

# Sustaining and changing culture in Australian federal politics

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## Keywords

politics, discourse, national identity

## Introduction

A week or so before the Federal election in November 2007 the evening news showed John Howard warning that 'if you change the government, you change the country'<sup>1</sup>, a warning that Paul Keating had similarly made on his defeat over a decade previously. This paper argues that the Howard Government did contribute to a change in the cultural identity of the nation, taking it away from its proclaimed values by, in part, appropriating and altering concepts from traditional narratives of national identity.

When the Howard Government swept to power in 1996, it was seen by many as something of a conservative backlash against the rapid social and economic change that had characterised the Hawke/Keating era and the Keating vision for Australia as it grappled with multiculturalism and increasing global integration (Johnson 2000, p. 31-35). Keating's vision was for Australia to be 'multicultural, diverse, celebrating difference, benefitting everyone' (p. 30). When John Howard came to power promising to govern 'for all of us', it was a direct response to Keating's vision of diversity and multiculturalism. He refashioned the national identity around the concept of the 'mainstream', which Carol Johnson (2000, p. 6) argues meant 'white, heterosexual, Anglo-Celtic males'. This was affirmed in a speech which he



made to the National Press Club in January 2006 where he upheld values and traditions linked to 'Judeo-Christian ethics' and 'British political culture' as the 'dominant cultural pattern' linked to Australian identity. In that speech, he declared that 'the divisive, phoney debate about national identity and what it means for our influence in the world has been finally laid to rest'. While John Howard has been accused of trying to turn the country back to the 1950s (Horne 2001, p. 72), others argue that he constructed and privileged a mainstream Australian identity that was neither entirely based on the past, nor completely unrelated to it (Curran 2004, p. 243).

Judith Brett (2005) has claimed that part of John Howard's appeal to the electorate was his ability to speak from the heartland of Australian culture, values, and national identity. Yet, by 2006 some media were reporting a perception in the populace that Australia had become 'meaner' and 'less fair' over the preceding decade, and that John Howard was a 'divisive prime minister' (Stephens 2006). While voters reportedly regarded economic and personal benefits as more significant than the government's poor handling of issues such as the Iraq War, health, education, the environment, and asylum seekers (Murphy 2006), social policies and the WorkChoices legislation passed in the government's last term were increasingly seen to contradict basic Australian values of fairness and egalitarianism.

This paper argues that the Howard Government, though not solely responsible for this perceived change in Australian culture, contributed to it. As Prime Minister, John Howard attempted to recast traditional narratives of cultural identity. He brought concepts from the radical nationalist working class tradition into closer alignment with a middle class understanding in processes of dilution and gentrification. By 'dilution' I refer to a reduction or weakening in the connotations of particular terms. By 'gentrification' I mean the privileging of connotations associated with the middle class tradition over the radical nationalist tradition, where the same concept occurs in both narratives.



The examples in this paper are taken from speeches on welfare reform during the second term of the Howard Government. This period, which predated his 2006 declaration that the debate over identity was resolved, was the beginning of significant changes in welfare policy, impacting on vulnerable groups such as the unemployed, and later single parents and people living with disability. Therefore, it could be argued that during this time the government was actively attempting to influence the social culture in Australia, particularly as it pertained to welfare and notions of entitlement.

The paper begins with a brief overview of traditional narratives of Australian identity, and then contextualises John Howard's construction of Australian identity, characteristics, and values. It suggests that his representation has promoted some aspects of Australian identity over others, and that in the context of economic change, this helped to create anxiety and division. Two assumptions underpin this argument: first, that culture and identity are inherently linked; and second, that the ideologies that undergird conceptions of cultural identity are in a dialectical relationship with the institutions and social structures that shape the nation's culture and social relations.

### **'Traditional' or 'Old' Constructions of Australian National Identity**

This paper uses the term 'national identity' to refer to popular notions of what it is to be Australian, including the character traits and values that are commonly recognised as such. In a survey of what 'ordinary' or 'mainstream' Australians considered to be Australian in terms of people, places, events and activities, groups, and values, Tim Phillips and Philip Smith (2000) found a remarkable consistency with traditional and past-oriented understandings of Australia as described in academic literature such as Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1965), White's *Inventing Australia* (1981), or Fiske, Hodge and Turner's *Myths of Oz* (1987). Like Brett, Phillips and Smith claim that John Howard was better attuned to this demographic than his critics allowed.



