Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, the 'radical nationalist' tradition was predominantly associated in the 1950s with the work of 'old-left' historians Vance Palmer, Russel Ward, Robin Gollan, Geoffrey Serle and Ian Turner. According to the radical nationalist myth, 'true' working-class Australians had been involved in a constant struggle with the more Anglophile, bourgeois elements of Australian society in an effort to realise Australian 'independence'. The radical nationalist myth invoked the bush legend of the 1890s, the birth of the trade union movement and the foundation of the Australian Labor Party for its inspiration and faith in national progress. It combined aspirations for human progress with an assertive, grass-roots national sentiment. As Robin Gollan put it, 'radical nationalism' was both a reaction against imperialism and 'the belief in the possibility of creating the good society'.[21]

The 'radical nationalists' claimed to locate a distinctive Australian national tradition which distinguished Australia from the 'old world'. Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) remains the most coherent expression of a self-consciously constructed Australian national myth. For Ward this 'legend' had the potential to be a 'true' imagined national myth, complete with values that emanated from the Australian 'bush' and which therefore had set Australians apart from all other peoples. Invoking the frontier thesis of the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, Ward examined the growth of an 'Australian national mystique' and traced its origins to the convicts, Irish, itinerant bush workers, gold diggers and bushrangers of the nineteenth century. He described them as a 'singular social group' with 'an ethos which, though similar to those of certain other communities distant in time and place, was in some ways unique'.[22] The qualities and values that they were seen to embody —mateship, collectivism, improvisation and anti-authoritarianism—had been conditioned in response to the harsh Australian frontier environment. By the time of Federation, Ward argued, the 'noble bushman' was enshrined in both the popular and the literary imagination. He was less comfortable, however, with the mutation of the 'legend' from bushman into Australian soldier of World War I: the 'cabbage tree-hat' worn so proudly by his nomad tribe did not magically metamorphose into an AIF slouch hat turned up at the side. Nevertheless, once the bitterness of the conscription crises of 1916–17 had 'faded into the background of consciousness' Ward conceded that 'Australian patriotism does not usually or necessarily involve weakening of attachment to Britain, but rather the reverse'.[23] The 'radical nationalist' protest was against Britain treating Australians as colonials, not against Britishness as such.

Hence, as Douglas Cole put it in 1971, 'An Australian nationalism, based upon a consciousness of ethnic differentiation, would have been incompatible with an imperial ideology based upon the unity of blood, language, ancestry and tradition'.[24] Around the same time, a new-left historian, Humphrey McQueen, taking issue with the old-left 'radical nationalists', declared that 'Anti-British feeling was not the mainstay of Australian nationalism . . . never did Australian nationalists shed their

race patriotism and reject the British people'.[25] Though Australian leaders could, when necessary, place Australian self-interest above British race patriot sentiment, no leader invoked the 'radical national' myth in doing so. This myth did not develop the same intensity nor the same unifying force as Britishness. Indeed it could be seen as a sub-set of British race patriotism.

And so, when each of the post-Menzies Prime Ministers took their place on the rostrum and spoke to the people about the challenges posed by a new era, they began the task of reshaping the national image and accepting the demise of Britishness. The process of leading the people to a new understanding of themselves and their place in the world was achieved not only through their politics and policies but also through their words. In their speeches and writings they endeavoured to give new meaning to the life of the nation. Since the spoken word is a valuable means of tapping into the way in which a nation is publicly defined, what follows is necessarily a rhetorical history.

The rhetoric of national leaders illuminates the great questions dominating the political debates of the day. Given the obvious temptation for national leaders to draw selectively from the past, there has been a tendency to dismiss rhetoric as inconsequential in the analysis of political culture. The adjectives that often accompany the very word 'rhetoric' —'windy', 'hollow' or 'empty'—are themselves indicative of the dismissal of a politician's speech-making as superficial gloss, a platitudinous 'grab-bag' by which the people are manipulated. Yet political rhetoric forms the vital nexus between a government and its people. Moreover, the tension between a prime minister's role as party leader and national leader, between his great national vision and the inevitable pragmatism needed to survive the daily ruck of domestic politics, is most authoritatively revealed in his rhetoric. As Phillip Williamson observes:

> politicians are what they speak and publish. What they say may often be the collective party line, but leaders are normally such because they add something distinctive and persuasive, causing particular importance to be attached to themselves not just by their own party and supporters but by opposing parties and other bodies too.[26]

The basic premise of this book is that the language of the prime ministers offers a unique and compelling view of the nation's transformation in the post-Menzies era.

The intense media focus on prime ministers has further enhanced their role as the principal 'national opinion leader and mobiliser'.[27] As such, it is axiomatic that they will attempt to use a language that they feel best helps them connect to the hearts and minds of the people they seek to represent. The function of political rhetoric is 'not to satisfy academic tests as theory', but to 'attract and hold the support of diverse audiences possessing a range of conventional beliefs and present interests'.[28] More than at any other time in their political careers, in becoming the executive head of government in a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy each prime minister is compelled to give his message a broader national perspective and significance. The media have been crucial in generating a public expectation of 'leadership' qualities, and leaders know that they live or die by their ability to connect their own political vision to the lives of the people. Recognising this, Paul Keating articulated a need common to all prime ministers:

> Politicians who believe in their cause are always conscious that they have a story to tell. Indeed the telling of it is an essential ingredient of success. When a government cannot convey a story, a consistent story, the people lose faith in the government . . . The other meaning of the story in politics is that same vision thing, one's ambition for the country and a notion of how it might be realised.[29]

The direct relationship Keating established here between a government's 'story' and its political success, between a vision of Australia and its realisation, would suggest that even in the modern era, with the insistence of the electronic media on the seven-second 'sound bite' and with public cynicism finely tuned to political pragmatism, the significance attached to the communication of ideas—especially by political leaders —remains paramount. It is through their rhetoric, both in formal speech and in more extemporaneous situations such as parliamentary question time, that national leaders give expression to their 'cause', their 'consistent story' and their 'ambition for the country'.

