



PRIME MINISTER

149/95

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING, MP

VAGUE IS BEST - JOHN HOWARD'S VIEW OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Mr Howard's "reflection" on Australia's national identity will go down in history as one of the most vapid statements about Australia ever delivered by an Australian political leader.

It was ultra conservative ideology thinly and soporifically disguised as thoughtfulness and moderation. Mr Howard sneaks around the great issues facing Australia, offering everything but an indication of what direction he and the Coalition intend to take. On some of these key issues, Mr Howard is glaringly exposed again as a policy-free zone. For instance, Mr Howard appears to be still sitting and "reflecting" on our relationship with Asia while this real, dynamic and irreversible fact of our national life streams past him.

He hangs his "reflections" not on any positive thoughts or plans he has for his country, but on a pathetic and malevolent misrepresentation of the Government's record on matters concerning Australia's Constitution and identity. The Coalition has long run a campaign of misinformation on this issue. I am flattered by his frequent references to me but they are almost without exception completely false.

For the record, no one has attempted a "heist" of Australian nationalism and no fair reading of the record since I became Prime Minister could lead to that conclusion. Never have I attacked earlier generations of Australians, rather I have honoured them and made strenuous attempts to keep them in the forefront of our national consciousness. Nor for that matter, have I ever attacked the British people or the great heritage Britain left to us.

Let me give him a couple of examples of what I think in fact, rather than that which is ascribed to me by the contemporary urban myth Mr Howard has attempted to manufacture. In my first speech as Prime Minister, on Australia Day 1992, I said:

"Perhaps we should not be surprised if these and other profound cultural and economic changes have made many Australians wonder if the traditions of their country, the values for which they have worked

and fought, are not under attack. I suspect there are many Australians who are wondering if their Australia will survive the changes - if there will be a place for the "old Australia" in the new.

I have no doubt that the best of Australia will survive - in fact it must. The hard-won traditions of democracy, of fairness and equity, individual opportunity and personal security, our way of life and those institutions which guarantee our freedom, will remain the guiding principles of Australia."

In calling for an Australian Head of State, in my speech to Parliament on 7 June 1995, I said: "This is not because our generation lacks respect for the British monarchy, or the British people, or our British heritage, or the British institutions we have made our own, or our long friendship with the British in peace and war. On the contrary, Australians everywhere respect them, as they respect The Queen."

On the arts and multiculturalism, Mr Howard offers the same clueless mixture of vapid motherhood statements and cynical misrepresentation. On the republic, if anything, he appears to be retreating. He sneaks around the issue and it is not easy to tell precisely in which direction he is pointing. The only definite thing asserted is his determination to hold a Constitutional convention - a device which he himself has described as the means by which he would "kick the republic into touch".

John Howard has an identity crisis. In trying to be all things to all people, he succeeds only in standing for nothing to anyone. His latest "Headland" speech is not so much about Australia's future as about John Howard's past.

Howard-watchers will smile wryly at his re-visiting the Future Directions policy document of 1988. The derision with which this document was greeted when it appeared, as one of the most conservative and least original policy statements seen up to that time, no doubt helps to explain why the Leader of the Opposition is so petrified today of venturing anew into the dangerous territory of policy substance and ideas.

Finally, if John Howard is unable to answer the big questions, perhaps we can help him with the small ones.

First, who is the "Australian" historian, Charles Wilson, referred to in his speech? Answer - an English historian who made a brief visit to Australia in the 1970s.

Second, where can we find the prejudice against other than orthodox families Mr Howard challenges us to find in his utterances "over the past 20 years"? Answer - try the Sunday Program, 12 November 1995.

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