Ward (1978) traces the development of the radical nationalist tradition of Australian identity which was initially based on the bushman whose characteristics arose from a strong Irish working class heritage and developed of necessity on the frontier during the 1800s. By the late nineteenth century, when this mythical figure entered the general popular consciousness as the 'national type', the conditions which produced him were already disappearing. However, Ward argues, 'it is not so much the bushman's actual nature that matters, as the nature attributed to him' (p. 275). That was as a man who was eminently practical, a great improviser, willing to 'have a go' at anything, but also content if a task was done in a way that was 'near enough'. He was hard working when necessary, but equally hard drinking when not working, and could see little point in saving. Although confident he was not particularly talkative. Among the strongest features of this 'typical Australian' were fierce egalitarianism, class solidarity and loyalty, generous hospitality and a 'marked dislike of authority' (p. 85). Ward attributes this confidence and egalitarianism to absolute though minimum economic security, and notes that Australian men were early and avid supporters of the trade union movement (p. 258-263).

Following on from Ward, White (1981) traces the development of the national type through the digger and the lifesaver into the twentieth century, noting that it became more urban and problematic as Australia itself became more urbanised. During the 1950s and 60s as migration and affluence increased, the image of a national type morphed into the notion of the 'Australian way of life'. In the Cold War atmosphere, says White, the concept of a

'way' of life was more effective in defending the status quo than 'the national character' or 'the national type' which radicals had actually been associating with social change. (p. 159)

While largely a conservative notion, the Australian Way of Life nevertheless retained continuity with elements of the radical nationalist identity and culture, though it blended



these into an image of Australia as 'a sophisticated, urban, industrialised, consumer society' (p. 161). Drinking, gambling, and egalitarianism remained (p. 160-61), though the practicality and self-reliance of the bushman became the handyman ethic of the suburban family man. Freedom, stability and development were highly valued, and high levels of immigration to cope with the boom encouraged Australians to think of their society as open and tolerant.

As recently as the late 1980s Fiske, Hodge, and Turner (1987) noted that a continuation of a pub culture, a sense of egalitarianism, openness and friendliness, a utilitarian attitude to work, and a lack of pretentiousness were still vital parts of Australian culture, derived from its working class origins. This was despite suburbanisation, the rise of hedonistic youth cultures, and a growing fascination with shopping and newness rather than development.

Miriam Dixon (1999) has argued that this tradition of national identity, particularly in its earlier radical nationalist guise, was only ever one side of the cultural story, and claims that it ran parallel to a middle class one more closely associated with the Australian Way of Life described above. However, she claims that core features of both narratives were 'decency, a dedicated practicality, a sense of finitude, and a commitment to fairness', respect for the individual, freedom of expression, egalitarianism, mateship and family (p. 30-31). More recently, both traditions have been criticised for not accurately reflecting the racism, sexism, class structure, and utilitarian approach to migration that has characterised much of Australia's history (Castles et al. 1992). Nevertheless Phillips and Smith's survey indicates that contemporary Australians from a variety of backgrounds still identify with the traditional narratives of cultural identity. The next section argues that the image of Australianness in these traditional narratives has been used and altered by John Howard and his Government.



## **John Howard's construction of national identity**

Prime ministers are key figures in articulating the national identity. White (1981) suggests, though, that their speeches should be understood in the context of the social concerns of the day and the needs and political goals of powerful and influential groups. The stories that they have told have reflected the struggle to make sense of Australia's British heritage, changing international relationships, and changing demography (Curran 2004).

The national identity, values, and characteristics constructed by John Howard were largely middle class, even though he drew on elements from the radical nationalist tradition, such as veneration of the digger and mateship. In doing so, he appropriated what had been Labor's symbolic territory. Still, Curran (2004) argues that the Australian identity that he constructed was firmly grounded in British cultural traditions and classical liberal values, which he accepted unquestioningly. While John Howard (2006) claimed a British tradition, his elaboration of this as 'Judeo-Christian ethics, the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment and the institutions and values of British political culture' privileged middle class, English or Scottish and Protestant cultures over working class, Irish, and radical nationalist ones. Johnson (2007) points out that what he in fact did was combine this Judeo-Christian Enlightenment identity with a neo-liberal enterprise culture from 1970s and 80s Thatcherist Britain and Reaganist United States and that this was a conscious attempt to refashion Australian culture.

The remainder of the paper argues that this was achieved partly through the dilution and gentrification of traditional Australian values, effectively weakening solidarity. Other activities contributed to this refashioning of the culture, including the alteration of institutions and policies so that they undermined traditional values, and the creation of anxiety focused on the internal cohesion of the nation. Only dilution and gentrification will be discussed in this paper.