In modern politics, cynicism towards the art of speechmaking has also been driven by the spectre of the speechwriter. There is an unmistakable irony in this development. The demands of high political office and the sheer volume of speechmaking expected of national leaders have made the employment of speechwriting staff almost an imperative.[30] Yet the existence of such 'behind the scenes' staff, penning the

prime minister's words, has only further strengthened public cynicism towards the political process, as if the anonymous figure between the leader and the led somehow undermines the authenticity of the message. It is perhaps for this reason that John Howard emphasises the absence of a speechwriter on his personal staff. Perhaps suspicious of the association between 'rhetoric', 'big pictures' and 'stories', Howard prefers to speak *ex tempore,* or 'off the cuff' from talking points. Only on rare occasions have speechwriters been engaged to craft his more ceremonial speeches. Upon assuming office in 1996, Howard was clearly of the view that Keating's rhetoric concerning engagement with Asia, the adoption of a republic and Aboriginal reconciliation had alienated 'mainstream' Australia from contemporary political debate. By not having a speechwriter, Howard endeavours to position himself as the authentic voice of 'middle' Australia—practical, no-nonsense and suspicious of grand visions. An alternative explanation for Howard's stance emanates from his respect for convention. Either consciously or unconsciously, he is following in the footsteps of his political mentor, Robert Menzies, though Menzies' speeches had a cadence and eloquence all their own.

In the second volume of his memoirs, Menzies despaired at the introduction of speechwriters to Australian politics. Regarding the use of a speechwriter as an insult to the audience—in *The Forgotten People,* broadcasts of the 1940s, he labelled speechwriters and their hidden scripts as part of the 'sickness of democracy'[31]—Menzies also feared for future historical scholarship:

> . . . we must spare a morsel of pity for the future historian. He will sit down to write of a long dead statesman whom he neither knew nor heard. He turns to the statesman's recorded speeches, hoping to perceive the man through his words. But if the words are those of the anonymous John Smith and not the statesman, the historian's light on the statesman becomes a little dim. True, the ideas, the policies, may be there, but those sudden phrases and flashing turns of speech, those uncontrived expressions of emotion, which tell us so much about a speaker, will be lacking.[32]

Historians need not despair. Menzies' lament was for the disappearance of style rather than substance. But there was an additional complication in this *cri de cœur.* It presupposed the existence of a political culture receptive to the art of rhetoric. Australians, though, are not greatly enamoured of official orations. Writing in the 1960s, historian John La Nauze lamented that Australians 'are inclined to associate sophisticated speaking with insincerity or condescension'. He characterised Alfred Deakin's eloquence as 'surpassingly rare in Australia'.[33]

The study of the prime ministerial persona and its relationship to the problem of Australian nationalism is entirely novel in Australian historiography, although studies of a similar type are more commonplace in the United States. This is not altogether surprising, given that an American President, as opposed to a Prime Minister in a Westminster system, is the head of state, the symbolic representative of the nation as well as the chief executive officer of government. American scholars have more readily equated the modern presidency with an idea of the nation. Historian Robert Dallek has identified a characteristic American eagerness to make their presidents the 'anointed bearers of sacred symbols' and 'vessels of "Americanism", embodying our most precious ideals'. Dallek noted that, once in office, the most astute Presidents realise that they have taken their place 'among the divinities of our national mythology' and act accordingly, appealing to American shibboleths about flag, family, liberty and fair-play.[34] In doing so these American leaders call forth a unique national myth which proclaims that American values are not only unique to themselves but are in fact universal values which are to be extended to all humankind.

Thus in the United States the role of president as spokesman for the nation remains unchallenged. Australia has no equivalent of Presidents Day, that specific day on which Americans honour the memory and achievements of their political leaders. For some the lack of such a tradition constitutes a national failure. In the weeks and months preceding celebrations for the Centenary of Federation, Australians were teased by a national advertising campaign which asked, almost in admonishment, 'What sort of nation would forget the name of its first Prime Minister?' Opinion polls pointed to Australians' greater familiarity with the names of the American founding fathers than with the colonial statesmen who worked tirelessly in convincing the people to set aside their differences and unite as 'one indissoluble Commonwealth' on 1 January 1901. The subtext of the message was clear: Australians had been found wanting in both respect and reverence for their own political heritage.

This work is little concerned with such posturing. In the outpouring of works examining the subject of Australian national identity in recent years there has been little sustained attempt to show how the

nation's political leaders approached ideas of Australian nationalism. The declining relevance of Britishness and the end of White Australia may herald for some that the idea of nationalism has become an anachronism, but such vast and rapid historical change makes it even more important to explore how national leaders have tried to craft a new national self-image. Since the 1960s Australian prime ministers have wrestled with the question of what ideas of community are possible now that the once-powerful British story is no longer viable or, indeed, if real community is possible at all. If not an Australian nationalist story, what story?