## **Dilution and gentrification**

The terms 'mateship', 'fair go', and 'having a go' serve as examples of the way that the Howard Government diluted concepts from traditional Australian narratives of cultural identity. This refers to a weakening or reduction of certain connotations of the terms through repeated use in particular contexts that limit the meanings.

Mateship grew out of class solidarity and the need for hospitality and collective action in the face of immense challenges posed by the social and physical environment of early (white) Australian life. As the following quotation indicates, however, John Howard (1998a) denied the existence of class distinctions in Australian life:

We have imbibed much of the great Liberal tradition of our British and other European heritage, but thankfully we have rejected the class distinction that went with that in the countries that gave birth to those traditions.

His use of the term 'mateship' precludes its class associations, and therefore also its connection with unionism, and significantly weakens its emotive content. Rather, mateship is reduced to the 'pragmatic' action of a 'respectable' society towards those who are in some kind of need:

Where being Australian means doing the decent thing in a pragmatic and respectable society which lives up to its creed of practical mateship and which brings along those who are disadvantaged. (Howard 1998b)

The asymmetry of this relationship negates much of the inherent egalitarianism of the original concept. The class-based solidarity, collectivist and trade union origins of mateship



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are in direct contrast to the individualism promoted by the philosophy of the Liberal Party, where the liberty of the individual takes precedence over collective action and group rights:

We are a Party that simultaneously fights for and protects those institutions that have served this country well through the years but we're also a Party that will always take up the cudgels in favour of the liberty of the individual in the true spirit of classical liberalism, demonstrated most recently may I say by the Federal Government's determination to uphold the principle of voluntary student unionism on the university campuses of Australia. (Howard 1999)

A further example of the process of dilution can be found in John Howard's use of the terms 'fair go' and 'having a go'. These also occurred in Howard's speeches but, in the area of welfare at least, the idea of giving someone a fair go was reduced to an obligation to provide the means for minimum sustenance for those who could not support themselves. Equating the fair go with welfare provision depersonalises the responsibility on individuals to treat each other fairly and instead places the burden on an undefined 'community', as indicated in this quotation:

There are many characteristics and many values that run like mighty rivers through the Australian community. One of them is the great Australian tradition of a fair go. We do pride ourselves on being a community that worries about the underdog. We do pride ourselves on being a community that cares for the needy and believes in our great vernacular that everyone should have a fair go.

But there's another great river that I think runs through our community . . . and that is a companion to a fair go and that is the Australian tradition of



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having a go. Because one of the great Australian characteristics and one that I certainly imbibed as a young person and one that has guided my behaviour though life is the belief that, yes, you look after the needy, yes, you have a social security safety net, yes, you have an open, tolerant society but you also have a society where people are encouraged to have a go. You have a society where people are given an incentive to improve themselves. (Howard 1998a)

Furthermore, the obligation to provide a fair go only applied where the recipients consistently demonstrated having a go at meeting aspirational middle class goals of self-improvement. The use of the word 'companion' in this passage suggests that the two ideas exist together.

In as far as having a go was defined as making the most of opportunities for self-improvement, which in relation to welfare meant increasing job-readiness and economic participation, it also partly exemplifies the process of gentrification. In this process, those meanings of a term which are consistent with middle class values and experiences are privileged over the working class associations. An example is the way that terms revolving around notions of practicality, and self-reliance were used by Howard Government ministers in relation to welfare. In the traditional narratives both of these terms referred to the ability to make the best of available resources to meet modest needs of survival. John Howard and his ministers used the term 'practical' primarily to deny differences of class and opinion. It implied that a policy focused on outcomes was not ideological and therefore should receive bipartisan support. 'Self-reliance' occurred less frequently than its synonym, 'independence', and was used almost exclusively in speeches about welfare to refer to independence from government financial support. Those connotations associated with the character of the person or skills with material resources were neglected in favour of an economic meaning that distinguished people on the basis of economic self-sufficiency.



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Gentrification can similarly be seen in changes in the culture over the past thirty years with regard to work, and more specifically, paid work. Australians have always had a reputation for hard work, though as noted above, in both the radical nationalist tradition and later working class inspired versions of national identity this effort was expended only as required. Hard work was balanced against an equally determined pursuit of leisure. In the discourses of the Howard Government, representations of work promoted the Protestant work ethic once associated most closely with the middle classes. However, even this tradition was modified to emphasise materialism and aspiration, as indicated in this quotation which refers to building wealth and inheritance across generations:

Australians are great believers in starting with little and building something and handing it onto their children. Australians are great believers in starting off life against the odds, overcoming those odds and moving on to a situation that they might never have dreamt of. (Howard 1998b)

Material affluence and increased 'living standards' were regarded as rewards for virtues of hard work and thrift. While these attitudes were most certainly present in the middle class culture of mid-last century, the aspirational aspects have been promoted over the past decade, particularly as affluence has increased. The egalitarianism that featured so strongly in early narratives of cultural identity seems to be disappearing. Johnson (2007, p. 198) claims that when Howard spoke of Australian culture being egalitarian, he meant that people are treated as individuals rather than as members of sub-groups. This is far different to the connotations of equal worth of individuals attached to the term in the radical nationalist tradition.

### **Undermining Solidarity**

One effect of the dilution and gentrification of values and concepts from traditional



Australian cultural identity is the undermining of solidarity and egalitarianism between members of the society. However, institutional discourses and policy changes also help to reduce the strength of these feelings within the population. The remainder of this paper will discuss this trend, specifically in relation to welfare.

Welfare speeches by Howard Government ministers shared a focus on individualism (in terms of individual responsibility), self-reliance, and independence. Systemic and structural causes of unemployment and disadvantage were almost completely ignored and the individual deficit explanation for unemployment so naturalised as to make any sense of solidarity and collective action amongst the unemployed, in particular, almost unthinkable.

Ministers in the Howard Government represented welfare recipients as either victims of their own personal flaws and an outdated system, or as cheats. They were assumed to lack the personal qualities possessed by ordinary working Australians, and Work for the Dole programs were claimed to address these flaws:

Work for the dole is an example of how government can help instil a work ethic . . . but will also ensure that this group is helped from the outset to develop and maintain self esteem, confidence, and good work habits. It will help many to make a smooth transition to the workplace. (Howard 1998b)

The government consistently stressed the success of their economic management, implying that unemployment was a choice made by those whose cultural values were defective. Whereas the government emphasised hard work in relation to the cultural identity of the mainstream, it emphasised the laziness of welfare recipients. The following quotations give examples.



The historical flip side of Australia's easy-going culture has been tolerance for people taking advantage of the 'system' whether that's avoiding tax or exploiting welfare. (Abbott 1999)

However, there are examples around Australia where job opportunities are available and our entrenched culture of welfare dependency has meant that certain members of our community are not only prepared, but feel entitled to exploit the social safety net instead. (Newman 1999)

If some people became too choosy for their own good, the 'system' was at least partly to blame because, for too many, the 'hassle' of working outweighed the deprivations of not working. (Abbott 1999)

Studies of the representations of welfare recipients and their resistance to those representations have consistently found that recipients are trapped in a position where they can contest their own standing in relation to the stereotype, but are unable to contest the existence of the stereotype itself (Howe 1998; Kingfisher 1995; Drewery 1998; Killion 1997; Gunders 1998). Strategies of resistance require the recipient to separate themselves from the group rather than express solidarity, for expressing solidarity demonstrates that they are not adopting the cultural change required to justify their continuing benefits.

Furthermore, the Howard Government's representation of welfare recipients worked to undermine solidarity between welfare recipients and workers. Constructions of national identity and characteristics, especially in the opening sections of John Howard's speeches, set the context for interpreting comments about welfare. Recipients were constructed as lacking markers of Australianness; they were represented as not having a go at the opportunities available in a strong economy, and as not giving a fair go to taxpayers. Rather they were represented as having a 'destructive and self indulgent welfare mentality'



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(Newman 1999) and as being 'job snobs' (Abbott 2000). Contrasted in this way to the character and culture of mainstream Australians, they were also portrayed as a threat to them. Because welfare recipients were represented as not contributing to the economy in an acceptable way through paid work, but rather as a drain on the resources of those who did contribute, they were constructed as a threat to the economic wellbeing of the country and therefore to the interests of its members.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that while commentators have claimed that John Howard was attuned to the values and identities of ordinary or mainstream Australians, he, in fact, diluted and gentrified concepts from the traditional narratives with which they identify. Furthermore, he used them to undermine solidarity among welfare recipients, and between recipients and those in paid employment. Over the time that the Howard Government was in power, it actively contributed to a change in the culture, as indeed was its intention. In this way it was no different from other governments that similarly tried to shape the national identity and culture. The examples that have been given in this paper may help to explain why it was that after ten years of this shaping, at least some people had begun to feel that Australia was a 'meaner' and less fair place.

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## Note

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1. National Nine News, Nine Network, Brisbane, Australia, 6.30pm 21 November 2007.

